

It's a cuddly idea:



give an ex-offender a hand

But unless we reinvent our hopeless prison system that perpetuates crime, it will never work

John Bird

John Bird is founder of the Big Issue and author of *The Necessity of Poverty*

Being let out into a cold, hard world with a pittance of £46 in your back pocket and an appointment with your parole officer is not conducive to keeping a newly released prisoner on the straight and narrow.

I know because I've been there myself. It was inevitable that the first thing I would do, as a young man just released from jail, would be to find some money. I had no skills, qualifications or legal ways of raising cash so, like any member of the criminal class, I did what I knew to make a living. I thieved. And to be honest, I would have thieved over taking a low-paid, 9-to-5 job because it is an easier way of getting money.

With reoffending rates kissing 60 per cent – and a third of prisoners homeless within the first few weeks after release – the rehabilitation plan announced yesterday makes a certain amount of sense.

From next year, the Justice Secretary wants all prisoners serving less than 12 months to be mentored. A mentor, usually an ex-offender, will make contact before the prisoner has been released and then support and

encourage him on the outside. The mentors will, in this vision, meet the prisoner on his release, help him to sort out accommodation and benefits and introduce him to local businesses who might give him some work.

So no more of the swift shock of reality at the prison gates: rather, a guide will help you over the hurdles of your first encounter with the outside world. Well, who could disagree with such helpful nudging? Who could possibly object to mentoring? It's nice and cuddly for someone to listen to your problems.

But without the reinvention of prison I'm sceptical about it making much difference. "Mentoring" will only work on those who are keen to go straight and have the skills to make a living outside the world of crime. Mentoring is unlikely to crack criminal minds, especially when our shambolic prison system does little to break the psychology of the criminal class.

There are four reasons to lock someone up. To punish and get justice for the public; to deter wrongdoers from reoffending; to transform them into better people; and, lastly, to keep them out of circulation.

I have known many young men who have left prison either unchanged or hardened and changed for the worse

In an ideal world prison would work on all these levels. But despite the billions spent, it only keeps wrongdoers out of circulation. A governor once told me that his job was to stop his charges escaping, dying or killing anyone. As for rehabilitation, that was a task that he could not get round to.

I have known many young men who have left prison either unchanged or hardened and changed for the worse. They have been biding their time, waiting to get out and carry on where they left off. And at times they have picked up new skills that are useful in the life of an opportunist criminal.

A prison system that worked would be very different from today's warehouses for criminals. It would offer an incredibly tough, disciplined regime. Everyone would have to work and learn practical skills. Prisoners would be paid for work, and have a chance to save money.

It would be expensive to run. It would also acknowledge the harsh reality that the people inside it are marked for failure by society even before they have done wrong – that crime and wrongdoing in some ways is the inevitable outcome of their circumstances. Up to 85 per cent of those in some prisons are from the jobless world of benefits dependency. Illiteracy is high and self-esteem low. Autism, dyslexia and Asperger's are way above the national average.

The harsh reality is that you have to spend to save.

I would like mentoring to work. But this scheme is like going into hospital for an operation that is cancelled and you then find that they've kindly laid on a car to get you home. But without the "operation" (the transformation inside prison), we might be putting our resources in the wrong place.

The harsh reality is that you have to spend to save. In a time of stringency maybe mentoring is all we can afford. But I doubt it will stop thousands and thousands of men prepared only for crime ending up banged up again.

The Times, 21 November 2012
© John Bird



2018 Update:

The discharge Grant is still £46.

Adults who served sentences of less than 12 months reoffended at a rate of 64.6%,

Proven Reoffending Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, July 2016 to September 2016, published July 2018.

A Freedom of Information request revealed that around one in six former prisoners were classified as unsettled, likely to mean sleeping rough or another form of homelessness, between April 2015 and March 2018.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- Do you think prison is the best punishment for offenders?
- Should offenders just be punished, or also helped to reform?
- How would you think it best to help criminals to reform and re-build a better life for themselves?