



Employment and training for ex-offenders

There is a link between ex-offenders gaining employment and their desistance from offending. However, ex-offenders face many obstacles to obtaining work. This research, by Del Roy Fletcher, David Woodhill and Alison Herrington, outlines the disadvantages faced by those with a criminal record in the labour market and evaluates different approaches to re-integrating ex-offenders through work. It found:

- f* There is a particular need to improve ex-offenders' access to, and ability to sustain, high-quality employment characterised by progressively increasing skills, responsibility and rewards.
- f* Ex-offenders face a range of barriers typical of many other disadvantaged jobseekers - poor basic skills, low self-esteem, sometimes behavioural and health problems. However, this is compounded by a lack of recent work experience for those leaving prison, and employer discrimination. There is a specific need with ex-offenders to focus on the issue of how to disclose a criminal record to employers as constructively as possible.
- f* Typically, local provision for ex-offenders has a strong emphasis on supply-side measures. Over 9 out of 10 local projects identified by the study focused on measures such as vocational guidance, help with jobsearch and basic skills training.
- f* The case studies exemplified a range of approaches. Whilst all these had their strengths, establishing closer and more productive links with employers came across as particularly effective.
- f* Many organisations were developing local projects for ex-offenders in an uncoordinated and unsystematic way, reducing their effectiveness. However, where local partnerships had been built, the strength of such a partnership was a key determinant of the project's success.
- f* The authors conclude that provision should be increasingly focused on the need to act strategically, should employ approaches that can deal with the multiple disadvantages faced by this group, and needs to recognise that work with individuals can often be a long-term process. This poses particular challenges to New Deal where ex-offenders will be a significant proportion of the target group.

Introduction

An ex-offender is a person who has been convicted of a criminal offence and has completed their sentence either in prison or in the community. Home Office figures show that by the age of 30, one in three men has a criminal record for offences other than those connected with motoring. Having a criminal record can undermine employment prospects so that ex-offenders are often doubly penalised - first by the courts and later in the labour market. Yet having a job is widely recognised by ex-offenders and those that work with them as the single most important factor in their resettlement and in preventing re-offending.

At the local level, there is a plethora of initiatives, involving a range of statutory and voluntary organisations, addressing the disadvantages faced by ex-offenders in the labour market. This research was designed to support local initiatives by identifying the disadvantages faced by ex-offenders in the labour market and evaluating a range of approaches to their re-integration. The research also reviews the nature and scale of local provision.

Ex-offenders in the labour market

Ex-offenders are a significant group in the labour market. It has been estimated that they constitute up to one-third of the working population. In addition, approximately 100,000 people leave prison each year in the UK. At least 90 per cent of those leaving prison enter unemployment and they comprise between 2 and 3 per cent of the average monthly in-flow to the unemployment pool.

Ex-offenders are substantially more likely to remain unemployed in the long term rather than taking a number of short-term jobs. An Association of Chief Officers of Probation (ACOP) survey, for example, shows that in the first six months of 1997 around 60 per cent of the people under the supervision of the Probation Services were unemployed.

Ex-offenders face a range of barriers in the labour market typical of many other disadvantaged jobseekers - poor basic skills, low self-esteem, sometimes behavioural and health problems. A lack of recent work experience will compound these barriers for those leaving prison, and employer discrimination is often reported. This raises the issue of how to disclose a criminal record to employers as constructively as possible.

Local provision

The research identified 190 local projects in England and Wales. The nature of local provision for ex-offenders bears many of the hallmarks of the wider UK focus of active labour market policy with its emphasis on the rapid re-employment of benefit claimants. Almost all projects represent supply-side responses to labour market re-integration, prioritising vocational guidance and help with jobsearch. Moreover, many projects have been established for

less than two years and involve modest levels of total contact time with participants.

The pattern of local provision is the result of the interplay of five key features of the policy environment:

- First, both the administration of relevant labour market policies and provision are characterised by fragmentation.
- Second, change in the education and training system has emphasised competition for limited public funds.
- Third, funding has become increasingly short-term and focused on positive outcomes. This sends the wrong signals to providers if provision is to genuinely meet the needs of ex-offenders in the labour market.
- Fourth, organisations active in provision are undergoing a period of intense change as they attempt to adapt to an increasingly competitive environment.
- Finally, whilst competitive pressures have intensified, multi-agency partnerships have become increasingly recommended as an important ingredient in project delivery.

Good practice

Practitioners engage in a wide range of processes when implementing local projects. The research identified ten good practice issues:

Organisational capabilities.

The capabilities of the provider were an important determinant of the effectiveness of local projects. Key capabilities included the ability to adopt a long-term, strategic approach, appropriate managerial systems, and appropriate financial and human resources. An ability to innovate and adapt to changing circumstances was particularly important if projects were to capitalise on new funding sources.

Networking and local co-ordination.

To ensure that projects are co-ordinated as effectively as possible, appropriate networking systems had been developed in some cases. This helped projects extend beyond labour market issues to include other important issues, e.g. debt management, drug counselling, assistance in finding accommodation etc.

Outreach work.

Groups like ex-offenders are often alienated from mainstream provision; outreach work emerged as essential in targeting those not in education and training.

Community involvement.

Community involvement in local projects can help if provision is to genuinely meet local needs. Community involvement took many forms, including physically locating projects in the

communities they serve and involving the local community as volunteers to assist in the rehabilitation of ex-offenders.

Establishing trust and building motivation.

Establishing trust and building motivation are fundamental pre-requisites for re-integration because many ex-offenders are mistrustful of mainstream agencies and lack motivation, often believing that they will never work again. The case studies have demonstrated several ways in which trust and motivation can be secured and developed, including making contact with participants in their own communities, employing a sympathetic approach and requiring voluntary rather than mandatory participation in projects.

Assessing need.

Effective assessment of ex-offenders' skills and needs at the beginning of projects enabled the full range of problems experienced by each individual to be understood and the resulting project to be tailored to their needs.

Action planning and reviewing.

Where an individual action plan had been set, it was important to review the plan with the participant during intensive counselling. This helped participants to develop a sense of 'ownership' of the action plan, ensuring that it was relevant and realistic.

Disclosure.

Once ex-offenders reached the point when they were ready to re-enter the labour market, specialist help to develop skills in disclosing criminal convictions to employers in a constructive way emerged as important. Many employers were also uncertain about the provision of the 1974 Rehabilitation of Offenders Act and had anxieties about recruiting ex-offenders which need to be addressed.

Job placement.

Identifying appropriate job vacancies, and prompt communication of these opportunities, was vital. Furthermore, since the Employment Service is notified of just one-third of all vacancies, practitioners need to develop a wide array of alternative sources of local labour market data.

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of different approaches

Approach	Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>Linking mainstream probation activities and NVOs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes probation more meaningful and beneficial. • Deepens relationships between probation officers and their clients. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs a cultural shift in probation. • Difficult to secure the commitment of probation staff. • Move towards case-management undermines the approach.
<i>Specially created jobs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combination of work experience and training. • Receipt of a wage rather than benefit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expensive. • Administratively complex. • Helps those best able to secure employment.
<i>Using outdoor activities to remotivate young offenders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on young offenders. • Attractive and exciting. • Important first step in the process of re-integration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not vocationally focused. • Support is necessary but not sufficient. • Creating new dependencies.
<i>The involvement of local communities as volunteers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fulfil a number of roles. • Personalise service. • Challenge stereotypes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mismatch between volunteers and clients. • Volunteers lack experience of paid employment.
<i>Focusing on the needs of Black offenders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meets specific needs of the Black community. • Recognises the links between crime, unemployment, Black culture and racism. • Gives the Black community a voice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributes to negative labelling. • Incapable of addressing structural nature of racism.
<i>Encouraging employers to recruit ex-offenders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confronts discrimination. • Accesses new sources of vacancy data. • Strengthens link between participation and paid employment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term process. • Seen as a reward for offending behaviour.

Monitoring and evaluation.

A feature of many local projects is that monitoring and evaluation practice is poor. However, the ability of projects to survive in the longer term depends largely on their ability to demonstrate their value to funders. This requires the maintenance of detailed client records and perhaps the use of databases to track participants in the longer-term.

Strengths and weaknesses of different approaches

The research considered some of the main strengths and weaknesses of six approaches to labour market re-integration (see Table 1). These approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Strategies to reduce the unemployment of ex-offenders need to be broadly based and multi-faceted. However, if ex-offenders are to gain employment, employers need to be seen as the 'customers' of strategy. Consequently, encouraging employers to consider recruiting ex-offenders on their individual merits may be an important component of all strategies.

Implications for local provision

The researchers conclude that there are five key implications for local provision:

- Provision should move from the current pre-occupation with short-term outputs to the notion of progressing the individual.
- Provision should be increasingly focused on the need to act strategically, employ holistic approaches, and view integration as a long-term process.
- A wide range of approaches is necessary to re-integrate ex-offenders. There would appear to be a particular need for interventions which are more innovative and resource intensive, which address the relationship between labour supply and demand in a systematic and integrated way.
- There is a need for projects to focus on the issue of disclosure. It is important to create an environment which will encourage an honest and open exchange of information about convictions between job applicant and employer.
- The ability of projects to survive in the longer term depends on their ability to demonstrate their value to funders. This requires the maintenance of client records in a more detailed form than has tended to

be the case hitherto. The use of databases to track participants in the longer-term should also be considered.

Implications for the New Deal

A significant number of ex-offenders will be affected by the Government's New Deal programme. It is estimated that probation staff are working with up to 100,000 of the New Deal's overall target group of 250,000. The target group has now halved (from 250,000 to 120,000) which means that an even higher proportion are likely to include those with a criminal record. Accommodating the multiple disadvantages of groups like ex-offenders will pose major challenges to Gateway providers; for example there is a potential conflict between improving employability and meeting the individual needs of ex-offenders facing acute disadvantage. In addition, research evidence also suggests that the active participation of business in local projects is crucial.

About the study

The study comprised three distinct, but inter-related stages. At the outset a literature review was used to identify the disadvantages faced by ex-offenders in the labour market and to highlight the links between unemployment and crime. A series of formal meetings was then held with representatives of twenty key members of the policy community. These meetings provided an opportunity to collect data on the nature and scale of local initiatives and to identify possible case study material. Finally, five case studies chosen to exemplify different approaches to labour market re-integration were evaluated.

How to get further information

The full report, *Building Bridges into Employment and Training for Ex-offenders*, by Del Roy Fletcher, David Woodhill and Alison Herrington, is published for the Foundation by YPS. It is available from York Publishing Services, 64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868 (price £9.95 plus £1.50 p&p, ISBN 1 899987 78 9).

A case study guide, giving fuller evidence for the five case studies, is also available from CRESR (Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research), Sheffield Hallam University, Pond Street, Sheffield S1 1WB (Tel: 0114 225 5555).

