

Suicide and Self-harm Prevention: following release from prison

Claire McCarthy summarises a recent report into suicide after release from prison.

Lester Christopher Shore left HMP Pentonville around midday on 14th July 1999. By that evening he was dead. During his five months in prison, Mr. Shore had been identified as highly vulnerable. He had spent several periods on the prison's healthcare wing and had been placed on suicide watch on two occasions. He had a history of mental instability and had previously been a patient in a psychiatric hospital.

Despite these profound indicators of mental instability and despite the prison doctor's reassurance to Mr. Shore's parents that appropriate arrangements would be made, he was released on the day of his death on his own in a taxi. He diverted his journey to the Cedar car park near his home in Uxbridge where he leapt to his death.

areas actively discouraged short sentence prisoners from seeking help or took only exceptional cases.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that many thousands of prisoners leave prison every year with nowhere to go and no support from the state (apart from a meagre discharge grant), which in many cases will have exacerbated their vulnerability.

Prisoners serving longer sentences are supervised on release but this work is ever more focused on probation areas meeting numerical targets for contact and completion of offending behaviour courses. The caring and welfare role of the probation service of old is very much out of fashion.

The newly created National Probation Directorate does not collect national statistics for those that end their own lives under supervision (unless the death

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There is a general consensus about the social risk factors for suicide. These include: male, unemployed, socially isolated or living alone, history of self-harm, family history of alcoholism, psychiatric illness and homelessness. There is a high prevalence of these risk factors amongst ex-prisoners when compared to the rest of the community. For example, an offender is five times more likely to be unemployed and four times more likely to suffer from mental illness. A survey of offenders undertaken by Akehurst, Brown and Wessley (1995) found that 21.5% of individuals under community supervision by the probation service had alcohol/drug misuse problems and 31.5% were experiencing or had experienced a family breakdown.

Despite this obvious vulnerability, since the *Criminal Justice Act 1991*, all prisoners sentenced to less than twelve months are automatically released once they have served half their sentence but they do not benefit from sentence planning and are not subject to compulsory post-release supervision by the probation service. They are entitled to seek support from their local probation area but there is no financial incentive for the area to respond and no funding is specifically allocated for the purpose. A Home Office study (Maguire *et al.*, 1998) found that levels of voluntary aftercare had declined markedly in recent years. Indeed, 40% of probation

takes place within a hostel). Neither is there a national guideline or policy on supervising individuals at risk of suicide. When deaths do occur probation areas may undertake internal investigations (often more for the benefit of staff) but these are not independent and the findings are not publicly available. In response to calls from Lester Shore's parents for a full investigation into his death, a Home Office spokesperson told the local newspaper, "The Home Office always looks into death in custody, but because Mr Shore died after he was released from prison an investigation is not required" (Uxbridge Gazette, 2000).

Policy and practise in probation hostels is similarly erratic. Whilst some hostels are experienced at supporting the most vulnerable offenders and have effective suicide prevention and self-harm policies in place, others will use a history of self-harm as an excuse to exclude an individual. Some of those most at risk are left without anywhere supportive to go.

In a new report on the subject of suicide after release from prison, the Howard League calls for the implementation of the Halliday recommendation that everyone released from prison should receive support from the National Probation Service. In addition it recommends that the work of the Prison Service Safer Custody Group should be replicated for the National

Probation Service by creating a Safer Supervision Group. The new group would record and monitor all deaths, identify trends, set targets for reduction, spread good practice in supporting vulnerable offenders and provide suicide prevention training for all probation and hostel staff. In conjunction with the Safer Custody Group it would monitor the flow of information between both services to ensure that where risk and need have been identified, it is acted upon and that offenders are not allowed to fall through the gap between services.

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The Howard League believes that the criminal justice system has a responsibility to intervene in order to rescue offenders who are on the road to suicide. The National Probation Service must pay as much attention to identifying and supporting those who are at risk of suicide and self-harm as it does to the identification of high-risk offenders and the protection of the public. In addition, the Prison Service must recognise that it is not good enough for a prison to get each offender out of the door alive and breathe a sigh of relief. The prison's responsibility does not end there.

The criminal justice system must stop treating ex-prisoners merely as a potential threat to the community. Society must accept that many ex-prisoners are victims too. They have often been in care, misused drugs, suffered abuse or mental ill health. Post-custodial support must be framed in this context. If it is not, the system will have learned nothing from the tragic death of Lester Shore and the many others like him.

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Suicide and Self-harm Prevention: following release from prison is available from the Howard League, £5, 20pp. For a copy telephone 020 7249 7373.

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of non-custodial sentences which people liked and which tapped into their (underlying) needs from sentencing. They liked the fact that curfews and tagging kept people off the streets, restricted their liberty, and had the power to shame (for example, a young man having to explain to his peers why he can't come down the pub). They found satisfying the idea of vandals removing graffiti and unemployed offenders gaining some notion of discipline and responsibility through community punishment work. Concepts such as 'paying back' and 'facing your victim' had powerful resonance.

Despite the potential strengths of non-custodial sentences, people knew little about curfews and tagging, and the proliferation of labels for different community punishments was simply confusing and irritating. Image problems with 'community service' – 'getting away with it', 'the soft option' – remained. The marketing strategy should therefore include creative use of the news media to raise awareness of non-custodial sentences, particularly at a local level, and to invest them with the same emotional power as 'prison'. Compelling stories might focus on themes of redemption through hard work or drug treatment.

Reducing prison numbers presents a long term and extremely complex challenge. No single solution will provide the answer, and the new approach suggested here, of using marketing thinking, is no exception. Nonetheless, it does show potential for guiding future efforts in this area. The marketing strategy, of which only a fragment could be presented here, seems to be generating new ideas, and has been very well received by criminal justice campaigners.

Ultimately, however, assessment of the contribution marketing can make will be determined by whether application of the strategy actually delivers reductions in prison numbers. The proof of the porridge will be in the eating.

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