

Isolated but not excluded: can prisoners be participants?

The Prison Reform Trust recently published *Barred Citizens*, the first national study of volunteering and active citizenship by prisoners. Authors **Finola Farrant** and **Joe Levenson** report on its findings.

Low self-esteem; lacking in empathy; poor educational achievements; few social skills. We are all familiar with these descriptions and their application to offenders in general and prisoners in particular. In these times of hard targets and strict measurements it is of little surprise that prison interventions focus on exams passed, groups attended and certificates gained. There is, however, the potential for configuring our prisons in a whole new way: based on responsibility, flexibility, choice, involvement and trust. It is this approach – seldom to be found in a whole prison – but evident in parts of many, which may hold the key to successful reintegration into society. When someone is imprisoned they are not only physically removed from wider society. They lose their status as citizens. By being placed in an environment in which decisions are made for them rather than by them, prisoners are usually ill prepared for the responsibilities that come with life after release. Participation in activities which allow the prisoner to gain confidence and skills, whilst encouraging a recognition that behaviour (good or bad) impacts upon others, is crucial in ensuring that prisons minimise the destructiveness of isolation from society.

Prisoners helping each other

Within the closed world of the prison, one of the ways that prisoners can get involved in helping each other is through peer support. Prisoners can provide support, advice or information to each other, with or without the help of outside agencies. Types of activities include listener schemes, substance misuse peer support and housing advice. Peer support is founded upon the principle that people in similar positions have something to offer each other which cannot be provided by professionals.

Prisoners and staff view peer support as highly beneficial. One peer supporter on a drug misuse programme described the impact of involvement: “I’ve learnt to communicate; before I was like a block of ice. I’d listen but wouldn’t hear, but now I want to do something positive”. Although peer support is the most likely form of voluntary activity that prisoners are involved in, one in 14 prisoners participated in some form of peer support; it could be developed still further. Peer support should be

linked to the development of training for prisoners, and seen as complimentary to, and not separate from, the help and support of professional workers.

Helping the community from inside the prison

Prisoners can play an important role in helping the community through charity work or supporting, supervising or working with people from the community who come into the prison. However, less than three per cent of prisoners were involved in helping the community from inside prison.

The main way in which prisoners are able to help the community whilst inside prison is through charity work, either through working in workshops which manufacture or repair goods on behalf of charities or organising or participating in charity fundraising. Significantly, charity workshops can be found in even high security prisons. Frankland is one of 30 prisons to involve prisoners in Braille transcription work, providing services for visually impaired people. When the Prisons Inspectorate visited Leeds, they found that:

“The best workshop by far was the Braille workshop. It fulfilled a social need, provided a pleasant environment, and gave prisoners basic computer skills and job satisfaction”. (HMCIP, 2001)

One prisoner employed in the charity workshop at Frankland told us: “I feel like I’m doing something useful. I’m putting something back”.

Helping the community from outside prison

Community placements serve as a valuable means of preparing prisoners for release. However, the number of releases on temporary licence has not kept pace with the rising prison population. Despite a 24 per cent increase in the prison population between 1994 and 2000, the number of resettlement temporary licences for community service fell by 17 per cent. Yet, in 2000, just 0.12 per cent of releases on temporary licence ended in failure (Home Office, 2001).

If possible, prisoners at Kirklevington Grange make their own choice of community work. One prisoner said that his community placement had been invaluable in preparing him for paid employment.



He said:

“Dealing with community work has helped me 100 per cent. It made me better equipped to deal with situations. Community work helped me to find out what people wanted – very useful for [my current job in] the restaurant business”.

One prison officer responsible for community placements said: “You don’t change people. They change themselves. But we provide the tools”.

Despite good practice in some prisons, only a tiny minority of eligible prisoners are able to undertake community placements. As a recent thematic review by the prisons and probation inspectorates found:

“The recent focus of prisons on security... has allowed resettlement needs to be under-prioritised” (HM Inspectorate of Prisons/HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2001).

Involvement in the prison regime

Prisoners can also be involved in the running of the prison establishment itself, through involvement in prisoner councils, race relations and suicide prevention committees, or being a wing representative. Including prisoners in these roles can ensure that services, strategies and policies are informed by the experience of those who will be most affected. At present, three per cent of prisoners are involved in the prison regime, representing one in 33 prisoners.

The Prison Service’s anti-bullying strategy states that:

“Where an anti-bullying committee is established, prisoner representatives may be considered. The potential advantage of this is that prisoners have the opportunity to put their own

views forward” (HM Prison Service, 1999).

However, neither the Home Office nor Prison Service has ensured that involvement of prisoners becomes intrinsic to its culture. Nonetheless, a number of prisons did recognise that there were benefits to the prisoners involved, in strategy and policy development, staff understanding and improved staff-prisoner relations. Unfortunately, the lack of central direction from the Prison Service has meant that prisoner involvement has emerged unevenly across the prison estate. It has also led to a high level of cynicism about the reasons for committees:

“It got to the stage where Frankland wanted to show they had a committee.... there is very tight control of the meetings which seem to just be a paper exercise” (comment by ex-representative of the Prisoner Consultative Committee).

Although they do not conform to the typical profile of active citizens, prisoners are one of the sections of society that can gain most from participation. Involvement can increase the confidence and self-esteem of prisoners by allowing them to take responsibility at a time when most decisions are made for them rather than by them. When prisoners are involved in the prison regime and have input into decision-making processes this can be beneficial to the prison as a whole. Community placements allow prisoners to build or maintain links with the outside world.

Where opportunities do exist for prisoners to take responsibility it is usually because of the determination of a few key members of staff and the willingness of prisoners to get involved, rather than because of Prison Service commitment. One governor said that there is “nil support from Prison Service, which neither knows, cares, nor understands”. The Prison Service’s lack of commitment to promoting prisoner participation is symptomatic of a wider reluctance to engage with prisoners as citizens. The Prison Service will have to undergo a major cultural shift if it is to gain the trust and support of prisoners in order to work with them in a constructive manner.

Finola Farrant is Research and Evaluation Manager at Nacro and was previously Research and Development Officer at the Prison Reform Trust. Joe Levenson is Policy Officer at the Prison Reform Trust.

Barred Citizens: Volunteering and Active Citizenship by Prisoners is available from the Prison Reform Trust. Tel: 020 7251 5070. Price £10.00. www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

References:

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