

Resettlement of Short-term Prisoners: some new approaches

Mike Maguire puts the inadequacies of resettlement services for short-term prisoners in historical context, and describes some encouraging recent innovations: 'Pathfinders', mentoring and regional strategies.

While the 'through the gate' arrangements for the resettlement of medium-term and long-term prisoners still leave much to be desired, since 1968 such offenders have at least received some professional advice, assistance and access to services after release through parole (later ACR and DCR) supervision. Increasingly, too, prisons have helped them prepare for release, through sentence planning, rehabilitative programmes, job training, 'custody to work' initiatives, and so on. Short-term prisoners, by contrast, remain little better off in these respects than their predecessors in the late nineteenth century, when the main hope for assistance lay in charitable and religious groups which set up missions outside prison gates. Most still spend their sentences in overcrowded local prisons, with little or no sentence planning, limited access to treatment or training, and only rudimentary preparation for release. Moreover, the twentieth century practice of 'voluntary aftercare', whereby ex-prisoners could formally request assistance from the probation service, virtually ceased in the 1980s, leaving many short-termers simply to fend for themselves after release (Maguire *et al.* 2000). As a high proportion of them have major problems around the basic needs of accommodation and employment – often made worse by the dislocation of being sent to prison (NACRO 2000) – let alone drug or alcohol problems, financial problems and basic skills deficits, it is unsurprising that their reconviction rates are among the highest of any category of offender.

However, after years of neglect, these issues have recently received an exceptional amount of government attention, mainly due to recognition that they are potentially critical to the broader aim of reducing levels of 'volume crime'. Under the new sentencing structure recommended in the Halliday report (2001) and enacted in the Criminal Justice Act 2003, offenders serving short periods in custody will for the first time become subject to statutory supervision on release. From 2007, prison sentences of under 12 months will be replaced principally by 'Custody Plus', the so-called 'seamless' sentence of only a few weeks in prison followed by compulsory supervision in the community for a longer period (such supervision will become part of the new national and regional offender management arrangements recommended by the Carter review, 2004). If the system operates efficiently, and if anything like sufficient resources become available (both, of course, dangerous assumptions to make), this should offer a greater opportunity for creative and effective approaches to the resettlement of short-term prisoners than has ever existed before in the UK.

Traditional 'voluntary aftercare'

To take full advantage of this opportunity, it is important to consider questions not only about the optimum practical arrangements for resettlement services, but about the

fundamental ideas and aims that should shape them. Even when 'voluntary aftercare' was relatively common practice, probation officers rarely set their sights higher than providing help with immediate practical problems such as finding accommodation and claiming benefits. The brief periods of contact that took place were considered insufficient to embark upon any more structured work on, for example, offending behaviour, which was anyway quite difficult to 'sell' to offenders whose expectations were centred on practical assistance (Maguire *et al.* 2000). Probation officers based in local prisons, too, were often referred to by inmates as 'the welfare', reflecting the general offender perception of what they were offering.

This kind of help – which often took the form of 'advocacy' on behalf of offenders to unsympathetic service providers – can be justified on the grounds that ex-prisoners have more pressing social needs than many other groups, yet have often been discriminated against by housing and benefits agencies, etc. However, there is no evidence that it had any effect on re-offending or reconviction, nor that temporary assistance to 'get them back on their feet' helps offenders to solve any of their social problems over the longer term. A more effective 'resettlement' strategy (the term which has come to replace 'aftercare' and 'throughcare' in recent years) should clearly pay attention to issues beyond simply 'crisis intervention' to deal with immediate practical problems.

This paper discusses briefly three recent developments which hold out some promise in this regard: the use of a short cognitive-motivational programme, delivered partly in prison and partly after release; the use of 'mentors' to advise and assist offenders and maintain contact post-release; and the implementation of regional 'resettlement strategies' based on partnership between key service agencies.

'FOR – A Change'

As part of the National Probation Service's series of pilot projects funded under the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme, 'Resettlement Pathfinders' were set up in 1999-2000 in seven local prisons, and evaluated by the author and colleagues (Lewis *et al.* 2003). Four of these prisons ran an experimental short cognitive-motivational programme aimed at short-term prisoners, 'Focus on Resettlement – A Change' (generally known as 'FOR – A Change'). FOR aims to combine cognitive-behavioural methods (necessarily at a lower level than in the major accredited CB programmes) with a strong focus on motivation and on practical problem-solving skills. It is also unusual in that, while delivered mainly in prison, it also contains sessions to be delivered after release. The prison modules end with a 'marketplace' session, to which service providers are invited and at which offenders can make their own appointments for post-release meetings.

While the Pathfinders included voluntary 'supervision' post-release (by a probation officer, mentor, or project worker), the aim of the programme is to motivate and assist offenders to identify, understand and address their problems themselves, the 'supervisor' providing support and guidance where needed. The thinking here, which is very much in line with that of Maruna (2004) and other theorists of 'desistance', is that changes in criminal 'careers' or 'pathways' come about primarily through decisions made by the offender him/herself, and agency 'interventions' should aim to support this process rather than treat the offender as a passive recipient of 'treatment' or 'welfare'.

While the full evaluation of the second phase of the Pathfinders, including reconviction outcomes from the first phase, is not yet available (Clancy *et al*, forthcoming), early indications have been that the Pathfinder prisoners who took the FOR programme showed significantly greater changes in attitude and in perceptions of their problems (as measured by CRIME-PICS II) than those who did not, and were also more likely to maintain contact with project staff post-release (Lewis *et al* 2003).

Mentors

Another growing practice in the resettlement field is the use of 'mentors' to support offenders through the transition from custody to community. These were used in some of the Pathfinder projects, and are also increasingly prominent in regional resettlement strategies.

Mentors may be paid or unpaid, and trained to a variety of levels. In some senses, they can be seen as filling the traditional role of probation officers – whose transition over the last 20 years to more impersonal 'offender managers' will be consolidated under the NOMS arrangements – to 'advise, assist and befriend' offenders. They can also be seen as generally 'closer to the community' than probation officers, who have become increasingly office-bound and cut off from local communities.

The use of mentors clearly makes sense in relation to voluntary resettlement activities, as offenders are likely to relate to them more warmly than to busy professionals, and if effectively 'matched' in terms of interests and compatibility, they can provide 'pro-social role models'. The community links of mentors are also valuable and can be developed more formally through projects such as building 'circles of support' around ex-offenders – an idea attracting particular interest around sex offenders, but with much broader potential (Maruna 2004). However, early evidence from the Pathfinders suggests that 'advising, assisting and befriending' by mentors may be less effective in other respects than more structured and offence-focused inputs by probation staff, and the optimum strategy may be to find ways of combining the advantages of both approaches. This will become a key issue once Custody Plus is introduced, as supervision will be statutory rather than voluntary.

One promising initiative in this respect is an all-Wales mentoring project funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. Focused on short-termers with drug problems, this involves trained mentors with close links to prisons, probation and drug treatment agencies. Strong emphasis is placed on building up relationships before release, and early indications are that this has generated high levels of post-release contact.

Regional resettlement strategies

Criminal justice partnership arrangements are increasingly being managed at a regional level, where senior managers can command and commit sufficient resources and links can be made between different probation areas and prisons. Regional commissioning of services, overseen by the new Regional Offender Managers, will also be at the heart of the NOMS system.

One of the best established regional resettlement initiatives – which could eventually be absorbed without major upheaval into the NOMS system and applied to Custody Plus sentences – is the 'SWing' project, which covers the south-west region of England. This involves partnership between the Government Office and all the prisons and probation services in the south-west, together with a variety of public, private and voluntary service providers, the aim being to coordinate all available services into a regional framework and offer a structured resettlement plan to every short-term prisoner in the region who requests it. Key aspects of the project include the widespread use of mentors and a strong focus on employment services. It also places strong emphasis on the 'tracking' of offenders through the system and on the evaluation of outcomes.

The above are only three examples of new approaches to the resettlement of short-term prisoners, all of which respond to some extent to the 'modernisation' agenda that is driving current rapid changes in correctional services. This includes government demands that interventions demonstrate effectiveness in preventing re-offending (rather than simply providing 'welfare' services to those in need) and that public sector provision is 'joined up' (and to some extent competes) with services from the voluntary and private sectors. This agenda offers both opportunities and risks. Perhaps the key messages to take from the initiatives outlined is that attention needs to be focused not simply on the efficient provision of services to meet offenders' practical needs (necessary though this is), but on their development as a whole person – including assisting the improvement of thinking skills, motivation to change and greater engagement with non-criminal elements of their local community.

Mike Maguire is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Cardiff University.

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