

# After Care and the Blackfriars Settlement

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## *Why After Care?*

THERE ARE SEVERAL possible attitudes which we can take about prisoners who have completed their sentence and are about to be discharged, and to some extent these will depend on the view which we have had of them when they were still in prison and of the function of prison itself.

Some for example hold that the aim of prison is punishment, that criminals having offended against society have to pay the cost, and that unless they are made to suffer there will be no deterrent effect and hence little to prevent them offending again. Others view the problem as one of reform—of re-education towards a more socially acceptable mode of life.

Others again may feel that while the primary role of prison is to protect society from the depredations of the criminal population some latitude may be shown in their treatment in prison and that a humane approach is likely to show better dividends afterwards than one of rigid discipline.

All would, I think agree that ideally a man's experience of imprisonment should be aimed at preventing him offending again and thus keeping him out of prison in future.

Unfortunately we all know only too well that this is far from the case and that while the majority of men undergoing a prison sentence are first offenders with whom their first sentence is also their last, there remains a very large minority who offend repeatedly, often in apparently the most stupid and pointless ways, and who return to prison again and again. It is this 'hard core' who of course make up the population of our maximum security prisons.

What is to be done to prevent these men from returning, to try to break into this vicious circle? To many people it seems that the more often the man offends the more difficult it becomes for him to adapt himself to life outside the prison walls. Of course, it is often hard to distinguish between cause and effect. Is this inability to survive outside prison due to some

inherent character problem or could it be that each experience of imprisonment itself renders it harder for the individual to survive in a free society? There are some men whose whole lives have been spent in prison-like institutions, whose childhood was spent in childrens' homes or orphanages under strict surveillance and who have never learned how to cope with any other kind of existence. Such people may become very anxious indeed when thrown into a competitive "free" world. Lacking the basic experience of family life in childhood they find close personal relationships difficult and usually lack friends. The only kind of life they are familiar with is life in an institution, hence they may welcome the security and anonymity which they find inside a prison and find it impossible to cope with the world outside. It is hard here to distinguish between cause and effect, all that one can say is that for such people each experience of imprisonment confirms and solidifies a pre-established pattern of behaviour.

In recent years there has been a movement to try to give more support to ex-prisoners on their discharge. It has been recognized by all who have studied the problem that the most difficult period for a discharged prisoner is the first few weeks after his discharge. Some of these difficulties are very real and material ones, others are internal, that is, problems of

adjustment for the man himself. All of us know how anxious any sudden change in our surroundings and our way of life makes us, for instance the anxiety of the first few days after joining the armed services until one gets used to the atmosphere and the routine and finds one's own place in the army structure.

But for the returning ex-prisoner there are additional difficulties. He finds himself, rightly or wrongly, to be a marked man, to bear the shame and disgrace of being an 'ex-con'. After all, few employers will willingly employ an ex-convict with a record of dishonesty if others are available. Many, having no families will have no homes to go to, no friends to turn to and no means of support, often they are suspicious of authority and in any case are afraid to ask for help. It is hardly surprising that so many fail to make the grade and land themselves back in prison.

It was to assist such men that the D.P.As. and the Prison Welfare Service were started up and they of course provide invaluable help in such material matters as finding lodgings and jobs for ex-prisoners who apply for them.

The shortcomings of these organizations are however very considerable. Firstly they lack funds and staff, especially trained staff. Secondly, although they received financial support from the Treasury, the State assumes no responsibility for their organization

and running and thirdly, the majority of ex-prisoners feel so disillusioned about "Welfare" that few will go to them for help. The D.P.As. attempt to deal only with ex-prisoners' material welfare—with the immediate practical necessities. The men and women whom I am talking about need more than this. Many are utterly demoralized by life outside the security of prison, they need support, guidance and above all friendship

The recent report on after-care drawn up by a Home Office Committee fully recognizes these problems and has attempted to solve them by proposing that in future all prison after-care should come under the wings of a greatly expanded Probation and After-care Service.

All discharged prisoners will be entitled to help under this scheme and their problems will be dealt with by trained case-workers who will be prepared to help not only with the purely material welfare of their clients but also to support and guide them through the very difficult period of readaptation to life in a free society, using for this purpose all the skills they have already learned as "Case Workers."

Most people will I think welcome these proposals in principle at least, although there is disagreement as to how effective this new body will be. But is it enough? Perhaps the most important feature of imprisonment is the sense

of isolation from society that is experienced by the prisoner. This of course is intended. The criminal by his own acts is said to have forfeited his right to citizenship. As a result the community excludes him and hands him over body and soul to the prison authorities. He loses not only his rights as a citizen but also so many of the attributes that mark him out as an individual with a role in the world. It is hardly possible for him while in a prison to feel any sense of purpose; he is cut off from his family if he has one, and can do nothing whatever to help them. If he was the breadwinner then he can do nothing to stop them starving. If he had a useful job then he will have lost it. Not only this but the whole emphasis inside prison is to strip the individual of his identity. He now becomes one of the herd, a name, a number indistinguishable from hundreds of others going through identical routines. If he had initiative and enterprise outside prison he will not find that they are welcome attributes inside it, indeed his best chance of "getting by" will be to make himself inconspicuous, to conform to the imposed pattern—"to do his bird easy" and as far as possible to lose his sense of personal identity. In other words the qualities that are needed by a prisoner to "keep his nose clean" and avoid trouble are exactly the opposite to those required by a free man in a free society. In prison there is no point in worry-

ing about your life outside, even if you know that your family is broken up, that your wife is living with another man and that your children are being neglected as there is absolutely nothing that you can do about it so what is the point of worrying! Under circumstances like these worry becomes intolerable, so your only way out if you are to remain sane is to avoid thinking about it.

Now on discharge all this is abruptly changed, the ex-prisoner has to quickly unlearn all these patterns of behaviour. In prison he has learned that as an individual he is of very little importance. This is not an easy lesson to unlearn. After all it is true, whilst he was in prison the community had lost all interest in him and all responsibility for him. Very few of the general public have any knowledge of life inside prison or any wish to know. They are content to "leave it to the experts".

This of course, applies not only to prisoners but to the prison administration and the prison staff. They are set an impossible task in old fashioned dilapidated buildings under conditions of gross overcrowding. The prisons are understaffed and the officers poorly paid considering the responsibility of their work, and there are few rewards in the work itself. They cannot often expect thanks from the prisoners themselves while the general public remain on the whole completely apathetic and

indifferent provided that their pockets are not touched.

How is our ex-prisoner going to adapt himself to his new conditions? Suddenly faced with overwhelming responsibilities which when in prison he had avoided because there was no point in doing otherwise, who is going to help him to unlearn these prison lessons and help him to face these responsibilities and above all who is going to represent the community to show him that he is indeed an accepted member once more with a role to play and with an identity of his own?

I am doubtful if the probation service alone can do this. They are bound to be regarded by the ex-prisoner as belonging to the same camp as the prison staff. Furthermore they are not truly representative of the general public; they are another set of "experts" and are regarded as such by the ordinary man-in-the-street as well as by the prisoner.

The A.C.T.O. report recognizing this stresses the importance of work being done by voluntary organizations with ex-prisoners and hopes it will be possible to integrate these into the After-Care Service. One of these is the Blackfriars Settlement Scheme.

### The Blackfriars Settlement

The work with prisoners at the Blackfriars Settlement grew up spontaneously. The Settlement was and is involved in numerous social activities in the region of South-

wark using for these purposes almost entirely voluntary helpers, laymen from all walks of life who had a desire to help their fellow men. The Warden of the Settlement soon appreciated the special problems of discharged prisoners and with the aid of a generous grant from the Nuffield Foundation, a special project was set going to help and support selected ex-prisoners on discharge from three London prisons, Pentonville Wandsworth and Holloway.

Our aim from the beginning was to try to help the ex-prisoners feel that they had a place in society and to offer friendship and support rather than material comforts. Since those with the greatest needs are likely to be repeated offenders who have spent much of their lives in prison we decided to concentrate our efforts on recidivists rather than first offenders. We recognized that this would not be an easy task and that many, if not most, of our clients would be embittered men who were highly suspicious of our motives and might tend to regard offers of help in the first place as a "soft touch." Few of our clients have had much experience of disinterested friendship and we did not expect them to respond with gratitude to such offers.

Our voluntary helpers or "associates" are drawn from many different walks of life. We have recruited them largely through advertisements in weekly magazines. Their motives for wanting to become associates are mixed but

most have, I think, a feeling that had their own circumstances been different, they could very easily have become criminals themselves.

Before they are accepted as fully-fledged associates they are asked to attend a course of evening and weekend lectures and discussions. Some come to this course expecting to be taught a technique for dealing with ex-prisoners and feel that what they are being asked to do is akin to "social case work." These will be disappointed. The training that we offer is quite informal and in spite of some pressure from the associates themselves no attempt is made to turn them into professional social workers. No one as yet knows just what makes a good associate and there is no blueprint available to model them on. They come to us with greatly varied experiences of life and with widely differing gifts. All we do is to give them some indication of the kind of problems that men leaving prison may have to face, some ideas as to the kind of personality difficulties that many recidivists suffer under and allow them the opportunity of meeting and talking to qualified associates who have had experience with ex-prisoners and who are willing to share this experience.

Our aim is to allow new associates to act as freely as they are able to within the limits imposed by their own personal and family commitments with whatever skills they have at their disposal. We try

to help them see that they are dealing with human beings rather than cases. In our view this is essential to the success of the enterprise. Our associates do not pose as "experts in after-care" because they are not. The relationship that grows between them and the men they are trying to help is within certain limits a spontaneous one. There are no rules or regulations as to how they are to behave, they are ordinary people, members of the community wanting to help those who have been cut off to feel accepted once more and prepared to shoulder some of the responsibility for doing so.

During the training course there are always a number of drop-outs, chiefly I think from those who feel such freedom to be intolerable. This is inevitable and may perhaps be the best method of selection available. Those that survive the course are asked to attend a selection panel before they are finally accepted. Our aim here is to prevent either the prisoner or his associate from getting badly hurt. Although we have no blueprint for an associate there are some people who enter upon this work for reasons—which they may not themselves be aware of, which are likely to prove unhelpful. Men or women for example who are more concerned with their own gratification than with benefitting ex-prisoners, or those who undertake it merely out of a sense of guilt. We try to prevent such people from becoming associ-

ates. Approximately one half of the original applicants are turned down for one reason or another.

There are, of course, certain limits which are imposed by the Settlement on Associates for the protection of themselves and of their ex-prisoners and of the project itself. We insist that no associate should be actively involved with more than one ex-prisoner at any one time. This is a very necessary restriction. Our associates often feel inclined to break it but our experience is that ex-prisoners can at moments of crisis be very demanding on their associates' time and energy and that it is unfair to the associate and his family if he is overburdened by the relationship. He cannot give of his best under these conditions.

Another rule we work is that the organizer of the scheme should be kept informed of all major events. It is he who co-ordinates the whole project and his role is a vital one. Associates are obliged to submit written progress reports to him every three months and he is always available to give support and practical advice to associates in difficulties. He has wide experience of other social organizations which may be able to assist a man in difficulties and on occasions he can provide material help from the resources of the settlement. It is important in our view to maintain a balance between allowing the associate freedom to act as he feels best

while exercising some control over the whole scheme.

The organizer also is responsible for the selection of ex-prisoners. The actual method of selection varies in each prison, all proposals are made through the Prison Welfare Officers and the prisoner is then interviewed by the organizer who explains the idea of the scheme to him. If he seems interested and is judged suitable the organizer then selects an associate from the 'pool' of those waiting and introduces both to each other. Ideally the prisoner and his associate should meet well in advance of his discharge and get a chance to know each other. In practice this often proves difficult. However, the aim is that the associate should at least be available to meet his prisoner at the prison gates on the day of his discharge. From then on they are on their own and no one can forecast how things will go. It may happen sometimes that in spite of apparently sincere intentions, contact with the ex-prisoner is lost after their first meeting. This can be a bitter blow to an inexperienced associate and repeated experiences of this kind tend to make him feel cynical about the whole project. For this reason we are careful when selecting prisoners to choose only those that seem to have a genuine wish for help and to exclude those who are so unstable that even if they seem to want help now one can be reasonably certain that their views will be

quite different tomorrow. Selection is no easy matter since we do not want to exclude those who need help most and accept only those who can really manage without it.

At the Settlement itself there is a short-stay hostel which can take up to six men. This acts as a half way house for a selected few who have nowhere to go on discharge and who are felt unlikely to survive in a free community without this intermediate step.

What happens next is a matter for the individual. No two cases are alike and nobody can predict what is likely to happen. Each associate will act in different ways according to his own nature and each ex-prisoner is also an individual. In some apparently successful cases the relationship is a short lived one; after finding his feet in society the ex-prisoner may want to manage on his own and contact may cease after a few weeks by mutual agreement. In other cases a much deeper relationship develops and some remain actively involved with each other for several years. The role taken by associates is equally varied. A few adopt a rather authoritarian role as if they were probation officers but more often the relationship is an informal one much on level terms. Some pairs meet only on neutral territory such as a café or a "pub"; some associates open the doors of their homes for their new-found friends and a few have them to stay in their homes for long periods. As

in any other friendship there are no rules, and any limitations on the degree of intensity of a friendship are imposed by the individual concerned.

Having explained our intentions and something of the way the scheme operates it is necessary to say something about the results. We make no startling claims, indeed I am doubtful whether our project in itself has any noticeable effect on the statistics of crime. There are two great difficulties when one comes to assess results; firstly the question of what criteria one uses, what yard-stick one measures success by, and secondly the difficulty in making comparisons with a similar group of men who have *not* had associate after-care.

On the first of these difficulties it might be said that the obvious measure of success is whether or not the man is sentenced again. Really it is not so simple. The fact that a man does not get re-convicted might simply mean that he has become more careful and expert in his 'profession' of burglary and thus avoids detection. Conversely, the one who is convicted more often may not necessarily be more dishonest but merely less careful or perhaps more guilty. In any case few of our associates are *primarily* interested in reducing the country's crime rate or even in the moral reform of their clients. They are concerned to offer friendship to someone whose life has until now

been a misery both to himself and to others, to try to bring some happiness through the possibility of friendship and to show him that there may be more satisfactory ways of dealing with life than the one he has chosen until now. It is very difficult to estimate success or failure when one is dealing with such vague ideas as these.

The second difficulty is a technical one. Even if it were possible to construct a yard stick for measuring success it would be useless until the results could be compared with an exactly similar group of ex-prisoners who have not undergone prison after-care. This is very difficult, firstly because our ex-prisoners are themselves a specially selected group and secondly because the average prisoner who does not receive after-care has no wish to be reminded of his prison experience and would not take kindly to enquiries about his way of life after his discharge.

We cannot, therefore, make any claims that our project is going to empty the prisons. All we can do is to suggest that on humanitarian grounds alone it is worth while and that it seems also to be a reasonable hope that if a man who has been heretofore an out-cast from society can be helped to restore his self respect and to feel that he has after all a useful place in the world, he will be less likely to offend again.