



Breaking the Cycle

Straight talking ex-offenders reduce recidivism

By Claire Seppings

Churchill Fellow 2015, Victoria

"Prisons are full of individuals who want to change but think they can't, or lack the courage or skills to try. Enabling those lost in the system to meet past offenders who have changed successfully is one of the most effective and inspiring things I have ever seen in prison." — Barry Greenberry, Former Governor Her Majesty's Prison, Isle of Wight, United Kingdom.¹

Prisons are failing to keep us safe.² That was the message from Victorian Ombudsman Deborah Glass in 2015. With nearly one in two prisoners returning to jail within two years of release, her report called for urgent action.³ Ms Glass pointed out that the corrections system must work better to rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners⁴ to improve public safety and get better value for the \$1 billion annual spend, adding,

"The public expects violent offenders to serve time, but offenders must also be better coming out than when they went in if we're going to reduce crime".⁵

That was the year I undertook my Churchill Fellowship to study the rehabilitative role of ex-prisoners as peer mentors in reintegration models in the UK, Ireland, Sweden and the USA.

In 2015, there were 33,791 adults in Australian prisons. Fast forward to 2020 and there were over 43,000. Australia's incarceration rate is now at a record high of 224 per 100,000.⁶ Recidivism is the bane of all correctional authorities and professionals. When prisoners return to prison for new offences and breaches, they leave behind new victims and return to the same programs that failed to reach them the first time.

My Churchill Fellowship mission came from a combination of seeing, in my professional experience, how Australian offender behaviour programs were not reducing recidivism; and learning from my personal experience when, on a prison visit to see a former partner, he said to me,

"I don't know how to be straight".⁷

This led me to discover a number of international initiatives and individuals leading reform, including the Swedish agency KRIS (Fig 1), as well as Glenn E. Martin, founder of JustLeadershipUSA, whose guiding principle is that,

"Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from resources and power."⁸

Mark Johnson MBE is a rehabilitated offender, former drug user, and bestselling author of the book *Wasted*, who founded the charity User Voice (Fig 1) which goes by the motto, *Only Offenders Can Stop Re-offending*. As Johnson explained,

"Our work leads us to recognise that offenders like to relate to those who have 'walked in their shoes': those who have the lived experience of criminal justice ... We believe it is essential for the offender community to develop its capacity to lead itself out of crime and developing and extending peer support networks is a way of doing this."⁹

I also discovered *The Road from Crime* documentary, which asked,

"What could be learnt from former prisoners who have successfully desisted from criminal behaviour or 'gone straight'?"

It pointed out that,

"The exit at the prison gate often appears to be a revolving door. Prisons and correctional services have, almost literally, tried everything in efforts to rehabilitate offenders over the past century, but the results have been uniformly bleak, leading many to conclude, 'nothing works'. In the past decade, however, a group of criminologists have hit upon what should have been an obvious source of inspiration for prisoner rehabilitation: the other 40%!"¹⁰

This obvious source is peer support—from ex-prisoners to current prisoners. My drive to reform the prison system, through the expertise of those who have lived it, had begun.

During my Fellowship, I engaged with more than 65 agencies and 100 committed and passionate people working across the criminal justice system in the UK, Ireland, Sweden and the USA. I found evidence that peer mentoring can reduce the likelihood that a person will commit further crimes after release and return to prison. Many of the programs developed organically, and were led by reformed ex-offenders who wanted to help others break the cycle of crime and incarceration.

Policy Context

Incarceration has substantial and increasing costs. The Australian taxpayers' criminal justice price-tag has risen to more than \$17 billion,¹¹ with prison operations alone costing \$4 billion.¹² In exchange, the public is assured that it is buying safety from crime. Yet 55% of prisoners have been in prison before.¹³ Re-offending creates more victims. Families of prisoners are the invisible victims. Incarceration costs many everything they have.¹⁴

A successful prison system should not simply contain people who have committed offences; it should also improve their lives by preparing them for release. Reintegration is about more than simply stopping re-offending. It is about adjusting, adapting and transitioning successfully to a straight life on the outside. Community safety improves when offenders do not commit further crimes after being released from prison. If they also go on to productively contribute to their communities, we benefit doubly, through decreased crime rates and increased social and economic capacity.¹⁵ Former Victorian Corrections Minister Ben Carroll said,

"If we're going to change the Corrections Act and put rehabilitation in it, I want rehabilitation to actually mean something—for it to flow through and for it to have accountability."¹⁶

The ongoing question to the recidivism dilemma is, *how?* The field is littered with former pilot projects aimed at reducing recidivism—some successful—which failed to obtain funding beyond the pilot stage. The means for rehabilitation is there within the corrections system. Existing structures and resourcing, however, prevent the needed transformation.

Before embarking on my Churchill Fellowship, I consulted broadly across Australia. Some former prisoners pointed out that discrimination in Australia existed to prevent the involvement of reformed prisoners in the criminal justice system. Many organisations, keen to see my findings and implement them, had been foiled by prison security clearance barriers and an attitude of wariness about using ex-offenders in pre-release programs. Correctional authorities cited the lack of evidence to mobilise such programs. Intense scrutiny from politicians, as well as from the community and media, meant that without contrary evidence from similar jurisdictions, utilising reformed offenders as mentors could be seen as a risky approach.

Prisons do not know what success looks like.



Figure 1. International examples of ex-offender peer mentor programs

Top (from left): User Voice (London, UK); SOS (Brooklyn, NY, USA). Middle: Community Led Initiatives (Manchester, UK); X-CONS (Stockholm, Sweden); Exodus (Harlem, NY, USA). Bottom: Osbourne Association (The Bronx, NY, USA); The Wise Group (Glasgow, Scotland); KRIS (Stockholm, Sweden). Photos from Seppings, C (2015).

Lessons from other jurisdictions and options for treatability

In the UK, I met with the organisation Clinks. They have pointed out that when treating people with mental health problems and drug and alcohol dependency, it is commonplace to listen to the views of people with experience in using the services designed to help. Yet, as they also note,

*"When it comes to offenders, there is a reluctance to make use of this consumer perspective. It is as if a criminal conviction removes a person's right to have their insights taken seriously or their efforts utilised."*¹⁷

Mark Johnson argues,

*"My lived experience is an asset, not a risk"¹⁸ ... The use of ex-offenders in visible roles within criminal justice supports offenders to see and touch the possibility of change and inspires and motivates those who are in the process of changing to keep going."*¹⁹

In the US, I found the organisation, Save Our Streets (SOS, **Fig 1**). Their staff have firsthand knowledge of street and gang life and act as, what they call, "violence interrupters"—using their credibility and relationships to mediate conflicts before they escalate.²⁰ An evaluation of SOS found it had a significant positive impact on the rate of gun violence, compared to neighbouring areas where no such program existed.²¹

“We need a new approach. One that doesn't waste too much energy discussing big existential questions about the prison population or trap us into often false choices between so-called tough or soft approaches.”

— David Cameron, former UK Prime Minister³¹

In the UK, I visited Merseyside Offender Mentoring (MOM) in Her Majesty's Prison, Liverpool. In 2016–17, MOM engaged 963 offenders with their project, before and after release from prison, successfully matching 228 of those with a mentor. Remarkably, just 15% of those mentored returned to prison, compared with a national average of 44%.²² In another survey, 65% of offenders under the age of 25 confirmed that support from a mentor helped them to stop re-offending, while 71% said they would prefer an ex-offender mentor.²³

My Churchill Fellowship mission was starting to come to fruition when, in 2017, Deakin University received funding from several charitable trusts. This enabled me, as the appointed project coordinator, to work collaboratively with the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety to investigate, design, deliver and evaluate a 'through-the-gate' peer mentoring trial in Geelong, Victoria that was suitable for the Australian context. We named this Australia-first trial of prison peer mentoring *Straight Talking*.²⁴ Led by Professor Joe Graffam, it is on the threshold of shaping best practice, policy reform and positive system change.

In the words of one participant,

*"All prisoners, once they leave jail, believe they are alone in the world and can only relate to other prisoners. This is why other ex-prisoners [as mentors] are fantastic as the tools in changing the way ex-prisoners make decisions out of fear. Typical comments are, 'If I knew this stuff before, I never would have come to jail'. I applaud what you guys are doing!"*²⁵

Graffam's research compared relevant system statistics and found *Straight Talking* to have succeeded in reducing re-incarceration. Highly rated by the mentors, mentees and key stakeholders, its low re-incarceration result is estimated to have achieved substantial financial savings.²⁶

While several conditions may contribute to this, including an individual's 'readiness to change', the following case study highlights one of the project's mentoring relationships.

The 29-year-old mentee had two previous periods of incarceration and a history of drug crime. After attending a prison peer mentoring 'casual meet and greet' information session, he felt very motivated to change and to receive the support of a mentor. Six months after release, he was employed and reunited with his family. Although there were some low-level reporting issues, his mentor helped him comply and avoid breaching parole. According to his mentor,

"This guy has been gifted with common sense. He really wants to get his life back on track."

Writing to his mentor, he proclaimed,

*"Out of everybody that's ever come into my life, I think you have made the biggest impact on me wanting to change."*²⁷

In addition to mentoring individuals, the peer mentors talked to prison staff, to remanded and sentenced prisoners, and gave input into project workshops, conferences and media. The program exposed prisoners who did not participate in the program, as well as prison and community corrections staff, to the positive changes in the lives of ex-prisoners. It provided staff with an enhanced sense of accomplishment in their work and prisoners with increased encouragement and confidence to succeed upon release. This is cultural change in practice.

Despite all the evidence to support the integration of former offenders in supporting offenders to reintegrate, only a handful of such agencies still exist. *Straight Talking* still remains the only 'through-the-gate' peer mentoring trial in Australia.

Stakeholder consultation

Working with community stakeholders, partners and service users is vital to develop and deliver an effective program and support its ongoing development. The biggest stakeholders in the justice system are the service users, and they need to have a voice in reforming the system. I have developed substantial collaborative relationships with government and non-government sectors over the years, implementing many innovative projects and services. Corrections Victoria supported my Churchill Fellowship. My published report attracted broad media and conference interest. Agencies I met with overseas continued to support my mission and helped inform the Deakin University peer mentoring model development.

Straight Talking was built on strong, positive working relationships. The Deakin University project team convened a working group to collaboratively develop the program, comprising members from the university, prison and community corrections. The model was co-designed with people who had lived experience of prison. The group developed guidelines, protocols and procedures, which were presented to the project's inter-agency reference group for review and endorsement. Stakeholder engagement and commitment led to a program of the highest standard.

The following stakeholders, while not exhaustive, would benefit from reading my Churchill Fellowship report and what has already been achieved with *Straight Talking*: state justice departments and relevant ministers and commissioners (corrections, youth justice, and victims of crime), ombudsmen, non-government reintegration services, Indigenous and culturally diverse organisations, universities, policy think tanks, philanthropists, and, most importantly, persons with lived experience of prison.

Policy recommendations

*"We need to remove the ingrained resistance to the concept of offenders, former offenders and their families as experts—because in this case, that is what they are."*²⁸

As I found on my Churchill Fellowship tour, ex-prisoners as peer mentors, and as advisors to prison management, public servants, government ministers, and researchers, help inform policy and are proven effective agents for positive change. They lead their own agencies, employ former prisoners and help to deliver person-centred services.

My evidence to Victoria's 2017 Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into youth justice centres²⁹ led to its recommendation that the government establish a rehabilitative mentoring program for young offenders.

Australia needs to incorporate the voice, expertise and role of people with lived experience of prison across the design, delivery, evaluation and reform of the criminal justice system. Enabling *Straight Talking's* expansion across Victoria would test the program's scalability and transportability for a national rollout.

Funding could come from existing government budgets, as occurs overseas, where such programs are integrated into the suite of resettlement services.

Implementing my recommendations would require a conscious policy shift in Australia, but bring us into line with other countries.

As David Cameron proclaimed, new approaches to prison reform are needed, and needed now,

*"If we get this right ... we can change lives, improve public safety and bring hope to those for whom it was in short supply. Turning waste and idleness into prisons with purpose. Turning remorse and regret into lives with new meaning. Finding diamonds in the rough and helping them shine."*³⁰

Let that be our mission.

We have many diamonds to mine in Australia. Ex-prisoners who have turned their lives around are a vital missing aspect of Australian prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration.

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39. Consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist, The Bridge, Cambridge, England [recorded interview, 11 November 2014].
40. The definition I have adopted of a 'therapeutic community' is '... a participative group-based approach to drug addiction ... it includes group psychotherapy as well as practical activities,' Wikipedia, 6 February 2015.
41. For example, at Glebe House, YP are on the interview panel for the selection of all staff, including the CEO, a YP also chairs the group meetings.
42. There would be fortnightly progress reports provided to the Magistrate who made the Order. Other forms of external scrutiny that I observed overseas included: the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, the Mental Welfare Commission in Scotland and the Care Quality Commission in England.
43. For example, hairdressing, motor mechanics, etc.
44. "One thing with secure (accommodation) is that you can get a lot of treatment and not have breakdowns in treatment ... breakdowns in treatment are very bad for youth." Associate Professor Tove Petersson, Head of Department of Criminology, Stockholm University, Sweden. [recorded interview, 15 October 2014].
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