

# Snapshot on Getting Out To Work – Employing Young Adults With Convictions

## Young adults with convictions and the workplace:

Getting young adults with convictions into work is essential, providing a legitimate income and a source of stability in their lives. In 2002 the Social Exclusion Unit found that a stable job reduces re-offending by between a third and a half – the single biggest influencing factor in changing behaviour.

Yet many of those who have been through the Criminal Justice System – particularly those who have been in prison – suffer from a chronic lack of qualifications, training and experience that can make finding a job extremely difficult. Compared with the general population, prisoners are 13 times as likely to be unemployed when they are arrested and 10 times as likely to have been a regular truant<sup>1</sup>. Prison, naturally, is deeply disruptive to an employment record – with two thirds of prisoners losing their jobs while they are in custody<sup>2</sup>.

The disappearance of millions of manual jobs from the economy has also made employment opportunities far scarcer for former prisoners lacking qualifications and skills. Though service industries have boomed, former young adult prisoners can lack the basic social skills associated with service sector employment – particularly in terms of good communication and presentation. These are already steep obstacles. But, on top of this, a criminal record often means an instant rejection from the pile of applications. Fifty-seven per cent of ex-prisoners seeking work say they have had difficulty finding employment because of their previous convictions<sup>3</sup>. This can be soul-destroying for young adults already lacking in confidence. During interviews for the Barrow Cadbury Trust Commission on Young Adults and the Criminal Justice System in 2005, young adults told researchers that the disappointment of being rejected for a job was made worse after receiving training because it was made clear that they had been rejected solely on account of their convictions.

*'Finding ways to help ex-offenders into work can create a virtuous circle. Companies can plug their skills gap and at the same time, young adults can find the stability to turn their lives around. If more employers become willing to employ young adults with criminal records, we will, in time all become less likely to be victims of crime'.*

**Sukhvinder Stubbs, Chief Executive, Barrow Cadbury Trust**

1. Social Exclusion Unit 2002

2. Chartered Institute of Personnel Development

3. Chartered Institute of Personnel Development

4. Social Exclusion Unit 2005

This dire employment situation faced by all ex-offenders is even worse for those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. Sixty-three per cent of those in prison aged eighteen to twenty-five are unemployed at the point of arrest<sup>4</sup> – compared to 46% of those aged 25 or over. A quarter of young adults in custody had left full-time education by the age of 14. And those aged eighteen to twenty are estimated to have basic skills, unemployment and a social exclusion background that is over a third worse than amongst adult prisoners.

A study on employer's attitudes to offenders found confused results. For example, even though only 32% of employers believed that employing an offender was more of a risk than a non-offender, 53% of companies declared that a prior conviction for theft would automatically bar an applicant from employment<sup>5</sup>. Theoretical attitudes towards rehabilitation seem to be displaced by practical issues of trust.

Those that do employ people with convictions are overwhelmingly happy with their performance: according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 87% of employers with experience of employing ex-offenders consider them at least as productive as other workers. In another 2002 survey, only 6 per cent of employers said that employing people with convictions had been a negative experience, compared with 66 per cent who said that it had been positive<sup>6</sup>.

For forward-thinking employers, there is an economic incentive: 85% of companies say that they are experiencing recruitment difficulties due to skill shortages and a lack of experienced staff<sup>7</sup>.

*'Whilst we obviously don't condone any form of criminal activity, we believe everyone deserves a chance to get their life back on track and recognise that offenders can make great colleagues and make a valuable contribution to our business. That is why we've put in place policies specifically for the recruitment of offenders which enables us to manage any risk appropriately'*

**Asda**

### Improving employment opportunities:

In autumn 2005, the report of the Barrow Cadbury Independent Commission on Young Adults and Criminal Justice, *Lost in Transition*, recommended that educational and employment opportunities improve for young adults with convictions.

In response to this, the Barrow Cadbury Trust decided to establish a group of pioneer companies with current experience of employing young adult ex-offenders. Working with Business in the Community and Ed Williams, who developed the innovative *Marks and Start* programme at Marks and Spencer, Barrow Cadbury brought together companies including Toyota, Marks and Spencer, United Utilities, Ford, Forest Bank, and Tesco.

Together, they have shared their experiences in a guide for other employers thinking of doing this: *Getting Out To Work - Employing Young Adults With Convictions – A guide to good practice*<sup>8</sup>. The project has established that there are many employers out there who want to recruit this way, but either don't know how to or are experiencing blockages with criminal justice agencies.

## Case study: The ESS Rehab Programme

Since 2005, The 'Rehab' project at Drake Hall prison in Staffordshire has prepared women for sustainable employment when they are released by providing training and support - including the chance to gain NVQ catering qualifications, training in customer service, health and safety and basic food preparation.

A partnership brokered between the prison governor, the MoD and defence support service contractors ESS now means that offenders taking part in the programme can, under stringent employment and security criteria, work at Swynnerton Defence Training Camp as caterers – helping to solve the base's perennial recruitment crisis. This is the first time that the Ministry of Defence has allowed serving offenders to work at one of its establishments.

Women are 'buddied up' with a permanent member of the ESS defence staff to ensure successful integration into the work team. They are paid the same rates as permanent ESS staff, and are allowed to access a small part of this income from prison, using the rest to help support their families and themselves on release. They normally work at the camp for six to nine months before being released on parole.

None of the forty women from Drake Hall who have been through The Rehab Programme are known to have re-offended – and ESS has also resolved a long-standing skills shortage and reduced its significant recruitment costs at Swynnerton to almost zero. Natalie Brown, who has benefited from the programme, says: "This has helped me get back in the community, to get me ready for the outside. It feels really good to be trusted. I feel proud of myself. It is about having some independence in order to get started again."

There are obvious risks involved in investing in a young person who has been unemployed for a lengthy period, or who has no demonstrable skills or qualifications. There is a strong possibility that they will be unsuitable for the job and will almost certainly need extra supervision and training – a particular problem for small businesses with limited resources.

Perhaps surprisingly, experience from the pioneer group of companies show that the greatest business benefits come from employing people with convictions via the prison or probation service either during or shortly after their sentence. This allows employers to exercise greater risk control than is possible when recruiting 'off the street'. Under few other circumstances is an employer able to discover so much about a candidate's skills, how they have behaved recently, and the skills they have to offer by those who know them best: prison and probation staff. By ensuring that the employer is asked to consider only individuals with the right skills, companies can have large parts of the standard recruitment process carried out without any costs.

For further information please contact the Barrow Cadbury Trust at 0207 391 9220 or visit our website at [www.barrowcadbury.org.uk](http://www.barrowcadbury.org.uk)

5. Del Roy Fletcher, Alan Taylor, Stephen Hughes and Jonathan Breeze, *Recruiting and employing offenders* (York: Joseph Rowntree, 2001)

6. CIPD 2002

7. Chartered Institute of Personnel

8. See the full report at [www.barrowcadbury.org.uk](http://www.barrowcadbury.org.uk)

## The ex-offender's view:

*'While I was in prison I took a three month BTEC course in digital media, organised by Media for Development, a company that brings media to isolated communities. Afterwards, I got a production assistant position in their London office.*

*When I went to prison, I had very low self-esteem. I had experienced a lengthy period of abusive behaviour in my relationship with my ex-boyfriend. Prison gave me an opportunity to be me again. Being able to work while I was there and go into a job straight from prison really helped me recover.*

*Then, the job came to an end. So I joined a job site for IT jobs. Within a week, I had an interview testing IT software, which I had done years before. Working had helped my confidence in the interview. I could be someone other than a prisoner. I already had the experience of being out there, holding down a job. Otherwise, I would have been thinking all the time about having just got out of prison.'*

**Fiona Bryce served 13 and a half months at HMP Downview**

## Incentives to get young adults into employment:

**The benefit system should be adjusted to encourage longer work placements and training:** Claimants should be allowed a longer period of work experience rather than the current two-week period before they lose the right to claim benefits. The "sixteen hour rule" should also be reformed which means that those who enter training or education that takes more than sixteen hours a week lose their entitlement to Housing Benefit – a huge psychological obstacle for anyone considering entering training. And the Working Tax Credit regime, which could incentivize unglamorous, low-paid work, does not apply to people under the age of 25 unless they are disabled or care for a child.

**Subsidies for employers that operate schemes outside of the New Deal need to be much better publicised to employers.** Job Centre Plus should become more active in carrying out checks on employers, such as health and safety checks, as well as recommending extra training and clarity in internal guidance.

**The Ministry of Justice could match young people at risk with employment opportunities:** Employers should have a single contact point in criminal justice agencies – who would act as personal advisers, identifying the skills profile of young adult offenders and signposting them to training, employment and work experience opportunities in the local area. There should also be a person in every prison who will be measured on the number of guaranteed interviews they secure per annum with local employers.