

Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners

Summary of the
Social Exclusion Unit report



SUMMARY

Background

The Prime Minister asked the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to explore with other government departments how to cut rates of re-offending by ex-prisoners. The report sets out the scale of the problem; examines the causes and why the system doesn't work better; and makes recommendations for the way forward.

The report is the result of a wide-ranging consultation by the SEU. This included a written consultation and a series of seminars with practitioners, managers and a broad range of service users both inside and outside the criminal justice field. The report has also been informed by visits the SEU made to over 50 prisons as well as to probation services, voluntary groups, housing, family, drug, health and employment projects to see good practice in action and hear the experiences and views of front line staff and users.

The problem

Prison sentences are not succeeding in turning the majority of offenders away from crime. Of those prisoners released in 1997, **58 per cent** were convicted of another crime within two years. **36 per cent** were back inside on another prison sentence. The system struggles particularly to reform younger offenders. 18–20-year-old male prisoners were reconvicted at a rate of **72 per cent** over the same period; **47 per cent** received another prison sentence.

Despite falling in the 1980s, the reconviction rate rose again in the 1990s and has remained obstinately high in recent years. The factors behind this are complex, but it is possible to single out a number of changes over that period which may have contributed: these include an erosion in post-release support for short-term prisoners – those sentenced to less than 12 months; a change in benefit rules for prisoners; and the sharp rise in social exclusion, in areas such as child poverty, drug use, school exclusion, and inequality.

In fact, the headline reconviction figure masks a far greater problem for public safety. We know, for instance, that of those reconvicted in the two years following release, each will actually have received **three further convictions** on average. For each reconviction, it is estimated that **five** recorded offences are committed. At a conservative estimate, released prisoners are responsible for at least **1 million** crimes per year – **18 per cent** of recorded, notifiable crimes. And this takes no account of the amount of unrecorded crime that ex-prisoners, reconvicted or otherwise, will have committed.

The cost

Many of the costs of re-offending by ex-prisoners are not quantifiable, but can be devastating and long-term, and are frequently felt by the most vulnerable in society. Most obviously, there is the impact on victims, many of whom will be repeat victims, and on their families; also on communities, predominantly the most disadvantaged. In turn, where re-offenders are caught and imprisoned, a heavy toll is taken on their families and on their own lives.

The financial cost of re-offending by ex-prisoners, calculated from the overall costs of crime, is staggering and widely felt. In terms of the cost to the criminal justice system of dealing with the consequences of crime, recorded crime alone committed by ex-prisoners comes to at least **£11 billion** per year.

An ex-prisoner's path back to prison is extremely costly for the criminal justice system. A re-offending ex-prisoner is likely to be responsible for crime costing the criminal justice system an average of **£65,000**. Prolific offenders will cost even more. When re-offending leads to a further prison sentence, the costs soar. The average cost of a prison sentence imposed at a crown court is roughly **£30,500**, made up of court and other legal costs. The costs of actually keeping prisoners within prison vary significantly, but average **£37,500** per year.

And yet these costs are only a fraction of the overall cost of re-offending. First, recorded crime accounts for between only a quarter and a tenth of total crime, and ex-prisoners are likely to be prolific offenders. They may, therefore, be responsible for a large proportion of unrecorded crime and its costs as well. Second, there are high financial costs to: the police and the criminal justice system more widely; the victims of the crimes; other public agencies who also have to pick up the pieces; the national economy through loss of income; the communities in which they live; and, of course, prisoners themselves and their families.

The causes

There is now considerable evidence of the factors that influence re-offending. Building on criminological and social research, the SEU has identified nine key factors:

- education;
- employment;
- drug and alcohol misuse;
- mental and physical health;
- attitudes and self-control;
- institutionalisation and life-skills;
- housing;
- financial support and debt; and
- family networks.

The evidence shows that these factors can have a huge impact on the likelihood of a prisoner re-offending. For example, being in employment reduces the risk of re-offending by between a third and a half; having stable accommodation reduces the risk by a fifth.

The challenge of turning a convicted offender away from crime is often considerable. Many prisoners have poor skills and little experience of employment, few positive social networks, severe housing problems, and all of this is often severely complicated by drug, alcohol and mental health problems.

Many prisoners have experienced a lifetime of social exclusion. Compared with the general population, prisoners are **thirteen** times as likely to have been in care as a child, **thirteen** times as likely to be unemployed, **ten** times as likely to have been a regular truant, **two and a half times** as likely to have had a family member convicted of a criminal offence, **six** times as likely to have been a young father, and **fifteen** times as likely to be HIV positive.

Many prisoners' basic skills are very poor. **80 per cent** have the writing skills, **65 per cent** the numeracy skills and **50 per cent** the reading skills at or below the level of an 11-year-old child. **60 to 70 per cent** of prisoners were using drugs before imprisonment. Over **70 per cent** suffer from at least two mental disorders. And **20 per cent** of male and **37 per cent** of female sentenced prisoners have attempted suicide in the past. The position is often even worse for 18–20-year-olds, whose basic skills, unemployment rate and school exclusion background are all over **a third** worse than those of older prisoners.

Despite high levels of need, many prisoners have effectively been excluded from access to services in the past. It is estimated that around **half** of prisoners had no GP before they came into custody; prisoners are over **twenty** times more likely than the general population to have been excluded from school; and one prison drugs project found that although **70 per cent** of those entering the prison had a drug misuse problem, **80 per cent** of these had never had any contact with drug treatment services.

There is a considerable risk that a prison sentence might actually make the factors associated with re-offending worse. For example, **a third** lose their house while in prison, **two-thirds** lose their job, **over a fifth** face increased financial problems and **over two-fifths** lose contact with their family. There are also real dangers of mental and physical health deteriorating further, of life and thinking skills being eroded, and of prisoners being introduced to drugs. By aggravating the factors associated with re-offending, prison sentences can prove counter-productive as a contribution to crime reduction and public safety.

Annette lost her accommodation as a result of entering prison. No one had talked to her when she arrived or during the following months about how she could keep her house or what she could do to ensure that she had somewhere to live on release. Annette's rent arrears continued to grow while she was in prison and she was evicted. Her early release under curfew was rejected because of the absence of an approved address. On release, her local authority refused to re-house her because of her rent arrears.

Tariq has been homeless and using drugs since leaving care. After several shoplifting offences, he spent six weeks in custody. His behaviour during this time was extremely withdrawn and erratic. After sentence, he harmed himself with a ballpoint pen. He received different diagnoses for mental disorder from the court and prison psychiatrists. He was also given medication for drugs withdrawal, but still hallucinated repeatedly. Between arrest and release, he had contact with 13 services at a cost of £10,000, but nothing was achieved. Prison workers referred him to community drugs and homelessness teams, but he failed to keep the appointments. Two days after release, he was arrested for shoplifting again.

What can be done?

There is increasing evidence of what works in tackling the problems of offenders, and in reducing re-offending. The following are some examples of the good practice that the SEU has identified during its visits and consultation:

- offending behaviour programmes can reduce reconviction rates by up to **14 per cent**. They aim to change the way offenders think, to bring home the effect of their behaviour on themselves and others, and to teach positive techniques to avoid the situations that lead to offending;
- the RAPT Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Project has shown that of the two-thirds of prisoners who complete its programme, reconviction rates are **11 per cent** lower than would normally be expected;
- at HMP Norwich, the Anglia Care Trust negotiated with landlords to help prisoners retain or terminate their tenancies. They advised prisoners on finance and debt management issues during and after their sentence. More than **50 per cent** of prisoners retained their tenancy with no added debt and only **5 per cent** left prison with nowhere to go;
- at HMP Belmarsh, the Mental Health Liaison Team has attained NHS Beacon status through offering in-patient assessment and support to those experiencing mental health problems and/or awaiting transfer to NHS hospitals. It also manages an effective outpatient referral process, ensuring that prisoners' needs are prepared for and information is passed on to the appropriate Community Mental Health Team;
- at HMP Hull, a prison officer seconded to the local authority directly matches prisoners to available jobs in the community. The officer divides his time between working in prison and outside. There is no set limit on the officer's contact time with ex-prisoners. He acts as an advocate, providing advice, support and encouragement. The project has a good record in finding employment for ex-prisoners;
- at HMP Holme House, the Prisoner Passport scheme involves Jobcentre Plus staff providing one-to-one advice on benefits. On release, prisoners are given a 'passport', which sets out the details of a pre-arranged appointment with a Jobcentre Plus adviser in the community;
- at HMP Reading, the Lattice Foundation train young offenders in forklift truck driving. Participants attend a day-release course, leading to a nationally accredited qualification. Over **70 per cent** of participants have found employment on release, and only around **6 per cent** are known to have re-offended. The scheme has been further developed to include training as groundwork engineers for the gas industry; and
- at HMP Leeds, the education department has adapted existing courses to deliver basic and key skills qualifications. Despite an annual turnover of 6,000 prisoners and an average stay of only 12 weeks, all prisoners receive targeted education and training, including testing for dyslexia.

These examples show that prison sentences can provide a real opportunity for constructive work. And it is clear from the profile of the prison population, that a sentence can be the first time many have been in sustained contact with public services. In many cases, the task is not to resettle prisoners in society, but *settle* them for the first time.

What is going wrong?

There is a growing consensus that we are sending some people to prison who should not be there. Short prison sentences are not appropriate for all the offenders who currently receive them; and too many people with severe mental illness are in prison rather than secure treatment facilities. All of this contributes to the problem of overcrowding, which in turn limits the capacity of prisons, probation and other services to work effectively to reduce re-offending.

Although the Prison Service and Probation Service have improved their focus on reducing re-offending, the current balance of resources still does not enable them to deliver beneficial programmes such as education, drug and mental health treatment, offending behaviour, and reparation programmes and many others, to anything like the number who need them.

The availability of positive initiatives, such as those noted above, is patchy, and the majority of prisoners, particularly those serving short sentences, receive little practical support, before release or afterwards. For instance, only 50 per cent of prisons holding medium-risk prisoners have a drug treatment programme; the money invested in education per prisoner varies between comparable prisons from £200 to £2,000 per year. The result can often be a piecemeal, untailored response, based on what happens to be available in that particular prison or area, rather than what the prisoner needs to tackle his or her offending behaviour.

In addressing the factors that contribute to re-offending, correctional services often have to remedy a lifetime of combined service failure, often unaided. And when prisoners are released, agencies are far from pro-active in identifying them, and indeed there is evidence that prisoners are actively de-prioritised. Many experience real obstacles to re-engaging in learning or drug programmes on release; but these pale into insignificance compared with their difficulties in accessing housing and benefits.

No one is ultimately responsible for the rehabilitation process at any level – from national policy, to the level of the individual prisoner. Responsibility and accountability for outcomes can be very unclear. The problems in prisoners' lives are often highly complicated and inter-related. They require a co-ordinated multi-agency response, within prison, across the crucial transitions between community and custody, and sustained long after release. Without this, they are likely to fall into the gaps between services. This task is made more complex by the need to assess the risk posed by released prisoners to public safety, and in some cases, to manage any potential threat across a number of areas, including housing and employment. However, joint-working mechanisms are not robust, and are not backed by shared targets, leverage, or up-to-date management information.

For those workers involved in the prison or in the community, the opportunities and rewards for innovation in rehabilitation work are currently far too limited.

In prisons, processes on reception and release could be much better designed to promote rehabilitation and to identify and tackle factors influencing re-offending. Prisoners are losing housing and employment, and accruing debt for want of basic procedures, dedicated resource and expertise. Good practice is not well enough articulated, and the process needs more resource and management priority.

For those who do increase their employability, the requirement to disclose their convictions to a potential employer can be a significant barrier, resulting in discrimination. The current arrangements do not get the balance right between the need to protect the public and the importance of enabling those who do not pose a significant risk of harm to move into legitimate employment.

Short-term prisoners – those sentenced to less than 12 months – aged over 21 are not required to be supervised by the Probation Service. As a result, they are released in a completely unmanaged fashion, nothing is done with them on release, and indeed because there is no responsible agency to which they are handed over, very little is done in preparation for release. Yet short-term prisoners have the highest re-offending rates.

Not enough has been done to engage prisoners, their families, victims, communities, and voluntary and business sectors in rehabilitation.

The system is not always geared up to deal with the different factors affecting the re-offending of certain groups of prisoners, particularly women, young adults, black and minority ethnic groups, and remand prisoners. The challenges presented by juvenile prisoners are distinct, and the Government has recognised this by putting in place a separate tailored system for them. Each of these groups is discussed in detail in the report's annexes.

Jim has been in prison four times, has never had paid work or been involved in training. On arriving in prison he was told that the only work available was packing plastic cutlery. Jim did this for five weeks, earning £7 a week. He was persuaded to put his name down to join the prison job club, to help in looking for paid work on release. Before he could join Jim was transferred to another prison, where he was told that there wasn't a similar programme. He cleaned landings for the remaining weeks of his sentence. Following release Jim is still unemployed.

Matthew has used heroin and cocaine for the past five years and has been in prison twice before. During his latest sentence his drug use was assessed when he arrived in prison and he successfully completed a detoxification programme. He gained basic skills qualifications and staff helped him to set up a college interview on release. Matthew accepted that he would need to complete a drug treatment programme to avoid using drugs in the future, but on release he was told that he would have to wait four months to get on a programme. Matthew found that he had no one to help him to organise the support that he needed.

The way forward

To build a system that can reduce the level of re-offending is a major challenge. One key element is a transparent and robust sentencing framework, geared towards crime reduction. The Government is at present considering this, in the light of the Review of Sentencing published last year. If implemented, the Custody Plus proposal would ensure that short-term sentences contain a period both in custody and under community supervision.

But reform of sentences would not, of itself, be enough. Major changes to the way in which those inside and outside the criminal justice system operate are necessary to ensure that the system is focusing resources sufficiently to deal with the right people, using robust systems of accountability and joint working, and delivering in innovative ways. Long-term change is needed to ensure that all those dealing with prisoners and ex-prisoners make the maximum possible impact on re-offending.

The benefits of reform would not only be felt by the criminal justice system. There are likely to be multiple returns to services dealing with employment, housing, benefits, families, health and education.

The Social Exclusion Unit's recommendations

A more effective cross-government approach to rehabilitation and reducing re-offending is urgently needed. The SEU recommends that the Government should develop and implement a National Rehabilitation Strategy, based on the report, involving all relevant departments and led by the Home Office.

The Strategy would need to be long-term and wide-ranging, but the SEU recommends that it should initially focus on policy and delivery in the following key areas:

Going Straight Contract

- a) A Going Straight contract should be developed, to deliver an integrated approach to rehabilitative programmes and support. This should be tailored to the individual and cover the entire sentence, in and out of custody; it should aim to address all of the factors either associated with a prisoner's offending or likely to increase the chances of their re-offending; and it should cover all of the organisations responsible for delivery. Once this has been developed, it should be tested out with 18–20-year-olds; and then, based on experience of what works, it should be extended to other groups later on.
- b) As part of this approach, each prisoner should be set a full programme of activities and support, based on a comprehensive assessment of need. In order to ensure effective and co-ordinated delivery, the programme should be drawn up by a case manager, who would oversee its delivery throughout the prisoner's sentence. The prisoner should sign a Going Straight contract, to last from the point of sentence to the end of sentence in the community. This should include rewards for participation and sanctions for non-participation. To fulfil their side of the contract, prisoners should be required to follow their agreed programme, and make payments from their prison pay, both to make reparation to victims and to help finance the support the case manager would provide on release.
- c) The proposed form of case management would be a new approach to prison sentences, and different models would need to be tested out, all of which should involve joint working between the Prison Service and Probation Service and other statutory and non-statutory organisations. In each pilot, clear local leadership would be crucial, although different lead agencies, including those from the voluntary sector, ought to be considered. The pilots should be supervised by a national programme director, reporting to the new Correctional Services Board in the Home Office and a cross-government group of ministers.

National measures

- d) On a national basis there is a strong case for introducing measures to tackle financial and housing need among newly released prisoners. Particular consideration should be given to increasing the discharge grant to cover the period before the first benefit payment and giving resettlement departments within prisons the ability to secure emergency housing for prisoners who would otherwise be homeless on release. The case for enabling more prisoners to retain their housing or pay unavoidable arrears should also be considered. Future development of this proposal would need to ensure that any amendment to Housing Benefit rules was accompanied by measures to secure a meaningful and effective extension to the responsibility of the prisoners.
- e) Effective reception and resettlement procedures should be developed in all prisons, to secure improved outcomes on housing, health, benefits and employment, education and training, drug and alcohol work, and family contact.

Further development

- f) Outside the pilots and in the community, the availability of a number of beneficial measures should be widened further, in areas such as offending behaviour programmes, education and training, mental health, drugs and alcohol, and family support.
- g) i) In developing a National Rehabilitation Strategy, the Government should draw on evaluation evidence of the outcomes of any initial measures taken and on the further issues identified in the full report. It should also draw on several other key sources: the detailed recommendations made by HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation in their report on resettlement *Through the Prison Gate*; the 2001 Sentencing Review; the National Audit Office's report *Reducing Prisoner Re-offending*; the current review of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act; and the forthcoming Criminal Justice White Paper.
- ii) The planning, development and implementation of the National Rehabilitation Strategy should include: correctional services (Prison Service and Probation Service) at a national and regional level; other statutory agencies involved with health, education, employment, drugs, families, and housing; the voluntary sector; businesses; and faith communities. The Strategy should make strong links with effective regional and local partnerships, including Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The changes that the SEU recommends are significant and would require considerable further development, both by criminal justice agencies and other mainstream agencies. The rate at which change could be implemented would be dependent on the speed at which the detail could be worked up and the rate at which resources could be identified and refocused across Government. As soon as possible, the Government should publish full details of how it proposes to respond to the SEU's report, together with a timetable for delivery.

This summary is available in the following languages: Bengali, Gujarati, Cantonese, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, from the address below. They can also be downloaded from the SEU website: www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk

Braille and audio tape versions of the summary are also available.

The full report and further copies of this summary are available from the website, or from the address below.

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