

Locked out

CAB evidence on prisoners and ex-offenders

Crime touches everyone in society. Although reported crime has decreased over the past 10 years, we now have dangerously overcrowded prisons and high levels of re-offending. Citizens Advice Bureaux have extensive experience of working with offenders and their families. Our evidence shows that providing them with advice, as well as other support services, can help to break the vicious cycle of re-offending, which is so costly for the individuals involved, their families, wider society and the economy.

Background – the Home Office problem

Our prisons are full. In response the Government is planning to build more. But investing in increasing prison capacity is expensive, and prisoners are costly to maintain in jail. It costs £35,000 to keep someone in prison for a year. And it does not necessarily cut rates of re-offending – over two-thirds of those who have been in prison re-offend.

In looking at the potential causes of re-offending, the profile of prisoners provides an insight. The vast majority of prisoners are male – only five per cent of prisoners are female. There are higher proportions of prisoners from ethnic minority backgrounds than in the UK population. More than half do not have a single educational qualification; 65 per cent have numeracy levels below those of an average 11-year-old; and more than 80 per cent have poor writing skills.

In light of the increasing prison population, the Government has been keen to understand the links between social exclusion and crime. The 2002 Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report, *Reducing re-offending*, highlighted the importance of this and in response, the Government set up the National Offender Management Service (NOMS)

to provide more 'end-to-end' services for offenders. Yet implementation has been slow, and three years later, offenders are still unable to access the help they need to deal with their problems and the cost and consequence of their imprisonment. A key theme which emerges from CAB work is the need to improve access to advice for prisoners.

The CAB service may be able to assist. Citizens Advice Bureaux are already providing advice in over 40 prisons and working with the Probation Service to help prisoners and ex-offenders to deal with their problems. This gives us a unique insight into the types of problems that prisoners face and the solutions to them. However, any successful strategy to tackle re-offending must include a wide range of partners and address challenges, such as prison overcrowding and delays in processing benefit claims, which have arisen since the SEU report was published.

This report draws on nearly 500 case studies from 160 Citizens Advice Bureaux in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2005 and 2006. We also surveyed 12 CAB Prison and Probation Service outreaches and interviewed 29 CAB clients in prison or on probation to get their views on the problems they were facing.

Main findings

Effective rehabilitation begins on arrival in prison. Prisoners' induction and reception into prison custody need to focus adequately on the practical issues that new prisoners have to sort out, such as outstanding housing, employment, debt and benefit liabilities.

Once in prison, prisoners find it difficult to deal with their problems. Simple actions such as making a phone call or writing a letter are no longer easy and are subject to restrictions. Without support and advice within prison, it is often not possible to deal with outstanding debts, or housing issues. Prisoners often lose their outside accommodation, and build up debts.

Prisoners' networks of family and friends are hugely important in supporting them throughout their sentence, and in providing them with a stable environment on release. However, the Prison Service often requires prisoners to be transferred to another prison, sometimes at short notice. Continual relocation can break down these relationships, removing a prisoner's personal support network at a time when they need it most.

The Prison Service has to provide training and education to help rehabilitate and prepare prisoners for release. These services vary from drug rehabilitation courses, financial capability, to educational training leading to professional qualifications. However the availability and quality of these courses varies enormously. As a result, when prisoners are transferred to another prison, they may not be able to continue the same courses.

Comprehensive support for prisoners during their sentences can help enable offenders to successfully rejoin society. But CAB evidence shows support services can be patchy, often leaving prisoners without the skills to manage their situations, thereby reducing their chances of successful rehabilitation.

These problems are compounded where a prisoner has specific needs. Women with babies in prison may be unable to claim benefits for their children. Foreign nationals are kept in prison for long periods waiting for the Home Office to make a decision about deportation. Victims of miscarriages of justice often face unique difficulties in readjusting to ordinary life. They may have become institutionalised and in many cases their problems are compounded by mental trauma, as well as economic hardship.

At the point of release, a range of support and advice services should be available through the Probation

Case 1

A client of Citizens Advice Reducing Offending Through Advice (ROTA) project was struggling to find accommodation when he was released from prison. The ROTA worker assisted him in making a housing application to his local authority and also arranged stable short-term accommodation for his release. She also negotiated with his previous landlord to accept small weekly repayments from his prison wages to repay rent arrears. The adviser arranged for him to consult a family solicitor via a video link about re-establishing contact with his two children. When he was subsequently transferred to another prison, the adviser was able to refer him to a colleague for continued advice and support.

Case 2

A CAB in Hampshire saw a man who had been in prison on remand. However, the case never went to court and he was released from prison after two months. On discharge he was given a travel voucher, but no money, and no accommodation had been arranged for him. He had no means of buying food.

Case 3

A CAB in Northamptonshire reported that a woman sought advice after her conviction had been quashed on appeal. The client, who was refused medical treatment for depression whilst in prison, was released with no money. As a result she had to walk right across London, despite poor mental and physical health.

Service and other advice agencies. These services help prisoners to organise accommodation and immediate financial support, either through employment or the benefit system. In reality, offenders are often released without having these basic needs met. They may find themselves homeless and hungry, and some may re-offend as a result of immediate poverty.

Prisoners who are released from remand are not eligible for practical support from the Probation Service, even though they can be held on remand for as long as 12 months.

Many prisoners are entitled to a discharge grant on release to help them meet living expenses for the first week until benefit claims are processed. However, the amount of discharge grant has remained fixed since 1997. CAB evidence suggests that this amount is insufficient to last for a week, let alone the 11 to 18 days in which benefit claims are supposed to be processed.

For ex-offenders to become financially stable on release, they need to be able to make advance claims for benefit, using documentation they are likely to have with them. It is also important that these claims are processed quickly.

Although NOMS has a target to find accommodation on release for 70,000 ex-offenders, CAB evidence suggests that many prisoners slip through the net, particularly in finding permanent accommodation. Some local authorities refuse to rehouse ex-offenders because they consider they are not vulnerable and are intentionally homeless.

The repercussions of a custodial sentence can be long term. Finding employment can be difficult, due to the current legislation on disclosure of unspent convictions, and the reluctance on the part of many employers to take on ex-offenders. Some newly released prisoners cannot receive their wages or benefits because they do not have any documents to prove their identity in order to open a bank account, and so are locked out.

It is important to realise that these problems do not occur in isolation – prisoners and ex-offenders often have complex needs and may struggle to deal with them without appropriate advice and support. Advice therefore plays a key role in rehabilitating offenders. Independent, quality assured advice, delivered by voluntary sector providers, offers skills and advocacy which may not be available from statutory providers, such as Jobcentre Plus. Access to advice should therefore be at the heart of NOMS's strategy for reducing re-offending.

Case 4

A CAB in Berkshire reported that a recently released prisoner was told by Jobcentre Plus that it would take up to six weeks to process his claim for Jobseeker's Allowance. Although he had been given a discharge grant of £46 on release, the money had only lasted 10 days. When the client applied for a crisis loan, Jobcentre Plus refused his application because they did not think he could repay it.

Case 5

A Somerset CAB reported that when a prisoner who tried to commit suicide was released from custody, he had nowhere to stay and had to sleep in his car in temperatures below freezing. The local authority refused to rehouse him because they did not think he was vulnerable. After having been turned away, the man admitted to stealing petrol to keep his car running, and then when the temperatures dropped even lower, he ripped a telephone off the wall in the police station so that he could have a bed for the night.

Case 6

A CAB in Essex reported a client who found it extremely difficult to get work as a result of his criminal record. He had been sleeping on a friend's floor but had been asked to leave, and was about to become homeless. Without employment, he could not afford accommodation, and his lack of a stable address would make finding employment even harder than it already was.

Key recommendations

- Reducing re-offending by investing in advice services for prisoners would cost a lot less than building more prisons. On average the costs of a CAB prison advice service serving the whole UK prison population could amount to as little as £319 per prisoner per year, compared to the costs of £35,000 per year keeping them in jail if they return.
- The Home Office should make it mandatory for all prisons to provide sufficiently resourced independent and quality assured advice services.
- The Prison Service should ensure that addressing a new prisoner's housing situation is a core element of induction to prison, to enable them to keep their home wherever possible. Induction procedures should be monitored and include follow-on sessions.
- The Prison Service should ensure that the procedure for transferring prisoners takes into account the importance of prisoners' access to family support networks.
- The Prison Service should ensure that on release, ex-offenders have sufficient proof of identity to enable them to claim benefits.
- The discharge grant should be sufficient to meet ex-offenders' basic needs for two weeks.
- The Government needs to develop a code of practice for employers to ensure best practice in the employment of ex-offenders.
- We also make a number of recommendations to the Prison Service, banks and other creditors, employers, local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to address other problems experienced by prisoners and ex-offenders.

The full report, **Locked out**, is available for £6.00 (including postage). To order a copy, please send your name and address, and a cheque made payable to Citizens Advice, to Citizens Advice, Myddelton House, 115-123 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9LZ.

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