

cjm

update

Una Padel summarises the latest report on reducing re-offending.

The long-awaited Social Exclusion Unit report *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners* was finally published on 1st July. It provides a thorough analysis of the problems facing prisoners on release and the consequences for them and the rest of society. Among the useful introductory statistics are the following: 58% of prisoners released in 1997 were reconvicted within two years, 36% returned to prison on another sentence. On average those reconvicted within two years actually received three further convictions, and it is estimated that for each reconviction five recorded offences were committed. Released prisoners are estimated to be responsible for 18% of recorded, notifiable crimes costing at least £11 billion per year.

The Social Exclusion Unit identifies nine key factors which influence re-offending: education; employment; drug and alcohol misuse; mental and physical health; attitudes and self-control; institutionalization and life skills; housing; financial support and debt; and family networks. Each of these factors is discussed in detail with the manner in which prison can address the issues, and the ways in which imprisonment can aggravate the problem described. Examples of good practice are highlighted, and direct quotes from prisoners used to emphasise some of the deficiencies.

The report identifies steps which should be taken at each stage of the sentence and on release relating to each of the nine factors influencing re-offending. They are incorporated into a fairly comprehensive Rehabilitation Framework. This framework is clearly laid-out and practical, designed to prevent some of the most usual problems occurring, and to address issues likely to cause difficulty on release well before the prisoner leaves prison. An example is the financial problems so many prisoners face relating to the payment of benefits. The Rehabilitation Framework identifies the following steps: pre-sentence: the prisoner's benefits situation should be identified. During reception/induction into prison: existing benefits claims should be closed or transferred and benefits owed should be obtained. ID should be established. During custody: ongoing benefits advice should be provided where needed. In preparation for release: benefits staff should be made aware of relevant rules and entitlements. Appropriate benefits claims should be made and cleared in time for release.

Each released prisoner should be provided with sufficient money to bridge the gap until the first benefit payment.

The report recommends the development of a long-term national rehabilitation strategy which would incorporate national measures to tackle the financial and housing problems faced by newly released prisoners.

The strategy would have at its heart the 'Going Straight Contract' which would be drawn up by individual case managers following a full assessment of each prisoner's needs and signed by the prisoner. It would start from the point of sentence and last to the end of the sentences in the community and would address the issues highlighted in the rehabilitation framework. Prisoners would be required to participate in a range of programmes and activities. They would be rewarded for their participation and sanctioned for non-participation. To compensate victims and communities for the damage caused by their offending, prisoners would also be expected to contribute to a reparation fund from their prison earnings.

The involvement of a range of agencies, both statutory and non-statutory, would be essential to make this work in a seamless manner and the report proposes that a number of models be piloted with 18-20 year old prisoners under the leadership of a national director reporting to the Correctional Services Board.

Copies of the report are available from the Social Exclusion Unit 020 7276 2055 or on www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk

Research examining drug markets and their relationship with community deprivation has recently been published by the Home Office. Two types of drug market were identified – those that drew buyers from outside the area, had open as well as closed selling and were vulnerable to competition – were found in inner city areas with mixed housing, significant transient populations and mixed ethnicity. Those that served buyers mainly from the local area with closed selling and established buyer/seller arrangements were found in outer city areas with stable, almost exclusively white populations. Researchers found that heroin was available in all the markets and crack in 75%. Crack use was found to be increasing more quickly than heroin. The decline in open selling is resulting in reducing nuisance in the communities involved, though in some areas there have been increases in the level of violence. In all the areas researched the drug market was one of a number of neighbourhood problems none of which on their own was sufficient for neighbourhood decline. However, where markets had become established they were an impediment to regeneration, damaging community confidence and damaging the reputation of the area.

A Rock and a Hard Place - drug markets in deprived neighbourhoods is available on www.drugs.gov.uk