Supporting people with a criminal record to become self-employed

Richard Morgan, CARREA campaign organiser

https://doi.org/10.54006/XXAK8149
Around 12 million people in the UK face difficulties in securing employment due to having a criminal record. Today as never before, we are living in a world where we are encouraged to embrace diversity and equality, where an individual’s freedom of choice is placed centre stage. Yet for some, that chance to make those choices has been severely impacted. One such group is people with convictions.

Research has shown that being economically active is a key driver in leading a crime free life. Yet people with convictions face significant obstacles because of their status. It is widely acknowledged that many people serving time have expressed an interest in becoming self-employed on their return to society. The justice system needs to address the education and training it provides to support people to return to economic activity in this way, just as it does in helping them find work for an employer.

The current emphasis on “getting a job” has been met with significant financial and people resources across the Ministry of Justice and HM Prisons and Probation Service. Initiatives such as the New Futures Network and Going Forward into Employment, are making a real difference to opportunities for those returning to the community. This will be further enhanced by the roll out of a programme to establish Employment Boards to work with Prison Governors and employers on a local level, and the creation of Employment Hubs in prisons.

However in the context of reducing re-offending we need to go further than support the existing cohort of current or recent prisoner leavers. We need to connect with former prisoners who are economically inactive, regardless of when they served time.

Rather than seeing people with convictions as inactive within society, we should work to ensure they are given the opportunity to make a real contribution to whilst improving their own lives. They have the least to lose, yet the most to gain in taking steps to becoming economically active again. An increase in their financial worth brings with it the benefits of a higher personal income and an improvement in their self-image and health.

Currently, the position is this:

- Only 17% of people with convictions manage to get a job within a year of release
- Each year more than 80,000 prisoners are released from prison, BUT nearly two-thirds of them will have re-offended within two years

Whilst ‘getting a job’ will be the objective of some individuals once through the gate, others have an aspiration to achieve other goals when it comes to work. It is well documented that there are similarities in personality and mindset between those individuals who have developed successful careers as entrepreneurs and those who have engaged in illegal activities.
The individuals who engaged in such activity and gone on to receive a custodial sentence have often lacked the structure or knowledge necessary to develop a successful enterprise – yet many display experience of being “streetwise”. Research has shown that when peoples’ abilities are recognised they can turn their activity into a legitimate business and more go on to succeed than fail. Yet very little provision exists to encourage and develop self-employment and start a business as a means of ‘getting a job’ for people who have spent time in prison.

The link between someone engaging in employed activity and this reducing the likelihood of them reoffending is widely acknowledged, yet getting a job can take many months or even years if at all. If we encourage individuals to create work for themselves, we offer them the opportunity of starting to work within days, and not months of their release, and give them a sense of stability and purpose that is absent from the lives of many people who have left prison, regardless of the length of time since their returning to the community.

The importance of a person being ‘work ready’, has always been a key element in an individual being able to make a successful transition from prison into employment. Given the recent pressures across the prison estate because of the COVID19 pandemic, this is an area that requires particular attention and care. Sending potential candidates into employment situations without them being sufficiently ‘work ready’ may result in disappointment or resentment from an employer and could contribute to reoffending. That is why it is important that those involved in the advisory or connecting process have relevant experience, whether that is in an employed or self-employed situation. The right guidance and support can often make the difference between success and failure.

Do we know what business experience each person has, and what economic activity they would like to engage in for the future? My own work with prisoners has shown that a significant number of individuals would consider the option of legitimate self-employment if they had access to the support and mentoring. After all, many serving time have ‘traded’ in this fashion, through the black economy.

Such guidance and support will enable a more effective outcome with minimum delay post-release. Moreover, people can prepare for self-employment prior to release, so that when they are free to do so, those plans can be implemented. To be valued for what their business can provide, whilst providing for themselves offers the motivation and a sense of pride to achieve the goal to become self-employed.

In order to achieve this I have created the Campaign to Reduce Reoffending through Enterprising Employment Activity (CARREA). Our objective is to develop a national campaign to give every person with a conviction who is able to become self-employed the opportunity to do so. This will be achieved by collaboratively engaging with the relevant stakeholders working in the sector.

The project will focus on delivering the following outcomes within the first twelve months:

- A launch conference and smaller regional events
- The publication of a report based on the actions of those events
- The publication of a review of the different kinds of support currently available to people with convictions seeking to become self-employed, and their effectiveness
- The creation of a policy bridge – enabling the views of the educator, trainer, employer, and person with a conviction to be coherently presented.

For further information and to get involved please visit: www.carrea.org