

ACTION NOT ARGUMENT

Unemployment and crime

Does unemployment lead to crime? Very roughly speaking, one can normally expect two types of response to this question. The first, usually adopted by those of us with a penal reform motivation, is to offer a firmish 'yes'. Deprivation, poor housing and a lack of job opportunities are important factors in encouraging people (particularly the young) to offend, primarily to seek economic security for themselves and their families.

A second perspective is offered by the present Government and those rather less inclined towards liberal thinking. To them, the very suggestion of a link between joblessness and crime is an insult to 'decent, law-abiding' unemployed people and provides an 'excuse' for youngsters to turn to crime.

In the face of this apparent impasse, perhaps we should abandon, at least temporarily, the search for a definitive answer to this question and focus instead on what we *do* know for sure.

Re-offending

There is no doubt that re-offending is a key factor in the continuing rises in crime. According to the latest figures from the Home Office, 71% of young male prisoners re-offend within two years of release from custody, while for all adult males and females the figures are 49% and 40% respectively. Given that in excess of 50,000 people are released each year from penal establishments, one can easily appreciate the extent of the problem.

Unlike unemployment and crime, no-one can reasonably doubt the connection between unemployment and re-offending. Indeed, ever since Douglas Hurd, when Home Secretary, made the statement that 'one ex-offender employed today could be one crime prevented tomorrow,' a succession of Conservative Ministers has acknowledged the damaging connection between unemployed ex-offenders and crime. Michael Howard,

when Secretary of State for Employment, argued that 'one of the most significant factors in the incidence of re-offending is the difficulty ex-offenders experience in establishing economic independence for themselves.... effective help on employment and training is central to the process of building up economic independence and beginning to break the cycle of crime, unemployment, and return to crime.'

Having accepted this fundamental premise, the Penal Affairs Consortium believes that the primary objective must be to ensure that ex-offenders are given all necessary help to find and keep a job, for crime prevention purposes if for no other.

Unfortunately, it is the experience of our members that a number of factors are currently combining to make the situation worse.

Training and 'Creaming'

Some elements of the current arrangements for training the unemployed could be adding to the problems of re-offending and crime, rather than helping ex-offenders rejoin the labour market.

Since the establishment of Training and Enterprise Councils in 1991, the level of funding for training special needs groups has declined year by year. In addition, however, the system of 'output related funding' introduced by TECs has resulted in a process known as 'creaming', whereby training providers are financially compelled to recruit those among the unemployed who are most able and most likely to achieve qualifications in the shortest possible time. The clear effect of 'creaming' is to leave those who are less able and with the poorest educational record without adequate training or employment assistance.

Since ex-offenders frequently lack qualifications and skills they are often the 'victims' of this funding arrangement and are therefore being denied proper levels of assistance to enter the labour market.

Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974

The Consortium has long been concerned that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act is having only a very limited impact in its intention to assist ex-offenders in leaving their criminal records behind them. It excludes large numbers of prisoners and ex-offenders from its scope through the arbitrary 30 month sentence threshold, it provides little incentive for rehabilitation because of the inordinately long rehabilitation periods it provides and fails to offer adequate protection for of-

fenders against unauthorised disclosure of their convictions.

Effective Intervention

The Consortium considers that some of the more effective approaches adopted towards helping offenders into employment in other parts of the European Union may offer lessons for the UK. We note, in particular, a recent report from the European Offender Employment Group comparing a range of different schemes throughout the European Union which are proving successful in turning offenders away from crime. Fundamentally, the EOEG argues that successful initiatives tend to be those which can deliver the prospect of real jobs for offenders. Research from North Rhine Westphalia in Germany shows that training, although of benefit to prisoners, can be significantly less effective when it does not lead to jobs or further training on release. Recidivism rates of successfully trained prisoners differed significantly depending upon whether jobs were found: those who had found an adequate job or follow-up training showed the lowest recidivism rate (32%), whereas there were 80% re-offending ex-prisoners among training participants who passed their exams, but nevertheless stayed unemployed afterwards.

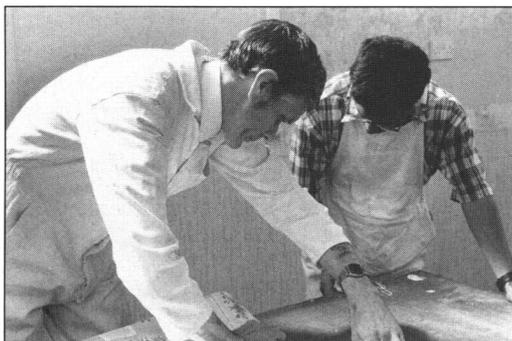
Action not argument

In the face of these problems and of the shared views of a wide range of groups, professionals in this field, it is time to initiate some practical steps which can begin to address the problems:

- Firstly, we need a new approach to funding special needs training - one which recognises the costs associated with training less able unemployed people and the benefits of furnishing them with the skills they need to compete effectively in the labour market;
- Secondly, there must be an overhaul of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 so that the original intentions of Parliament in passing legislation which would offer genuine assistance to offenders turning their backs on crime can be realised;
- Thirdly, there should be a review of the level and type of current Government interventions in support of prisoners and ex-offenders to examine their effectiveness, with a view to promoting and developing the approaches which are most effective in preventing re-offending.

Surely it is time to kick the political football into touch and to recognise and act upon a problem whose damaging effects are now universally acknowledged.

Andrew McCall, is Secretary of the Penal Affairs Consortium.



Sally Lancaster

New Careers Training (NACRO)