

How do we make prisons places of work and learning?

Del Roy Fletcher*
Sheffield Hallam University

Abstract

UK policy makers are seeking to improve the vocational skills of offenders to help reduce re-offending. The author of this 'think piece' draws upon his experience of evaluating pre-release vocational training schemes to highlight some of the challenges that will have to be met if prisons are to be transformed into places of work and learning. He argues that policy makers must significantly reduce the prison population; implement a major programme of 'justice reinvestment' to staunch the flow of offenders from our most deprived communities; and introduce small community-based prisons to better facilitate the resettlement of inmates.

Keywords: prison, employment, vocational training.

A growing focus on making prisons places of work and learning

The prison population in England and Wales has more than doubled since 1992 and stands at record levels. During June 2009 it was 83,001 (Prison Reform Trust, 2009). Many prisoners appear to be caught in a revolving door; two thirds are reconvicted within two years of their release (Ministry of Justice, 2009). High levels of re-offending carry a high social and financial cost. In terms of the latter, the National Audit Office (2010) has estimated that the cost of recorded crime committed by ex-prisoners may be £13 billion per year.

The National Reducing Re-Offending Action Plan prioritises skills and employment. Public Service Agreement targets (16 and 23) have also focussed attention on meeting the employment needs of offenders. The Social Exclusion Unit (2002) suggested that work could reduce re-offending by between a third and a half. This theme was developed by the December 2005 Green Paper, *Reducing re-offending through skills and employment*, which confirmed that 'an important strand of the strategy to reduce re-offending is concerted action to transform the skills and employment prospects of offenders' (HM Government, 2005: 11). The *Reducing re-offending through skills and employment: Next steps* report proclaims that the intention is to: 'make many prisons places of work and learning' (HM Government, 2006: 23).

Key lessons from the evaluation of prison-based training interventions

This think piece draws upon the insights gained during the evaluations of:

- the Construction Training in Prisons (CIT) project at HMP Lindholme which provided accredited training to prisoners in construction skills
- the Yorkshire Prisons Employment, Training and Education (ETE) scheme which sought to improve the ability of offenders to access ETE opportunities on release.

Preparing inmates for work or managing the prison population?

The CIT project was funded by Yorkshire Forward and sought to address skill shortages in the construction industry and reduce regional re-offending rates. However, the evaluators quickly established that it fulfilled a very different function for the prison authorities. A senior Prison Service staff member explained that:

'Training means that inmates are not on the wing up to no good'

This focus on managing the prison population rather than reducing re-offending was emblematic. Implementation was characterised by an on-going tension with civilian members of staff who viewed the project as a vehicle for ensuring the successful resettlement of prisoners. Similarly, the evaluation of the Yorkshire Prisons ETE scheme uncovered deep cultural differences between prison and civilian stakeholders. Working relationships with prison officers were often characterised by mutual suspicion.

Inmates often viewed training as an interesting way of passing their sentence. A CIT trainee confided that:

'Many want to muck about and waste time'

Participants could also acquire everyday skills. Most had attended several other prison-based training courses. Further corroborating evidence was provided by the general lack of concern displayed by many about their inability to gain qualifications prior to release. Providers also highlighted the difficulties of working with some individuals that were 'going through the motions' or were actively disruptive. These problems were found to be more prevalent amongst young males, especially those with drug problems, and those compelled to attend provision by conditions of their sentence plan.

Selection processes and security concerns

The pre-occupation with security can lead to the selection of inappropriate trainees. The CIT project sought to maximise post-release employment outcomes and help to address skill shortages. However, at one point about a third of trainees were serving life-sentences and others were subject to deportation orders. Lifers are often prioritised because they can be a good stabilising influence on younger, more volatile inmates. At HMP Lindholme inmates often sought participation in offender behaviour courses because they are seen as a more effective route towards parole. A lack of the necessary commitment amongst some inmates was also an issue for the Yorkshire Prisons ETE scheme. Operational staff, for example, identified *'those who ask for a volunteer [mentor] in order to impress the system'*.

The selective nature of vocational training can generate resentment amongst both inmates and prison officers. The author reviewed a high profile project at HMP Reading

to provide pipe fitters for the gas industry. The course was highly selective and targeted those eligible for release on temporary license so that trainees could undertake part of the training in the community. Yet the selective nature of the project antagonised other inmates. It was reported, for example, that trainees were known as 'screw boys'. Furthermore, it became apparent that some prison officers regarded prisoners as an 'undeserving group' for such an investment.

The problems caused by overcrowding

Prison overcrowding undermines the efforts of practitioners to prepare inmates for their release. It makes it difficult to maintain decent prison conditions and intensifies the concern with managing offenders rather than rehabilitation. Overcrowding also increases the number of transfers and the distance that many inmates are held from home. Consequently, the training of the CIT participants was curtailed by their transfer to other prisons. Similarly, some were removed from the project at very short notice because they had been selected for Home Detention Curfew. The latter allows selected prisoners to serve the last few months of their sentence under an electronically monitored curfew.

The staffing of prison-based vocational training initiatives

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (2006: 14) reported that: 'Occupational training in custody has always been good, with expert trades people absolutely dedicated to achieving outstanding craftsmanship'. However, some workshop tutors had been in post for nearly 20 years and were resistant to the changes brought by the CIT project. A civilian stakeholder reported that they had traditionally performed a 'babysitting' role where outcomes were unimportant. A senior Prison Service staff member confirmed: '*The instructors are coming on board more after a few pep talks. They couldn't see the point of changing and so it's been a case of challenging them a little*'.

Integration with other support

Previous research has shown that effective training initiatives are integrated with other relevant prison-based support. This allows the wide range of trainee requirements to be addressed. However, the wider resettlement needs of trainees are often not met when they are participating in training. All of the CIT participants interviewed had problems with drugs prior to custody and several had been convicted of drug-related offences. A few were under the influence of drugs during the interview. Singleton et al (2005) found that one in five prisoners reported opiate use in prison. Nearly half of those interviewed in the final week of their sentence had received no help in finding somewhere to live. Where help was provided it was usually left until the last day.

Many prisoners require ongoing support once they are released. Finding work is just one of the problems that will confront them. Unless they are dealt with effectively issues such as a lack of housing, debt, or drug and alcohol misuse can also make finding and retaining employment very difficult. The Committee of Public Accounts (2002) has stated that work, accommodation and family support are the three key factors in terms of reducing re-offending. Yet the prevailing attitude of many prison staff is:

'Once they're out of the gate, they're nothing to do with us' (HMP Lindholme management).

Similarly, a HMP Holloway interviewee confirmed that:

'traditionally security rules and so resettlement is what others do'.

It is in this context that a former CIT trainee bitterly complained that:

'There's now't in place for me when I was released'.

The lack of integration with wider resettlement provision can have a profound impact on post-release outcomes. A half of the CIT trainees interviewed following their release had experienced difficulties securing appropriate accommodation. One individual had been sleeping on floors for over three months before getting a council flat. Another was living in a caravan which was procured by his mother. A lack of stable accommodation had made finding work more difficult. In one case this had meant that a former trainee was unable to open a bank account. This had prevented him from accepting a job laying cables since the employer was unwilling to pay him 'cash-in-hand'. The post-release interviews also revealed that several had become re-immersed in the drugs sub-culture. One individual was, for example, initially well motivated but subsequent rejection in the labour market coincided with his relapse into heroin use. At the time of the interview he was missing appointments with his probation officer. Similarly, one of those declining a post-release interview had relapsed. His probation officer confided that: *'He's not doing too well at the moment'.*

Transforming prisons into places of work and learning

The criminal justice system in England and Wales received £22.7 billion in 2008, over a third more than ten years ago. The UK now spends a greater proportion of its gross domestic product on law and order than any other country in the OECD (Commission on English Prisons Today, 2009). The recession and the acute pressure on public finances present a timely opportunity for reflection and reform. Prison is a perennially failing institution - not least because the dynamics which lead people into prison - are largely beyond its control. The growing use of prison is expensive, wasteful, counter-productive and fundamentally unsustainable. Policy makers should:

- tackle overcrowding and significantly reduce the prison population
- implement a major programme of 'justice reinvestment'
- introduce small community-based prisons to better facilitate the resettlement of inmates.

How to tackle prison overcrowding

At the end of July 2009, 88 of the 140 prisons in England and Wales were overcrowded (Prison Reform Trust, 2009). Prison should only be used where absolutely necessary. Yet the past decade has witnessed a 'down-tariff drift' where offenders who would have been put on probation or given community sentences are now being sent to prison for short periods. Prisoners serving sentences of less than twelve months account for the majority of those released each year. However, they have the greatest level of need, receive the least help during their incarceration and are the group most likely to be reconvicted. Between a third and a half are not involved in work or courses and spend almost all day in their cells (National Audit Office, 2010). Three quarters of the cost of re-offending can be attributed to short-sentenced prisoners, some £7 billion to £10

billion a year (National Audit Office, 2010). Consequently, the Commission on English Prisons Today (2009) has called for the replacement of short prison sentences with community-based responses.

There are many people in custody that would be better placed in mental health treatment. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2009) has called for better funding of schemes which divert people with mental health problems from custody. They suggest that liaison and diversion schemes can save £20,000 in crime-related costs for every person diverted from prison. The Centre estimates that £30 million per annum would enable such schemes to divert up to 35,000 people from prison every year with no additional risk to the public (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2009).

Moreover, there is a pressing need to staunch the flow of offenders from some of our most deprived communities. The Social Exclusion Unit (2002) has acknowledged that the highest rates of prisoners in the population are to be found in deprived communities in metropolitan areas. Table 1 provides data on the social characteristics of prisoners. 'Those we punish are largely the poor and disadvantaged, those with mental health needs and drug or alcohol addictions' (Commission on English Prisons Today, 2009: 11). 'The social exclusion of offenders is acknowledged by Ministers, but an apologetic tone seems to accompany any mention of support to offenders. By talking up punitive elements of the criminal justice system, the Government...will only prolong their exclusion and hinder their rehabilitation' (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2010: 67). A substantial programme of 'prehabilitation' aimed at potential offenders and targeted on deprived communities with the objective of heading off the drift into crime and custody is needed. More broadly, policy initiatives could form part of a package of measures designed to reduce poverty and inequality and promote social mobility.

Table 1: Prisoners: a socially excluded group

Characteristic	General population (%)	Prison population (%)
Regular truant from school	3	30
Excluded from school	1	49
Reading at or below Level 1 (level expected of an 11 year old)	16	37
No qualifications	15	
<i>Men</i>		52
<i>Women</i>		71
Suffer from two or more mental disorders		
<i>Men</i>	5	72
<i>Women</i>	2	70
Drug use in previous year		
<i>Men</i>	13	66
<i>Women</i>	8	55
Hazardous drinking		
<i>Men</i>	38	63
<i>Women</i>	15	39
Homeless	0.9	32
Unemployed (before imprisonment)	5	67

Sources: HM Government (2005) Reducing re-offending through skills and employment and Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners

Justice reinvestment: an idea whose time has come?

In the US the soaring costs of incarceration and the fact that most prisoners come from a relatively small number of deprived neighbourhoods has prompted new thinking. 'Justice reinvestment' is a term that refers to a variety of approaches that have sought to combat burgeoning prison populations by tackling the root causes of criminality. The central proposition of 'justice reinvestment' is that it is far better and cheaper to focus resources on preventing criminality than solely on catching and incarcerating criminals. The new approach seeks to rebalance criminal justice expenditure by redirecting funding that would otherwise be spent on custody into community based initiatives which tackle the underlying causes of crime. This represents a devolved approach that focuses on deprived communities and is redistributive.

The application of this approach in New York City has identified 'million-dollar block' i.e. poor neighbourhoods where so many residents are sent to prison that the total cost exceeds \$1 million. New York City has managed to reduce the prison population and create safer communities by concerted investment in mental health and drug treatments and housing and social support; specialist drug and community courts organised around problem solving and diversion from prison (Commission on English Prisons Today, 2009). Justice reinvestment is now being applied in several US states including Arizona, Connecticut, Kansas, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Vermont and Wisconsin. The Connecticut prison population has, for example, been lowered by several strategies including reducing the number of people incarcerated for violating probation rules. The state has then steered the savings into services designed to curb recidivism, including mental health care and drug treatment in high incarceration neighbourhoods.

The House of Commons Justice Committee (2010) has called for a significant part of the resources earmarked for the new prison building programme to be redirected to a programme of justice reinvestment. The Commission on English Prisons Today (2009: 52) has argued that: 'it is difficult to argue against the reallocation of resources from incarcerating minor offenders to the provision of nursery places, youth centres, improved housing and lighting for residents of deprived communities.' It is in this context that the Ministry of Justice has commissioned the piloting of so called 'diamond districts' in a number of local authorities. However, rather than re-directing criminal justice funds into re-invigorating 'diamond district' communities resources are dedicated to the management of individual offenders.

The need for small community-based prisons

The Commission on English Prisons Today (2009) has called for a significant reduction in those incarcerated and the creation of small community-based prisons such as those found in Scandinavian countries. During 2006 the Government proposed the introduction of community prisons to facilitate community engagement and resettlement of the least serious offenders. However, these proposals have succumbed to the decision to rapidly expand the prison estate. At the very least some of the principles of community prisons should be applied to the existing estate so that it is not expanded in a way to prohibit such an approach in the future.

There is a related need to change the culture of the Prison Service. Vocational training has traditionally been dependant upon the skills and interests of local staff and education providers rather than the needs of inmates or the types of work they intend to pursue. The most powerful incentive for offenders to take the steps necessary to improve their employment prospects lies in the ability of training to help ex-prisoners to

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find well paid work with good career prospects. This support must be continued when individuals are released into the community. The last words are best left to an ex-prisoner:

'When it's time to let us out, don't dump us at the prison gate with nowhere to go and a confusing, complex morass of services that may or may not help us'.

★ Correspondence Address: Del Roy Fletcher, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB. Email: d.r.fletcher@shu.ac.uk.

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