

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

March 2020 No 248



# Learning Together

# The Twinning Project: how football, the beautiful game, can be used to reduce reoffending

*Dr Martha Newson is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, University of Oxford and Professor Harvey Whitehouse is the Director of the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion*

**Reoffending is one of the greatest socio-economic burdens currently facing the UK, costing taxpayers around £18.1 billion a year<sup>1</sup>. Recent studies show that 48 per cent of ex-prisoners reoffend within a 12-month period, exacerbating the current prison overcrowding crisis<sup>2</sup>. The benefits of reducing recidivism are obvious, but viable pathways to this outcome have yet to be elucidated and executed. The twofold solution to this problem is proposed in the present practice note. Firstly, we need to change the way prisoners think about themselves, aiming to bond prisoners more tightly to mainstream society and law-abiding values. In doing so, opportunities for employment become more viable. Secondly, we need to increase society-at-large's determination in bringing former prisoners back into the fold. The Twinning project is a new initiative that promises to help us accomplish both goals.**

## The Twinning Project

The Twinning Project, launched in October 2018, pairs prisons with their local football clubs to deliver training programmes for people in prison. The project builds on the ongoing efforts of many football clubs' prison-based community outreach programmes, by connecting even more clubs with their local prisons nationwide (Table 1). By the end of 2019, 45 major football clubs were paired with one or more prisons in the UK, with active interventions in over 40 prisons—including men's, women's, young offenders' institutes (YOIs) and categories D, C, B, and long term / high security. Crucial to the Twinning Project's success is its leadership by two pivotal figures across the football and prison sectors: David Dein, former Vice-Chairman of the FA (Football Association), Vice-Chairman of Arsenal, president of the Arsenal Ladies Team, and creator of the British Premier League in the 1990s; and Jason Swettenham, Head of Prison Industries, Catering and

Physical Education in HM Prison Service in England and Wales, with a responsibility for Physical Education nationally. The Twinning Project capitalises on some of the most powerful collective identities in the country—football brands and clubs—to deliver prison-specific, football industry-recognised training. The project has been welcomed by both the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), with many prisons eager to join the scheme.

Table 1. Quick guide to the Twinning Project

<b>Number of associated clubs</b>	46 across leagues (all FA clubs, Premier League and EFL)
<b>How long do programmes last?</b>	6-12 weeks, depending on club and prison preferences, 20 – 40 hours.
<b>How are they structured?</b>	Varied, depending on club / prison preferences, e.g. weekly / twice weekly.
<b>Who are they delivered by?</b>	Professional football coaches, with support from physical education instructor (PEIs) who are specialist prison officers
<b>Are there incentives for prisoners?</b>	Puma football kit, qualification (which may be recognised by FA), psychological benefits of allegiance to a club.
<b>What programmes are offered?</b>	Coaching is the most common programme (and the only FA-devised programme, that is Leadership in Sport), stewarding and refereeing offered at some prisons.
<b>Is it just football?</b>	Mostly, but there are some Rugby League and Rugby Union exceptions (presently two clubs).
<b>What is the cohort size?</b>	10-16, dependent on club / prison.
<b>Is there any through the gate support?</b>	Planned by many clubs, but yet to be formalised by the Twinning Project.
<b>Who funds the programmes?</b>	Initially via club trusts, new programmes also funded by the Twinning Project charity.
<b>How are clubs paired with prisons?</b>	Majority are connected via proximity and resettlement areas of the prisons involved, aside from a minority of former pairings pre-dating the Twinning Project.
<b>Who is eligible?</b>	Most participants are nearing the end of their term and a risk assessment is conducted to ensure that participants are suitable. This includes what risk they are to others and what incentive level they are on.
<b>Who is excluded?</b>	Prisoners on the basic level of the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme are excluded. Most clubs exclude people convicted of sexual offences due to their own legal and safeguarding requirements.
<b>How are participants selected?</b>	Prisoners are invited to apply to clubs through advertisement in the gym or on residential units. Clubs select on the merit of good behaviour and prison officer recommendations. A number of sites will use interviewing methods to build on the importance of participation and link to employability.

Specifically, the project relates to HMPPS' priority to reduce reoffending in adults and young people.

## From practical assistance to changing identities

The initial aim of the Twinning Project was to offer people in prison opportunities to gain qualifications that could help guide them toward employment on release, thus reducing reoffending and associated costs

1. Newton, A. et al. (2019). Economic and social costs of reoffending. *Ministry of Justice analytical report*.  
 2. MacDonald M. (2018). Overcrowding and its impact on prison conditions and health. *International journal of prisoner health* 14: 65-68.

to the tax-payer. Employment opportunities are a well-researched factor associated with reoffending<sup>3</sup>, particularly when coupled with lack of accommodation<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, lack of employment appears to be a fundamental driver of the largest reoffending category—theft (over £9m a year, double that of the next largest reoffending category, violence)<sup>5</sup>. But this is only one of the challenges facing ex-prisoners hoping to change their lives.

As well as offering routes to employment, the Twinning Project offers participants something more: a positive social identity. According to social identity theory, central to reoffending behaviours are perpetrators' identities: their sense of self, the groups they belong to (or are excluded from), and the values associated with these identities<sup>6</sup>. Gaining employment after release depends, in part, on adopting alignments with law-abiding groups and values that have the power to motivate behaviour<sup>7</sup>. We already know that football is a powerful motivator, causing fans to travel across the globe for a game, and even put life and limb at risk to defend their groups<sup>8</sup>. Can this group passion be harnessed for social good? Could football foster positive social identities powerful enough to re-write prisoners' self-narratives? We are leading research at the University of Oxford to analyse the short- and long-term impact of

the Twinning Project and the role social bonding might play in its success.

## Identity fusion

One particularly intense form of social bonding—which is deeply personal, and thus motivational—involves the fusion of personal and group identities. Identity fusion is a reliable predictor of charitable acts, loyalty to the group, and even willingness to lay down one's life for others<sup>9</sup>. Fusion has been studied in many special populations, including football fans and 'hooligans' across four continents<sup>10</sup>. In these highly 'fused' groups, individuals report family-like bonds. This 'psychological kinship' means that fused people deeply value the lives of all group members, are committed to the group, and want to stick by them<sup>11</sup>. For ex-prisoners, a lack of social support—particularly in the form of a stable family—is a major factor contributing to reoffending<sup>12</sup>. The Twinning Project may be able to provide a foundational set of experiences for re-building this void in social support and belonging.

Rosie Meek's work into prison service sports programmes has paved the way for academic research into sport's potential to turn prisoners' lives around<sup>13</sup>. However, just one academic study connecting reoffending and identity

## The Twinning Project may be able to provide a foundational set of experiences for re-building this void in social support and belonging.

3. Graffam J and Hardcastle L. (2007). Ex-prisoners and ex-offenders and the employment connection: Assistance plus acceptance. *Vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia*: 47-66.
4. May C, Sharma N and Stewart D. (2008). Factors linked to reoffending: a one-year follow-up of prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 and 2004. *Research Summary* 5.
5. Newton, A. et al. (2019). Economic and social costs of reoffending. *Ministry of Justice analytical report*.
6. Monahan, J. (2017). The individual risk assessment of terrorism: Recent developments. *The handbook of the criminology of terrorism*: 520-534; Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In: Austin WG and Worchel S (Ed.s) *The social psychology of intergroup relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks / Cole, 33-47.
7. Whitehouse H and Fitzgerald R. (under review) Fusion and reform: the potential for identity fusion to reduce recidivism and improve reintegration.
8. Newson M. (2017) Football, Fan Violence, and Identity Fusion. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*.
9. Swann W., et al. (2009). Identity fusion: The interplay of personal and social identities in extreme group behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96: 995-1011; Swann W., et al. (2012). When group membership gets personal: A theory of identity fusion. *Psychological Review* 119: 441-456; Whitehouse, H., and Lanman, J. (2014). The Ties That Bind Us: Ritual, fusion, and identification. *Current Anthropology* 55: 674-695.
10. Newson, M., Buhrmester, M., and Whitehouse, H., (2016). Explaining Lifelong Loyalty: The Role of Identity Fusion and Self-Shaping Group Events. *PLoS one* 11: e0160427; Newson, M., et al. (2018). Brazil's Football Warriors: Social bonding and inter-group violence. *Evolution and Human Behavior* 39(6): 675-683; Knijnik J and Newson M. (Under review) Personal agency, identity fusion and football fandom in Australia: the case of Western Sydney. *Soccer & Society*; Bortolini, T., et al. (2018). Identity fusion predicts pro-group behaviours: targeting nationality, religion or football in Brazilian samples. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12235.
11. Buhrmester, M., et al. (2015). When terror hits home: Identity fused Americans who saw Boston bombing victims as "family" provided aid. *Self and Identity* 14: 253-270.
12. Farmer, M. (2017). The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime. *Ministry of Justice*.
13. Meek R and Lewis G. (2014) The impact of a sports initiative for young men in prison: Staff and participant perspectives. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 38: 95-123.

fusion has been conducted to date (in an Australian prison)<sup>14</sup>. Nonetheless, social identity theory has already shown that positive identity construction is critical to reducing reoffending in the criminology literature<sup>15</sup>. Fusion tends to be a stronger, more reliable predictor of pro-social behaviours, which the proposed intervention aims to achieve. With regards to desistance theory, whereby crime is reduced or entirely refrained from, fusion theory particularly connects to Maruna's second and third perspectives: life transitions and their associated social bonds, and narrative changes in both personal and social identities<sup>16</sup>. Specifically, the Twinning Project provides opportunities for the social resources required to identify and cement positive social identities and commitments<sup>17</sup>.

Equally important to reducing recidivism is a need to establish host communities that show commitment to ex-prisoners, supporting and encouraging their efforts to go straight. Football clubs, with their 'tribal' identities, are uniquely placed to help ex-prisoners back into the fold, with assistance by coaches and peers<sup>18</sup>. With this two-way fusion—or, social bonding—we expect to see a host of improved employability markers, increased self-esteem, and higher levels of cooperation and altruism. Even participants who score low on empathy<sup>19</sup> or high on impulsivity<sup>20</sup>, that is those at particular risk of reoffending, may be less likely to reoffend, provided that they have become fused to more positive social targets.

### Next steps

Many factors contribute to recidivism. While we expect such a high calibre endeavour as the Twinning

Project to enjoy a great deal of success in reducing reoffending among its participants, it is likely that some people will still reoffend. For instance, people with stable families on the outside are less likely to reoffend, but whether this is due to fusion within families or other factors remains unclear. Can the Twinning Project provide the 'kinship' currently lacked by some ex-prisoners? Following survey, interview, and prison data evaluations, the Twinning Project will be better placed to advise on the through-the-gate programmes so many clubs are seeking to devise.

Looking forward, the success stories that may emerge from this project have the possibility to translate into peer-based coaching and community-led, post-probation initiatives under future strands of the Twinning Project umbrella. This might include, for example, a Fellowship of participants who remain in contact with their club post-release, or who go on to use their qualifications in the football industry or community. Grouping ex-prisoners in this socially desirable way would not only provide recognition for their achievements, but give stability to an emerging community. There is also scope to extend the programme both domestically and internationally. At home, evaluations will help reveal the

Grouping ex-prisoners in this socially desirable way would not only provide recognition for their achievements, but give stability to an emerging community.

cognitive mechanisms underlying its success and limitations, which can be built in to future interventions. As the football market is truly international in scale, there is scope for cross-border communication and rehabilitation.

Evaluations will also help unpack the feasibility of offering randomly-allocated programmes, whereby eligible prisoners have equal opportunities of participation. In research, random allocation is a gold standard, but there are other merits that could

14. Whitehouse H and Fitzgerald R. (under review) Fusion and reform: the potential for identity fusion to reduce recidivism and improve reintegration.
15. Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A. (2011). Reflections on social values, offending and desistance among young adult recidivists. *Punishment & Society* 13: 256-282.
16. Maruna, S. (2000) Desistance from crime and offender rehabilitation: A tale of two research literatures. *Offender Programs Report* 4: 1-13; Weaver, B., and McNeill, F. (2010). Travelling hopefully: Desistance theory and probation practice. In: Brayford J, Cowe F and Deering J (Ed.s) *What Else Works? Creative Work with Offenders*. Routledge: Willan Cullompton.
17. Uggen, C., Manza, J., and Thompson, M. (2006). Citizenship, democracy, and the civic reintegration of criminal offenders. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 605: 281-310.
18. Morris, D. (1981). *The soccer tribe*: Cape London; Whitehouse, H. (2018). Dying for the group: Towards a general theory of extreme self-sacrifice. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 41.
19. Jolliffe D and Farrington DP. (2004) Empathy and offending: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Aggression and violent behavior* 9: 441-476.
20. Ireland JL and Archer J. (2008) Impulsivity among adult prisoners: A confirmatory factor analysis study of the Barratt Impulsivity Scale. *Personality and Individual Differences* 45: 286-292.

contribute to the Twinning Project's long-term standing. First, random allocation would reduce reliance on prison and football staff selecting prisoners for the project, which could disadvantage some prisoners, especially with regards to 'good behaviour' (see Table 1). Instead, reaching prisoners at highest risk of offending, rather than only those who do well in interviews, could lead to impact with populations who are usually regarded as uncooperative or too challenging to rehabilitate. This initiative does not neglect the knowledge and expertise that prison officers offer when helping select participants, but

rather emphasises the potential of this nationwide reoffending scheme (endorsed and executed primarily by the Premier League) to rehabilitate the lives of those disenfranchised prisoners at most of risk of a lifetime of institutionalisation. With increased employment opportunities, health benefits of engaging in an active lifestyle, and an all-important family — albeit fictive kin, the 'football family' — sports initiatives such as the Twinning Project have the potential to access some of the hardest to reach and vulnerable prison populations for meaningful and lasting rehabilitation.