Summary

Every year about 30,000 people leave correctional facilities in the Netherlands. At release, these former convicts experience many problems: they have financial problems; no accommodation; no work; addiction; psychiatric problems and lack of a social network. The current research is directed at one aspect of these multiple problems: accommodation and shelter for male former prisoners. Former prisoners, who do not have accommodation at release and can’t rely on family, friends or other social network for accommodation, often will have to turn to Social Shelter (Maatschappelijke Opvang). This study answers the question if available social shelter quantitatively and qualitatively meets the needs of people re-entering society after having been imprisoned.

The need for accommodation and shelter of former prisoners after detention has been studied by means of a questionnaire among male prisoners in houses of detention and (semi)open prisons who will be released within four months. A total of 520 prisoners filled out the questionnaire. The response rate is nearly 80%. Additionally, professionals working in prisons and as probation officers have been interviewed. More than half of the prisoners express a need for help finding accommodation, while 70% of this group indicate not to have received any help yet. Interviewed professionals estimate that 20 to 50% of the prisoners will not have accommodation at release. Prisoners themselves are slightly more positive: 17% of them expect not to have accommodation at release and 11% is uncertain about the availability of accommodation. In this study a number of risk factors emerge that enlarge the chance a prisoner will not find accommodation at release. Risk factors are ethnic origin (people of foreign origin find accommodation less often than people of Dutch origin), length of detention (the longer the detention, the smaller the chance to find accommodation), hard drug abuse, not having and not being able to hold a job and not having accommodation before detention. The professionals who have been interviewed add three groups of people likely to experience difficulty to encounter accommodation at release: sexual offenders, people who are illegal and people who get an unexpected early release. A total of 33 prisoners, 7% of all respondents, indicate that they plan to turn to social shelter. Extrapolated to the number of people leaving prison each year, this represents an estimation of 2100 former prisoners who apply for social shelter every year. Among them about 300 potential users of social shelter exclusively for former prisoners.

In the study of the availability of accommodation for former prisoners we investigated both categorical accommodation exclusively for former prisoners and facilities for social shelter not directed exclusively at this group. A quarter of all organisations for Social Shelter and all categorical organisations have been interviewed by phone. Additionally face-to-face interviews were conducted with several categorical organisations offering social shelter for former prisoners and with professionals working in Social Shelter and in probation. Social Shelter exclusively for former prisoners is provided by Exodus, Leger des Heils, Moria, Door, De Ontmoeting en Stoel. These organizations offer programmes that, in the form of penitentiary programmes, often are available both for prisoners on release and for those in the last phase of detention. In total, these six organisations have about 225 beds for former prisoners and people following a penitentiary programme. Because most organisations do not register if a client is a former prisoner, only a rough estimate can be given of the number of former prisoners using this type of accommodation: about a hundred users each year, excluding penitentiary programmes. Organisations offering accommodation for former prisoners mention the following bottlenecks: financial and legal regulations considering penitentiary programmes, lack of structural financing of voluntary programmes for former prisoners, insufficient referring of former prisoners to categorical
accommodation facilities by the probation services; lack of after-care by the probation services in the
categorical facilities, lack of temporary accommodation resulting in stagnation of an after-care
trajectory and insufficient or late debt restructuring.

The social shelter provides accommodation for the homeless and for people in crisis. The target group
of social shelter consists of vulnerable people who, due to a combination of problems, have left their
home (or might be forced to) and are (temporarily) not capable of taking care of themselves. The
capacity of the social shelter is about 10,000 beds.
The social shelter is not aimed exclusively at former prisoners, but most facilities are open to this
group (8% does not admit former prisoners). Data on percentage of beds occupied and circulation in
this sector are not widely available. One third of the facilities for social shelter indicate that hardly any
former prisoners or none at all frequent their facility; another third can’t give an estimate. In the
remaining facilities the number of former prisoners ranges from “a few a year” to 40% of the total
capacity. It is possible (but uncertain due to lack of registration) that the facilities former prisoners
frequent, mostly consist of night shelter. On the basis of the given estimates, an indicative lower
boundary of the use of social shelter has been calculated: each year an estimated number of 350 to
1250 former prisoners use facilities for social shelter (excluding facilities for night shelter).

The numbers on the estimated demand and the estimated use of categorical social shelter indicate
that the demand is larger than the estimated use. The study does not indicate the existence of waiting
lists, but it is clear that bottlenecks exist in the circulation. Information about categorical social shelter
in correctional facilities needs improvement. Prisoners might not always have complete or correct
expectations of what a categorical institution does and does not offer and potential users might not
make use of the institutions. The numbers on the estimated demand and the estimated use of Social
Shelter not exclusively aimed at former prisoners also indicate that the estimated demand surpasses
the estimated use. The estimated use indicates an absolute lower boundary. The difference between
demand and use might be smaller than it seems. The research also makes clear that most of the
categorical institutions are accessible only under conditions and the criteria for admission from
institutions for Social Shelter often include contra-indications for former prisoners. Former prisoners
applying for shelter in categorical or general institutions for Social Shelter will not always be admitted.
In this light it is important to draw attention to the fact that 7% of subjects indicate they don’t have and
do not intend to look for accommodation. Every year this is a group of 2100 former prisoners who
intend to live on the street. Possibly this group could be reached by general or categorical Social
Shelter if these become more easily accessible and relax their admission criteria. This does imply that
expertise to handle complex psychiatric problems in former prisoners should be reinforced.

The social shelter mentions that the chance on finding accommodation at release is reduced by lack of
a social network, abuse of drugs, loss of accommodation during detention, unemployment and the
passivity created by living in a strict and organised regime. Cooperation and fine-tuning between the
different institutions is mentioned as another bottleneck: former prisoners are not sufficiently or not at
all prepared for the situation after detention; there is hardly any fine-tuning between prisons and social
shelter accommodations and the direct accessibility of facilities for social shelter is limited. Also the
severity of (psychiatric) problems of former prisoners increases, while the facilities are often not
sufficiently equipped to deal with this. Finally, professionals working in facilities for social shelter notice
a lack of after-care by the probation services and the intersectoral cooperation. Fine-tuning between
different disciplines of assistance is insufficient.
The current study shows a large number of bottlenecks in helping former prisoners to find accommodation and shelter and in the matching of supply and demand. We recommend that prisons register the situation of accommodation of a prisoner at entry and where applicable inform the landlord/house owner of the detention. Reintroduction of the possibility of temporary continuation of payment of rent by the local council is desirable to prevent loss of accommodation during detention. During detention prisoners ought to be prepared more explicitly for their accommodation after release. Extension of the accessibility of penitentiary programmes offers more possibilities to spend the last part of detention outside of the prison.

In the social shelter the registration facilities should be improved. Possibilities for shelter for former prisoners should be extended. Improvement of the offer of shelter can be attained by the categorical institutions but also by developing and introducing recognisable programmes for former prisoners within the general Social Shelter. Many former prisoners have a combination of problems, for them an intersectoral approach is necessary. Improvement of chain-cooperation will have a positive effect on the circulation of facilities of social shelter. We recommend that the supply of types of accommodation suitable for former prisoners will be extended. Finally, next to preparation during detention a new product “starting help accommodation” should be developed. We think about a constricted form of coaching after detention, constricted in term and tasks.