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Going Straight

Helping ex-offenders to find work is the only way of cutting costly recidivism.

Reoffending by those released from prison costs the taxpayer £15 billion a year. For all the talk of rehabilitation, better training schemes and more mentoring, well over half of all those released commit another crime within a year. At a time when prisons in England and Wales are under unprecedented strain from overcrowding, budget cuts and antiquated buildings, the failure to stop this cycle of reoffending makes more disturbances like the riot in Birmingham almost inevitable.

The single biggest cause of reoffending is the lack of jobs for ex-offenders. From the moment the prison gates open to release a prisoner back into society, with £46 in his pocket and a small case of personal belongings, the odds are stacked against him. It will take weeks before his first social security payment comes through. Almost no employer will offer him an interview, let alone a job. He may no longer have a home to return to or a family waiting for him. For far too many ex-offenders, the only option is a return to his old haunts and the criminal networks that led to his conviction.

A report by the Commons work and pensions committee says that those leaving prison face a “cliff-edge” drop-off in support to help them re-enter normal life and find work. Most businesses refuse to hire ex-offenders because of worries about their reliability and the risks they pose to the company’s image. About half of all employers would not consider offering a job to anyone who had been in prison. And almost all application forms have a box to tick stating whether the applicant has a criminal record. A tick in that box inevitably puts paid to any hopes of a job.

The committee urges ministers to reduce national insurance contributions for those firms that “actively” employ former convicts, and wants to widen the “ban the box” scheme in the civil service so that those looking for a job in any public body do not have to disclose past convictions. Employers, the committee said, needed to be encouraged to change their recruitment practices and should be given support to do so.

The way has already been shown by several dynamic charities. In Brixton prison, south London, Bounce Back runs intensive training schemes for those in the last six months of their sentence to teach them interior decoration skills and enable them to gain national qualifications. It then employs them from the day they leave jail, hiring them out to building firms keen to find qualified craftsmen in an area where there are big labour shortages. Another charity, Blue Sky Regeneration, was set up 11 years ago with the sole purpose of employing and training ex-offenders. In partnership with a range of companies it has found jobs, largely in ground maintenance and waste management, for more than 1,200 people.

Both charities have understood that matching skills shortages to a workforce desperate to earn an honest living is the only way to break the cycle of reoffending. More such schemes are needed — and especially those that also cater for less capable or motivated ex-offenders who are not creamed off by charities engaging mainly the smarter and more able prisoners.

There must always be checks, especially on those with a record of sexual offending. And recidivism will never be eliminated. But Scandinavia, where training for work has been so successful that some prisons are now half empty, shows the way. It can, and must, be extended here in Britain.



Dozens of BA flights cancelled as cabin crew strike over pay

◆ NEW

Up to 48 British Airways flights will be cancelled next week when cabin crew strike over claims of “poverty” pay. The carrier said that 24 flights a day from Heathrow — or 12 round trips — were likely to be grounded during the two-day walkout. BA insisted that passengers on the affected flights would be rebooked on...

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