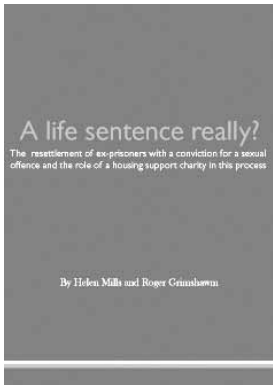


A life sentence really?

The resettlement of ex-prisoners with convictions for sexual offences

Helen Mills examines the role of a housing support charity in this process



About a year ago I was due to carry out in-depth research interviews with men who had committed sexual offences and who, having served their prison sentence, had been released into the community. When I spoke about this upcoming work with others the usual response was a version of 'rather you than me', or inquisitiveness about the arrangements for speaking

with this group. As one friend said, 'You'll be talking to them from behind some glass won't you?'

I like to think I gave some confident sounding responses. I probably quoted the relatively very low short term reconviction rate for this group of ex-prisoners. No doubt I gave assurances about the risk assessment and ethics procedures that research of this nature is subject to. I likely said something too about the importance of listening to highly stigmatised individuals as part of responding to challenging social issues.

But behind these responses I did have concerns about what the people I met would be like. What would the risks be to me of interviewing, at length, those with convictions for sex offences? To what extent could I or others unproblematically accept the accounts of those convicted of sexual offences when self-delusion and minimisation of harm are well-established issues in therapeutic work with this group?

Those convicted of sexual offences do seem to occupy a particular space in public consciousness as a group whose status as members of society has been fundamentally spoilt, commonly trivialised as 'paedos' or willingly dismissed as unacceptable 'others'.

Life after prison

I was undertaking these interviews as part of a research project at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. The aim of the research was to better understand resettlement and life after prison for those with a conviction for a

sexual offence and to assess the role of a voluntary sector run hostel in supporting the resettlement process. These are matters which, when we carried out a literature review as part of this work, we found had received relatively little previous attention (although notable exceptions to this include McAlinden, 2009 and 2010; Brown et al., 2010).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, our research found that on prison release, those with convictions for sexual offences were effectively stranded in resettlement terms. Friends had walked away, family contact was often minimal and taking up previous employment or a profession was usually not an option. There were also considerable barriers to making progress regarding these matters. Indeed, these barriers were such that they did not appear likely to be overcome even in the longer term. The report considers three key resettlement outcomes: housing, employment and community reintegration.

Starting again?

To take one of these areas, community reintegration, coming to the hostel was synonymous with starting again in terms of relationships and social contacts for most residents. Residents were living in a new area and usually brought few social attachments with them to the House. Feeling cut off and isolated from meaningful friendships and a sense of community characterised what life was like after prison for many. This was not something that necessarily improved in time. Renewing social contacts was usually a fraught and emotionally difficult process for those with a conviction for a sexual offence. Meeting new people was bound up with questions about disclosure of offences. Of whom to tell? When to tell? What to tell? How to do this? Disclosure also risked rejection. One resident described it like this:

You make yourself very vulnerable when you start to reveal these sorts of things about yourself, it's a very difficult time. [...] There's always the risk that if you do disclose, you've made yourself vulnerable. Say I'm going to trust you with this, and then you get a smack round the face as if to say, 'goodbye I want nothing to do with you'. Which reinforces all those negative

Those convicted of sexual offences seem to occupy a particular space in public consciousness

feelings about the sort of person people say you are. It's an emotionally very painful thought, and the risks of exposure and of rejection.

For some, choosing to 'keep themselves to themselves' was a self imposed decision they had come to. Depression, acute social anxiety, leading an essentially solitary existence and being close to unemployable were common. As Andrew Bridges, the former chief inspector of probation, notes in the foreword to the report, 'the wider context is that few people want to offer someone with a conviction for a sexual offence either a job or a place to rent.' In addition, from a public protection perspective, social spaces and relationships are inherently problematic as past harms are linked to relationships with others. As a result, social relationships and contact are subject to considerable scrutiny and restriction.

The idea that those who have committed serious harms against others should have any kind of life outside prison is likely for most to be a difficult and uncomfortable notion to contemplate. Indeed some may ask – why does this matter?

Poor resettlement outcomes

The lack of progress regarding resettlement outcomes is clearly of consequence to the quality of life those with convictions for sexual offences are able to lead in the community. However, it is also of significant consequence regarding wider public safety. Achieving outcomes such as healthy social networks are well recognised as important protective factors to reduce the likelihood of sexual reoffending. Conversely poor outcomes such as being socially isolated are recognised as risk factors in future offending. This is commonly agreed, including by the public protection guidance which governs life in the community for this group of ex-prisoners. Hence professionals working with this group face complex dilemmas about how to balance the role of both restriction and reintegration in managing public safety. As the following interviewee's experience suggests, these are approaches which do not always fit together easily in practice:

For me [being isolated is] the most difficult thing at the moment. Which is why I keep saying to my probation officer I feel that I'm isolated, which I think is not a good thing. And she agrees, but how do you fix it? [...] And I said well you only socialise by going where there are people, which is church or a club or something like that. But the restrictions are so tight sometimes that you wonder how they expect you to reintegrate.

The limited resettlement progress identified in this research reflects wider concerns raised in a recent

joint inspectorate report that resettlement has become relatively sidelined by the dominance of restriction and monitoring arrangements (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2010). The report, *Restriction and rehabilitation: getting the right mix*, as its title suggests, acknowledges a role for restriction and resettlement in working with those with sexual offence convictions in the community. It suggests current public protection work, and the risk management process that dominates this, focus on restriction sometimes to the detriment of achieving longer term resettlement outcomes.

Resettlement and reintegration work with this group is no straightforward enabling process. It is inevitably complex when ongoing restrictions and monitoring are part of post-prison life. Without question professionals involved with this group's resettlement must also challenge the individuals they work with and support the monitoring and restriction practices that necessarily govern those with convictions for sexual offences.

Thinking about life after prison for those with a conviction for a sexual offence, and about the context for managing the different vulnerabilities in this process, involves confronting challenging and uncomfortable questions about a group who have committed serious harms. But when we conceive of this process only in terms of restriction and risk management this is seriously questionable.

Achieving better resettlement outcomes requires a broader debate about the costs and benefits of the current arrangements governing this group and the contribution such practices make to support individuals to lead better and safer lives. ■

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The report based on this research, *A life sentence really? The resettlement of ex-prisoners with a conviction for a sexual offence and the role of a housing support charity in this process*, is available to download from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies website: www.crimeandjustice.org.uk

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