

Community Participation in Crime Reduction

Tracey Moses describes a volunteer programme to help offenders resettle into the community.

Discussion about crime reduction and possible ways to prevent criminal behaviour has increased in response to public concern about crime. Meanwhile prison populations rise, and overworked and short-staffed criminal justice agencies struggle to meet targets.

Short term prisoners

There is huge need for support and assistance through mentoring to 'short term' prisoners (i.e. those serving sentences of less than 12 months), who represent the largest proportion of sentenced prisoners received into prison. For example, of approximately 3000 offenders sentenced to custody in May 2002, 65% had been given short-term prison sentences. Shockingly it is this section of the prison population whose needs have been largely neglected by statutory organisations as a result of the 1991 Criminal Justice Act. The Act stipulated that the Probation Service had no statutory obligation to work with those serving less than 12 months. The Probation Service's main role was to be the supervision of those sentenced to over 12 months. Subsequently the responsibility for the resettlement of short-term prisoners was given to voluntary sector organisations. The problems associated with short-term sentences are immense and very similar to the problems experienced by prisoners serving longer sentences. Yet short-term prisoners do not receive nearly as much support. Short sentenced prisoners can voluntarily request intervention from resettlement agencies, but it is not always available. Therefore individual resettlement issues remain unresolved and there is no opportunity for the cycle of crime to be broken. This is illustrated by the latest reoffending figures available which show that 61% of all short-term sentenced prisoners discharged from custody are re-convicted within two years. The Home Office suggests that it is this group who are responsible for 18% of recorded crime, amounting to 95,000 recorded crimes per year.

Political commentators recognise the need to address the rising prison population and reconviction rates as the current cost per prisoner stands at around £27,500 per year. Thus short sentences have come into the firing line and their effectiveness has been questioned. A consensus has emerged that although sentences of less than 12 months seem to have a recognisable punitive value, without resettlement assistance they are likely to have little impact on reoffending. Intervention is

needed to address offending behaviour patterns, without which prisoners leave custody ill prepared to live and work in the community.

Prisoners serving short sentences are in need of support from the time they are received into custody, throughout the sentence and particularly on release. On reception into custody, short stay prisoners do not go through the sentence planning process, unlike those sentenced to over 12 months, so there is no plan of action for their incarceration. Prison may be a first opportunity to consider the future and options on release, and to access services such as education, training, drug and alcohol treatment and housing advice. When a prisoner is enthusiastic about addressing these issues but is not provided with the opportunities to do so the consequences can be very destructive.

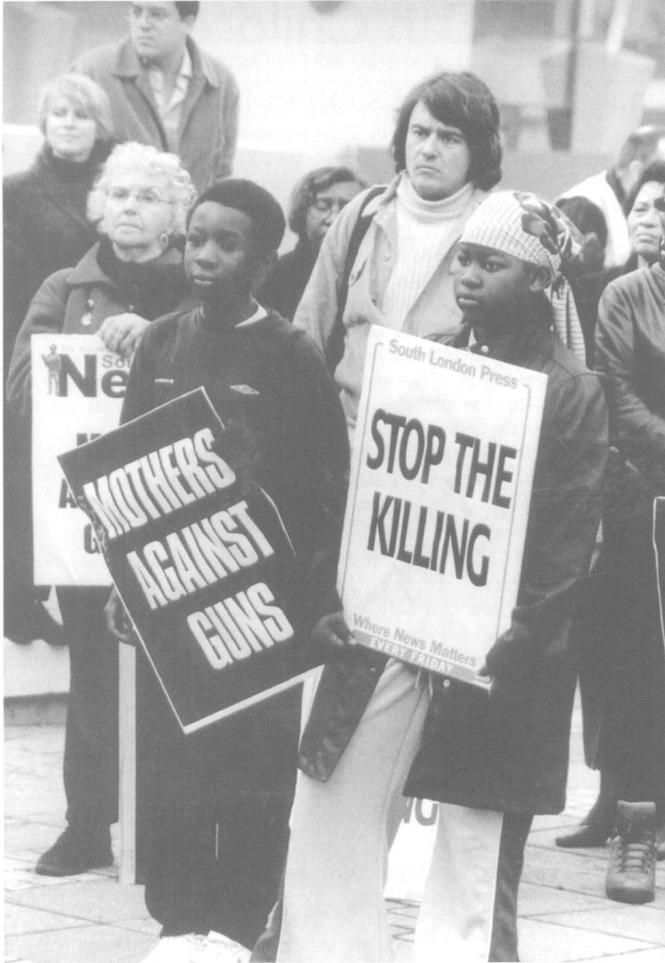
A new Social Exclusion Report has highlighted the inextricable link between social exclusion before sentencing and reoffending. Custody only increases the high levels of social exclusion many prisoners experienced before imprisonment.

The solution

Volunteering is a potentially powerful force in the restoration of neighbourhoods and this government has thrown its weight behind efforts to increase the amount of volunteering and to develop the role of the voluntary sector. Strong vibrant democracies require citizens participating in their communities, activities that may not only reduce the cost of public services but also the demand for public services, police, courts, probation and prisons.

SOVA, a national voluntary organisation, has risen to the challenge, addressing crime reduction through the use of volunteers to provide pre and post release support for those sentenced to less than 12 months. The SOVA philosophy encourages the strengthening of communities by involving local volunteers in promoting social inclusion and reducing crime. Having grown rapidly in the last thirty years, SOVA has developed expertise in the recruitment and training of volunteers to work primarily in criminal justice settings. SOVA believes that long-term solutions to crime and disadvantage lie within local communities with volunteers participating in local projects to find solutions to local problems. Volunteers are well received by the prisoners, as they are impartial representatives offering support and assistance in a range of areas.

SOVA London Link works in partnership with the London Probation Area to provide essential



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resettlement to short term prisoners within the London area. SOVA London Link volunteers visit clients in prison, if possible making a comprehensive assessment of resettlement needs before release from prison. One to one sessions with clients are arranged to devise individual action plans in preparation for discharge. Volunteers are given an amazing opportunity to work constructively on resettlement issues and offer positive alternatives to crime. This full package of support can also be accessed on release at drop-in centres across London which provide support with the reality of 'going straight'.

Some of the resettlement challenges faced by ex-offenders are outlined below:

- SOVA London Link in-house research suggests that of prisoners sentenced to less than 12 months, 70% requesting assistance would be returning to unstable accommodation. Housing is scarce and ex-offenders do not constitute a priority to the local authority. Hostel agencies require risk assessments completed by probation officers, which are not always available for prisoners completing short sentences.
- The Social Exclusion Unit has reported that 75% of prisoners leave custody without jobs. Large proportions have never worked before

and are unaware of the laws on declaration of offences.

- 50 % of prisoners have poor literacy and 65% have poor numeracy.
- 62% of male prisoners have been involved with drug and alcohol misuse. Short-term prisoners may be exempt from intensive drug treatment programmes, because of the length of sentence.
- Prisoners are regularly moved between establishments, many are moved to distant prisons, making family contact and continuation of courses and assessments difficult.
- A common feature of resettlement is the lack of constructive empowerment. A successfully settled client commented "The volunteer helped to encourage and support me. Although I am capable of finding work I needed positive encouragement". What is needed is input that challenges prisoner perceptions about housing benefits and employment.

Drawing on the recommendations of the Social Exclusion Unit Report, SOVA London Link is working towards a more integrated and holistic approach to the resettlement of short-term prisoners. Clients are rarely faced with a single resettlement issue, but usually a combination of needs which in the past have been dealt with by various voluntary and charitable organisations in isolation. SOVA London Link advocates multi-agency networking, which avoids the duplication of assessments and encourages the sharing of expertise.

SOVA London Link volunteers fill the gap, so that basic advice about housing and benefits can be issued to prisoners in preparation for release. Clients are linked to specialist organisations, and follow-up on all referrals remains paramount to the work of volunteers.

The value of volunteers in addressing resettlement is immeasurable and benefits both the client and the volunteer. It would be unrealistic to suggest that resettlement is successful in every case, as it would be unethical to enforce resettlement for an individual who has never been settled. However, project outcomes illustrate that volunteer-aided resettlement can be successful in helping clients find their way with housing, benefits, drug and alcohol issues and employment. Changes in these areas have the potential to reduce criminal activity, which is of benefit not only to individuals and their families but the community in general.

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