



# Research Bulletin

## **Parole in NSW: Benefits, Dangers & Opportunities**

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Department of Corrective Services

## PAROLE IN N.S.W.: BENEFITS, DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

(Prepared by Angela Gorta, Research Officer)

People disagree about how the prison system should serve the community. Some people believe that the main function of prisons is to **punish** those who break the law, and in so doing **deter** others from breaking the law. Others think prisons should **protect** the community by locking away people who are dangerous to society. Still others consider it is the prison's role to **rehabilitate** those who have committed a crime, so that they will not do it again.

These different aims are antagonistic. One cannot easily punish and rehabilitate at the same time. Protecting the community by locking the bad away may help society in the short-term but it ignores what will happen when the prisoner is released at the end of his sentence.

Such diverse aims are not unique to the gaols: parole, a system of conditional release from gaol, aims both to protect the community and to allow the newly released prisoner to re-establish himself in the community before the completion of his sentence. As discussed in the *Report of the Committee Appointed to Review the Parole of Prisoners Act, 1966*, the purpose of parole is to "assist prisoners to move back into society and lead a law-abiding existence, whilst at the same time protecting society from further crime" (1979, p. 7).

This Bulletin seeks both to outline the experiences of parolees while on parole and to quantify the types of offences they commit. In this way some of the possible benefits to the parolee can be weighed against the dangers to society of releasing the parolee from gaol earlier than the end of his sentence. It is based on a major Research Publication discussing the characteristics of 250 parolees in N.S.W. and their performance while on parole (Gorta, Cooney, George & West, 1982), currently in press. This Bulletin outlines those aspects of this research related to experiences while on parole.

### The Design of the Study

A sample of 250 parolees was obtained from the total 1283 prisoners released to parole in New South Wales in 1974. 1974 was chosen as a common year of release to allow a minimum of a five year follow-up at the time of data collection.

Parole files provided the sole source of data. Since the

## SUMMARY

Parole, a system of conditional release from prison, offers both potential benefits and potential dangers. The main danger to society is that the parolee might commit some crime, particularly a crime that causes death or injury, that could not have been committed had the parolee remained in gaol. The main benefit to the parolee is that time which would otherwise have been spent in gaol can be used to re-establish his place in society.

This Bulletin outlines the experiences of parolees during their parole period, as recorded by their parole officer. Most notable of these experiences was the large proportion of parolees who parole officers identified as having problems. Particularly prominent were problems classified as interpersonal or financial. The high proportion of parolees identified as having problems suggests there are opportunities for the parolee to be assisted and hence benefit from the transition period between the surveillance of the institution and the relative freedom of society.

When the offences committed while on parole are examined, it was concluded that the parolees as a group do not greatly threaten the safety of the community. Only 44 (18%) of the 250 parolees were revoked because of a further offence they had committed. For the most part these offences did not involve serious violence. One parolee was convicted of major assault, one of robbery with major assault, the others were convicted of property or drug offences.

parole files provided the sole source of data, the discussion of the experiences while on parole is limited by the parole officers' awareness and interpretation of these experiences.

### Aspects of Parole Supervision

The parolee is released into society under certain conditions, such as, that he must obey the law and report to his parole officer as directed. Special conditions are placed on some parole orders. Most parolees in this study had no special conditions placed on their parole order. The most frequent special condition imposed was that alcohol was prohibited to 9% of the parolees during their parole period. The other conditions imposed (and percentage of parolees affected) were as follows: medical and/or psychiatric conditions (6%), conditions classified as "other" (4%) and one person had a prohibited localities restriction (0.4%) placed on his parole. None of the sample had restrictions concerning residence, fines or costs, or associates imposed.

The parolees were initially required to report either weekly, fortnightly or monthly. Two-thirds (66%) were asked to report fortnightly. The remainder were divided between those who were required to report more frequently (15%) and those required to report less frequently (19%).

Most often the special conditions placed on parole were not varied during the parole period. The conditions were varied for only three of the 250 parolees. This involved two additional people having an alcohol restriction imposed and one having a restriction placed on his associates.

During the parole period most (76%) changed to reporting to their parole officer less frequently. Only a minority (2%) reported more frequently and almost one-quarter (22%) did not change their reporting pattern. No information was provided on why 13% changed their reporting pattern. In 60% of the cases the change was initiated by the Probation and Parole Service. In other cases, 16% simply failed to report, 8% reported spasmodically, two parolees were hospitalized and a further two had no one to report to in the area.

#### Accommodation

On release, most parolees (80%) were living in a house or flat with their parents (54%) or spouse (20%). A further 15% were living in a hostel or a boarding house and 17% were living alone. At this time almost half lived with the person they had lived with at the time of the current offence. In most cases (81%) the information given to the parole officer about accommodation was considered correct. Approximately one-quarter of the sample (22%) had no address changes during their parole period. A further 42% had between one and three address changes, 19% had six or more address changes. For only two people (0.8%) was "no fixed abode" the most common form of accommodation. All others had some more stable form of accommodation: the most common being a house or flat (80%).

#### Employment

Most (93%) held at least one job whilst on parole, the number of jobs held ranging from nil to sixteen. On average two or three jobs were held. These jobs were interspersed with a number of periods of unemployment, with most (78%) of the parolees experiencing some unemployment while on parole. The total period of unemployment ranged from 0 to 56 months, with the average period of unemployment being less than three months.

#### Problems Experienced During the Parole Period

Where information was available, the group of parolees seem to have experienced a wide range of problems while on parole. However no information was available on the problems in 10% of the parole files. It is not known whether nothing was recorded on these files because the parole officer had investigated and found that the parolee had no problems or whether this had not been investigated. The categories of problems experienced by the parolees, together with the percentage of parolees who experienced these problems, are shown in Table 1. The most remarkable aspect of Table 1 is the large percentage of parolees experiencing problems, particularly interpersonal and financial problems.

**Table 1: Problems Experienced While on Parole**

Type of Problem	Percentage of Parolees
Interpersonal	53
Financial	36
Alcohol	22
Health (physical)	18
Accommodation	15
Marital	10
Health (Mental)	9
Drugs	5
Gambling	2
Other	1

(Note that the percentages in Table 1 sum to more than 100% because each parolee could have more than one type of problem).

Approximately one-quarter (24%) of the files revealed that problems were being experienced by the parolee's family. Once again in 10% of the files there was no information.

#### Social Networks

Over one-third (36%) of the parole files contained no information about the parolees' social networks, that is no information concerning support from, for example, family, friends, or known criminals. Of the 160 files which had information on social networks, most mentioned only one (54%) or two (44%) main social supports. In only 2% of the cases were three or more social supports mentioned. The parolee's family was the most frequently mentioned support group (49%). The next most frequently mentioned support groups were: "workmates or friends", "known criminals" and "other parolees" who each represented the major contact for 13% of the parolees. The social support groups given for the remaining parolees included family members with a record or who were also on parole (5%), drug addicts or pushers (4%), club members (2%) and hoodlums or delinquents (2%).

#### Offences Committed While on Parole

Seventy-six parolees (30%) committed at least one offence during their parole period. Just over half of these parolees (53%) were revoked, the others were not. Property offences were the most commonly committed, accounting for over half of the offences. The specific offences committed (and the number of people committing them) are listed in Table 2. The offences leading to revocation included: major assault, most property offences and some drug offences; but not: minor assault, driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, dangerous driving, fare evasion, or obscene language or other offensive behaviour.

**Table 2: Offences committed while on parole**

Offence	Number of Parolees
Larceny of a motor vehicle	17
Stealing — not elsewhere contained	11
Break enter and steal	10
Driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol	6
Use etc or possession of drugs	5
Minor assault	4
Obscene language	4
Unlawful possession of goods	3
Offensive behaviour — other	3
Assault of unspecified nature	2
False pretences	2
Dangerous driving	2
Major assault	1
Robbery with major assault	1
Robbery with minor assault	1
Forgery and uttering	1
Evasion of fare	1
Unlawful possession of firearms	1
Other	1
Total	76

In most cases, the new offence was committed early in the parole period. Of those committing a new offence, over one-third (36%) had committed it within three months of release, over one half (58%) within 6 months and most (85%) within the first year.

As would be expected, most (84%) were convicted of their offence in N.S.W., the rest were either convicted interstate (13%) or in New Zealand (2%). Almost half (48%) had no other offences taken into account at this time, a further quarter (28%) had one other offence taken into account, while 11% had more than 5 offences also taken into account. For over half (57%) of the parolees committing an offence, the offence was similar to the current conviction for which they had been imprisoned. This is likely to reflect a combination of the large percentage of prisoners in gaol for property offences, and the large percentage of property offences committed whilst on parole.

In one-third of cases (33%) the parolee was fined for the offence, while in just under half of the cases the parolee was sentenced to more than one month's gaol. Other penalties imposed included: recognizance (6%), gaol sentence of less than one month (6%), bench warrant (4%) or a bond (2%). Where a gaol sentence of more than one month was imposed, in 40% of cases the gaol sentence was less than one year, 29% were given sentences of between one and two years, a further 20% were given sentences of between two and three years. In no case was a parolee sentenced to more than five years. In over half of these cases (59%) the sentence was to be served concurrently with the sentence given for the offence for which the parolee was paroled, in the remaining cases the sentence imposed was to be additional to the earlier sentence.

#### **Outcome of Parole Supervision**

Of the 250 parolees whose files were examined, 138 (55%) completed their parole period without incident, 46 (18%)

were breached but not revoked while the remaining 66 (26%) had their parole orders revoked and were returned to prison. These revocations were the result of a further offence committed by the parolee (47%), failure to report to the parole officer (29%), a breach of another condition (5%) or the combination of a new offence and a breach (20%).

#### **Implications**

A recent study of the conditions under which parole is successfully completed (Gorta, Cooney, George & West, 1982) has indicated that experiences on parole are important to parole outcome. Found to be particularly important were the experiencing of drug and alcohol problems and indices of address and job changes. This Bulletin has provided an overview of parolees' experiences while on parole.

Most notable of these experiences was the large proportion of parolees who parole officers identified as having problems. Particularly prominent were problems classified as interpersonal or financial. Another problem faced by more than three-quarters of the parolees was unemployment. These problems were those recorded by parole officers on the parolees' files. Although parole officers may not be aware of all of the problems of the parolees they supervise and may interpret some of the problems of which they are aware differently from the parolees, the high proportion of problems identified here suggests there are opportunities for the parolee to be assisted during this transition period between the surveillance of the institution and the relative freedom of society.

The dangers posed to society by the early release of these parolees from prison can be assessed both by the number who were revoked, that is returned to prison, and by the offences committed by the parolees during their parole period. Of the 250 parolees whose files were studied, 66 (26%) were revoked. That is, either they were automatically returned to prison having committed a further offence resulting in a prison sentence of three months or more, or they breached a condition or committed some other offence for which it was decided to return them to gaol, protecting the community. Some people would argue that had these prisoners not been released to parole and had they remained in gaol until the end of their sentences, the community would be spared the expense of any crime committed during their parole periods. When examining the reason for revocation of these parolees it can be seen that the early release of these prisoners did not pose a large threat to the bodily safety of members of the community. Only 44 (18%) were revoked because of a further offence they had committed. For the most part these parolees did not commit offences involving violence. One parolee was convicted for major assault, another with robbery with major assault. The others were convicted of property or drug offences. A further 19 (8%) were revoked for failing to report to their parole officer. It is possible, although unknown, that those parolees who did not report may have been involved in criminal activities, or they may have failed to report for other reasons.

The alternative to this small, but real, risk to the community would be to hold these 250 prisoners in gaol until the end of their sentences. Had these 250 prisoners not been released on parole, the 206 (82%) who were not revoked for a further offence would be denied the opportunity of any assistance during this transition between the surveillance of the

prison and the relative freedom of society. Instead, having served their time all would be released into society unsupervised: less assistance for the parolee and less protection for society.

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