

Reducing Reoffending

Louise Dominion, Head of the Adult Offender and Rehabilitation Unit in the Home Office, spoke at the CCJS AGM in December 2002 about 'Implementing the Social Exclusion Unit report on reducing reoffending by ex-prisoners'. This is an edited extract from her speech.

6 The Social Exclusion Unit was commissioned by the Prime Minister to look at the high rates of reoffending by released prisoners. This built on other projects that we had done on truancy and exclusion of young people, homelessness and neighbourhood renewal. There are very strong links between these different pieces of work.

The first thing that we needed to do was get an understanding of the scale of the problem. 58% of released prisoners are re-convicted within two years, a figure which has not altered very much in the last ten years. We know that each conviction actually represented a number of crimes. Overall we worked out that released prisoners were responsible for about a million crimes annually, but we know that the real figures were likely to be much higher than that.

We've got a really high rate of reoffending amongst 18 to 20-year olds, 72%, and 48% of them are back inside prison within two years. That is a real waste, and there are some pretty important knock-on costs in the community. We know that there is very clear damage to communities in high crime environments, to victims, to the children of offenders who are more likely to offend themselves. In order to understand why prisoners reoffend so much we need to understand them as a socially excluded group.

Our analysis of social exclusion across all our different pieces of work typically finds that socially excluded individuals suffer from a number of problems, all of which are damaging and difficult in themselves, but which are mutually reinforcing and tend to be very inter-connected. Alongside this, they also suffer very poor access to services, either because the services simply aren't there for that group or that area, or because services aren't tailored to deal with their particular problems, or because they fall through gaps in services. The combination of mutually reinforcing problems exacerbate each other creating a vicious circle that increases the likelihood of reoffending.

What makes someone socially excluded also makes them more likely to reoffend and in turn their social exclusion is considerably worsened. I'll give you an example of that in housing. Evidence shows that coming out of prison you're much more likely to go on to the streets. We also have evidence that stable housing can help to prevent reoffending. But what happens when a prisoner goes into prison is that nobody informs their housing provider. While they're in prison they may be held quite a long way from their home authority and no one may actually know that they're there. Their rent arrears mount up, and eventually, the authority may take steps to evict the prisoner. Finally when the eviction comes through, the authority often has to clear that person's property, again, with no notion as to where they've disappeared to. That includes clearing information and ID that the prisoner needs to establish their identity on discharge to claim benefits. We estimate that about a third of prisoners lose their property and their housing going through the prison system. Given that we know that the loss of stable housing actually promotes reoffending, this seems to be a system that needs to be tackled from both the housing authority side and from the prisons side.

Factors in reoffending

When we looked closely at the links between social exclusion and reoffending we found factors that were connected with reoffending and we know that scoring badly in any one of these areas will actually increase the likelihood of reoffending. So attitudes and self-control, benefits and debts, access to financial wherewithal, drugs and alcohol dependency score very highly, education and training are also linked and have very strong links to employment which is a very protective factor when we're looking at re-offending. We found that being in stable employment reduces the risk of offending by about a third and stable accommodation reduces the risk by about a fifth.

Family ties are very important – having stable links with family often provides some of the employment and housing that an offender's going to need on release. There is also the whole issue of institutionalisation and life skills, the fact that within a prison environment the offender is really not responsible for any part of their lives and the difficulty they have in re-engaging when they come out. All these issues are interconnected. For example, issues of homelessness are very connected with issues of unemployment, with family problems, with drug and alcohol problems, so we're looking at a range of very complicated and inter-related problems. The prisoner doesn't perceive his or her problems as being one issue of homelessness, one issue of drugs, they're very interconnected for the individual – unfortunately, not for the services.

Degrees of disadvantage

It's worth looking at the degree of disadvantage that we're talking about in this population. Prisoners may actually be a very tiny proportion of the customers of a particular service, however they are definitely going to be a very large proportion of the hardest to help in any of these groups. Mental health problems are really very highly represented in this population. Unemployment levels are 5% in the general population, 67% amongst prisoners. 15% of the general population lack qualifications but the rate is very much higher in men and women in prison. Homelessness is experienced by only 1% of the general population but 32% of prisoners. The rates of those on benefits, and those using drugs, is again very high. The criminal justice system in a sense deals with a population with very, very high rates of disadvantage, and that is a challenge in terms of the people that are walking through the door.

So, what's the response? We recognised that our work was actually building on some quite important changes within the criminal justice system and in prisons in particular. The Prison Service made enormous strides in getting more prisoners on to basic skills programmes and into drug services in particular, and they'd also for some time been working on getting offending behaviour programmes to prisoners. There are also other services out there with mental health treatment and benefits and employment advice that we can build on.

Gaps in the system

However, we still need to look at the differences in access between custody and community, at some of the gaps at the various points in the system. There could for example be a set of pilot projects on housing advice but they're not necessarily in the same locality as a set of pilots on mental health. So we need to build capacity and improve joint working. It's important actually not to think of the prisoners as separate episodes as they pass through the system. One of the things that struck me on my various visits (to prisons) was how difficult it was to sequence activity so that the prisoner who wasn't able to go on the offending behaviour programme because their basic skills weren't up to scratch, was put through the basic skills programme and then on to the offending behaviour programme, whereas at the moment there is no overview for the whole story.

So we need to integrate the strategies at national level, and to work out a way of integrating the sequencing of support around the offender's needs. We need to tighten up the accountability for outcomes. We have recommended that a national rehabilitation strategy be developed to pull together cross-government response, but which would make sense at the level of the individual prisoner. We also recommended the 'Going Straight Contract', our attempt to develop and test the effectiveness of a holistic approach with activities determined by the prisoner's needs, based on assessment and a shared understanding by the correctional services. It would be overseen by a case manager throughout the sentence, both in prison and outside prison, with a pay scheme that would motivate engagement.

Transition points

We also identified that there were some transitional points for prisoners that were particularly important and relevant. We looked at the First Night in Custody project in at Holloway, where they were working with women at this very early, very vulnerable point in their prison experience. It's those sorts of processes throughout the prison system that we need to target.

There's an equally sensitive point of transition at discharge. I was shocked when I first came into the project about how little a prison has to do for a prisoner at discharge — they have to pay them their discharge grant, ensure there's a warrant, and check they're discharging the right person, but there isn't very much more. There is no clear responsibility for establishing connections to services such as the Job Centre and housing, services that might be important to help a prisoner to re-enter the community.

The discharge process is a vulnerable transition point and we want to focus on that. In the White Paper 'Justice for All' that was given as our top priority in improving these processes. It's important to know that the person has somewhere to go and that they have enough money to survive until their benefit claim is processed.

Taking recommendations forward

So those were our recommendations. When we published the report we handed over, in stages, the responsibility for taking this forward to the Home Office. Experience of doing other Social Exclusion Unit reports shows that there tends to be a lull in activity while the department which has received the report staggers under the recommendations, collects itself together and starts to build up its own capacity and put together a programme of work, and that's exactly what's happened in the Home Office.

There are some important developments that aren't just in The Adult Offender and Rehabilitation Unit's hands. One of the

most important developments is the Offender Assessment System (OASys), which will be rolled out nationally by the end of 2004. This will be a system that will actually join up the Prison and Probation Services in assessing and monitoring what happens to an offender throughout the system.

We've also pinpointed reform of short sentences. Transition points are very key for short-term prisoners, who don't tend to get the beneficial programmes, but this need has been addressed in 'Custody Plus', which should ensure that no one is sentenced to prison without some form of supervision afterwards. We needed to see that some form of development would follow people from prison into the community and keep some of the important work they've started in prison going. Drug treatment is a particular case. If you've actually managed to detox a person in prison and started them off on treatment, it is pretty useless when they go out into the community if they're put on a treatment waiting list for six months. The custody plus sentence allows a follow-through for a number of programmes and for supervision.

The money that the Treasury has distributed in 2002 does contain some elements that are about targeting difficult-to-help groups. One of the themes of our work is shifting funding and responsibility for the problems (once prisoners are in the community) to mainstream delivery departments. A good example of that is the funding that's moved from the Prison Service into the Department of Health where prison health care from 2008 onwards is the responsibility of primary care trusts. It isn't tenable to have the Prison Service trying to deal with all of these problems on its own. When people re-enter the community, community services need to be prepared to pick them up and work with them.

It won't have escaped your attention that we've had an incredible rise in the prison population and the Home Office's priority at the moment is to undertake a correctional services review which looks at this particular issue and the measures that need to be taken to address it. The Prison Service quite rightly points out that it's very difficult to deliver their existing rehabilitation programmes when people are moving around the system at very high rates to create space for new people coming in. So that is a barrier and a risk to the programmes being rolled out.

There are a number of different key recommendations coming through. The Adult Offenders Rehabilitation Unit, which I have responsibility for, has now been formed and we are there to make sure that the government responds to the recommendations made by the Social Exclusion Unit Report, the inspection report on *Through the Prison Gate* by the Prisons and Probation Inspectorates, and the National Audit Office report on reoffending.

Along with all the strategies and the bringing together of the departments, the need is to catch the imagination of the people working on the ground. Changes have to actually mean something to them, otherwise all the strategies in the world will fail to deliver. We have to develop pilots, to work with the good practice that we do see on the ground, not only from the prisons but from other sources.

I haven't been able to tell you that everything is completely sorted but I have told you about some developments that I hope will get us on the right track. I am quietly confident we have made a good start. ☺