

# EX-OFFENDERS, SOCIAL TIES AND THE ROUTES INTO EMPLOYMENT

By Dr James Rhodes<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Although the role that employment plays in reducing re-offending has been widely acknowledged, less work has been done to explain why this should be the case. To begin to address this knowledge gap, this article focuses upon the various ways that ex-offenders benefit from employment opportunities, some of the specific difficulties they face in finding employment and how some manage to overcome them legitimately or else employ other adaptive strategies. Based on in-depth research with a sample of 12 ex-offenders, the research reveals the precise importance of the role of social relationships in securing and maintaining employment for ex-offenders. Importantly, the key role of social ties in the labour market – for those who have them – highlights the extent to which those leaving prison lack both the relevant vocational training and experience of the application process to compete effectively within a labour market that is already set heavily against them.*

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<sup>1</sup> Dr James Rhodes, Research Associate, School of Social Sciences University of Manchester

## Introduction

Finding stable employment is widely recognised as playing a central role in desistance from crime (see Farrall, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Uggen, 2000; Visher and Travis, 2003). Sustainable employment reduces the likelihood of an individual re-offending by between one-third and a half (LGA, 2005:1). As a result of this, government policy has increasingly focused on addressing the obstacles that ex-offenders face in accessing employment opportunities. In 2005, the Government published *Reducing Re-offending through Skills and Employment*, which sought to place employment as key to “leading a crime-free life” (HM Government, 2005; 2006). However, it is clear that many barriers remain. Ex-offenders have disproportionately low skill-levels and formal qualifications, poor employment histories, and high levels of unemployment. And 75 per cent of prisoners are released from custody without having secured work (Home Office, 2004:15). Similarly, they are confronted with the often negative attitudes of employers who are reluctant, or simply unwilling, to employ individuals with a criminal record (Brown et al, 2006; CIPD, 2007). This is despite the fact that approximately one-third of all males aged under-30 in the UK possess a criminal record (CIPD, 2007:4). As a result, offenders rely heavily on social ties in order to find employment (Farrall, 2002; 2004; Niven and Stewart, 2005; Visher and Courtney, 2007). There is also an increasing recognition that it is not employment alone, but the interaction between employment and events such as family formation that both encourage and enable ex-offenders to desist from crime (Burnett, 2004; Farrall, 2004; Gadd and Farrall, 2004; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001; Rumgay, 2004; Visher and Travis, 2003).

During the summer of 2007, in-depth interviews were conducted with probationers who had entered work, as well as local employment and probation workers. Using this data it will be argued that the relationship between social ties and employment form both a *constitutive* and a *performative* function for probationers. Not only do social ties offer ex-offenders access to employment, they also encourage and foster the development of a self-identity in which paid work assumes an integral role. Additionally, they offer a means by which the more formal and exclusionary processes of the labour market can be avoided. However, the reliance on social ties also reveals the frailties in existing provision aimed at assisting ex-offenders into employment.

## Ex-offenders, employment and social ties

Although the role that employment plays in reducing re-offending has been widely acknowledged, less work has been done into explaining why this should be the case. Farrall suggests that employment has a range of impacts upon ex-offenders which interact to reduce the likelihood of re-offending. Work offers:

“A reduction in ‘unstructured’ time and an increase in ‘structured’ time; an income, which enables ‘home-leaving’ and the establishment of significant relationships; a ‘legitimate’ identity; an increase in self-esteem; use of an individual’s energies; financial security; daily interaction with non-offenders...a reduction in the time spent in single-sex peer-aged

groups...and ambitions and goals, such as promotion at work” (Farrall, 2002:146).

It is the issue of identity which is particularly pertinent. Research conducted in the US has indicated that employment, even if ‘marginal’ in its nature, has a greater impact on desistance amongst individuals aged over 26 (Uggen, 2000). This suggests that other factors are at play. It serves to negate from the idea of a purely instrumental relationship between employment and rates of offending. An increasing body of work has emerged which argues that it is the dual transition of employment and family formation which leads individuals to turn away from offending behaviour (Burnett, 2001; Gadd and Farrall, 2004; Farrall, 2002; 2004; Sampson and Laub, 2001; Visher and Travis, 2003). Uggen et al state that both work and family roles comprise cornerstones of “a general ‘law-abiding adult citizen’ identity construct” (2004:263). Therefore, it is important to consider the interaction between employment, self-identity and the social relationships of ex-offenders (Gadd and Farrall, 2004). Recently, a greater emphasis has been placed on the ‘narratives’ or ‘scripts’ of desistors and the role that these play in self-understanding (Maruna, 2001; Rumgay, 2004; Vaughan, 2007). This has provided a useful insight into the way in which ex-offenders seek to reconstruct past events to formulate a cohesive, ‘legitimate’, and more positive identity (Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Roy, 2007; Vaughan, 2007). For Maruna (2001), shifts in identity and the decision to disengage from criminal activity is the result of a subjective process. Stripped of their identity as ‘criminals’ or ‘prisoners’, desistors must carve out new roles for themselves, the fulfilment of which is jeopardised by continuing involvement in criminal activities (ibid: 86). This is important as it reasserts the role of individual agency in the decision of ex-offenders to seek more ‘legitimate’ lifestyles. It also recognises that employment represents just one aspect of a broader shift in attitude and identity. Laub and Sampson (2001) have suggested that employment and family encourage desistance, as they involve individuals within a web of responsibilities, obligations, and institutions of social control that lead to a reduction in criminal association and behaviour. However, Maruna (2001) claims that this downplays the active engagement and investment that ex-offenders make in their attempts to manufacture a new life for themselves. Similarly, Gadd and Farrall (2004) argue that it is how agents understand the role of employment and the nature of their social relationships that lies at the heart of desistance. It is with recourse to such narratives that this article attempts to expand upon the importance of social bonds for ex-offenders who enter employment.

Social ties are also important for ex-offenders, as they represent the most effective and predominant means of finding paid employment. A study into the resettlement outcomes of prisoners released in 2003 found that of those who had entered the labour market, 51 per cent found employment, training, or education through social networks. For those entering new forms of employment or training, 85 per cent of these opportunities were secured via social ties (Niven and Stewart, 2005:2). Research in the US uncovered a similarly trend. A study of almost 300 ex-prisoners in Cleveland found that 57 per cent found work through friends and family (Visher and Courtney, 2007:4). This is not simply an efficacious and often more immediate means of finding employment, it can also be seen as a response to the way in which labour market processes seek to exclude and

marginalise ex-offenders. The 1974 Rehabilitation of Offenders Act made it easier for employers to obtain details about individuals and placed greater burdens of disclosure on ex-offenders;

“[The Act] requires ex-offenders, if asked, to disclose their previous convictions to employers. This requirement lasts until a period of time has passed without further convictions, when they become ‘spent’. For many ex-prisoners this process will take 10 years. For those sentenced to over two and a half years the requirement to disclose lasts for the rest of their lives- a requirement which affects around 100,000 ex-prisoners” (SEU, 2002:59).

This development has inevitably led to employers increasingly demanding information about criminal convictions. A study in Los Angeles found that the percentage of employers checking the criminal records of applicants rose over 10 per cent to 60 per cent between 1993-4 and 2001 (Holzer et al, 2003:11). Similarly, a survey conducted in the North West of England found that approximately two-thirds of employers requested information on an applicant’s criminal record, with 60 per cent asking for this regardless of the post they were seeking to fill (Brown et al, 2006:17). This has adversely impacted upon the employment prospects of ex-offenders. Research shows that 75 per cent of employers indicate that they would treat a candidate with a criminal record less favourably (SEU, 2002:59).

The employment opportunities available to ex-offenders are also restricted as a result of the disproportionately poor educational and skill levels this group possess. 52 per cent of male and 71 per cent of female prisoners have no formal qualifications (ibid: 46-7). Similarly, “half of all prisoners are at or below Level 1 (the level expected of an 11-year-old) in reading; two-thirds in numeracy; and four-fifths in writing. These are the skills required for 96 per cent of all jobs” (ibid: 44). This situation is not adequately addressed in custody since just 20 per cent of those entering prison with no qualifications leave with one (ibid: 46-7). This is especially a problem for those serving shorter-sentences and those subject to high rates of prison transfer (SEU, 2002). Even where prisoners manage to gain training or education, there is often a mismatch between the knowledge that they are able to acquire and the needs of local labour markets into which offenders will be returning (SEU, 2002; HM Govt, 2005; 2006). Ex-offenders may also lack many of the ‘soft’ skills that employers demand and the processes involved such as attending interviews, writing applications can prove to be both difficult and daunting for individuals (SEU, 2002). Once again, this serves to highlight the important link that social ties represent for ex-offenders seeking employment. These social bonds are also vital in ensuring that individuals are at a position where employment is an achievable aim. On release from custody, ex-offenders face a diverse and interrelated array of needs which complicate any attempt to build a more stable lifestyle. Offenders may have mental health problems, suffer from drug and alcohol misuse, have financial debts, and most importantly, lack suitable accommodation. Of those leaving custody in 2003, 29 per cent had no accommodation arranged on release (Niven and Stewart, 2005:3). The importance of social bonds here is illustrated by the fact that those who received visits from family or

partners in prison were almost three times more likely to have accommodation arranged on exiting custody (ibid). It appears then that not only are social relationships important in the construction of a more 'legitimate' identity in which employment plays an integral role, they are also vital as they offer a means by which ex-offenders can avoid the more exclusionary processes of the labour market in order to find work. Similarly, the important role such links can play in addressing needs such accommodation has been observed.

This article seeks to expand on the literature outlined above by offering a more qualitative understanding of the importance of social relationships and the *constitutive* and *performative* functions which they serve for ex-offenders seeking employment.

### **The Manchester Study**

Between May and August 2007, a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with probationers, employment workers and probation officers across Greater Manchester. This was part of a collaborative study between Innovation Means Prisons and Communities Together (IMPACT), Greater Manchester Against Crime (GMAC) and the University of Manchester (see GMAC/IMPACT, 2007). The aim of the research was to understand more effectively the role that employment plays in reducing re-offending and to gain an insight into the strategies used by ex-offenders in their search for a legitimate income. Using OASys data obtained from the Greater Manchester Probation Service, a list of probationers aged over 21, who had served custodial sentences and had entered employment in the first quarter of 2007, was produced. Following this, probation officers were contacted in order to secure the voluntary participation of their clients. In total, 12 probationers were interviewed. The sample was predominantly male (10 males, two females), and exclusively white (all 12 respondents were white, one was a foreign national). Participants were aged between 22 and 43 years of age and had served sentences of various lengths for a disparate range of offences, from participation in an armed robbery to assault and theft. All of the interviews were conducted at probation offices at a time when probationers were attending appointments. All but two of the interviews were conducted with just the probationer and the interviewer present. In the other two cases, interviewees requested the presence of probation workers. In addition to the 12 probationers, four probation officers and one employment worker were also interviewed in order to gain their perceptions of the issues facing ex-offenders in their attempts to find employment. All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and with the informed consent of the participants. It should be noted here that in no way is the claim made that the sample is representative. Rather, it represents the outcome of a purposive sampling technique which was used to identify a specific section of those on probation supervision.

### **The constitutive role of social relationships and employment**

As Gadd and Farrall (2004) argue, in order to better understand the role that employment and social relationships play in desistance from crime there is a need to examine what these mean to ex-offenders themselves. In relation to employment, it was clear that this

was extremely important to all probationers interviewed. However, it was important in different ways. Eight of the 12 probationers can be described as what Burnett has termed “non-starters” (Burnett, 2004:166). Burnett’s study of convicted property offenders led her to identify a specific group whom, “were adamant that they were not ‘typical thieves’ or ‘real criminals’. They had fewer previous convictions and claimed that any offences they had committed had been out of character and committed during an aberrant set of circumstances which would not recur” (ibid). Those probationers who shared these characteristics generally had good employment histories and had worked consistently since the age of 16. Although a number of them possessed additional minor offences, all eight individuals had just completed what was their first adult custodial sentence. As Burnett states, this group were keen to disassociate themselves from ‘typical’ criminals and it was with recourse to their record of employment that this was usually done.

In the Manchester study, Kevin, for example, is a 32 year-old male who had held a number of good jobs before being convicted for theft. As a result of his qualifications and employment history he did not recognise himself as an ‘everyday’ criminal. Rather a set of extenuating circumstances, namely financial difficulties resulting from his drug addiction, had led him into criminality;

“I’ve always been good with jobs, I’ve never not had a job, I’ve got good qualifications. I know it sounds funny, but compared to me and some everyday criminals, I’ve got really good grades, I’ve got a good head, everything like that, I’ve always been well paid but unfortunately with my drug habit it never paid me enough to do it that way”.

David, a 25 year-old male, used a similar tactic to differentiate himself from other offenders. He had worked continuously since leaving school. At the time of his imprisonment he worked in a factory, for the same employer to which he returned following his release. He drew upon the reaction of his colleagues to his arrest to distance himself from both his offence, and other offenders. It appears that it is his ‘normative’ status, secured by virtue of his occupation which elicited a sympathetic response from his workmates;

“[at the time of the offence] I was working where I work now and all this happened, and they all knew me at work and they all seen it was out of character. They could understand why I did it but they didn’t know the full extent of the damage I caused and they were all upset that I went to prison. But I had them come to visit me in prison and they said the jobs still open when you come back out. I think it’s because I’m a normal lad”.

Using this sense of ‘normality’ derived via employment, David described how difficult the shift to life in prison had been; “I didn’t take to prison at all, for some people it may be, for the lowlifes and that”. This group viewed themselves, not as offenders primarily, but as ‘normal’ working people who had ended up in custody as a result of circumstance and poor decision-making.

It was clear for this group that paid employment possessed an intrinsic value and forged an integral part of their identities; it was simply something that they had always done. Work offered them a sense of responsibility, pride, a steady income and a degree of self-worth. This was perhaps most apparent in the account of 28 year-old Paul. He blamed his offending on drug addiction and the financial debts he had accrued as a result of it. He stated that, "I've always been a worker, I've worked since I was like 11 years of age, know what I mean. I used to go 4 days after school and all day Saturday". Paul had trained hard and was a highly qualified skilled-manual worker. He had worked for the same company for over ten years and took great pride in his work.

Paul worried that prison had destroyed the possibility of any return to the occupation and career he had previously enjoyed and invested so heavily in:

"It was my job, that was my main concern about going to prison, losing my career that I've worked fucking really hard for, you know I've put all my life into that job, I was proud to work there you know what I mean, and it fucking all went to pot for one silly mistake".

These accounts are interesting due to the way in which they differ from the subjects often cited in studies of desistance (see Maruna, 2001). This group of individuals were not seeking to construct a new identity away from crime, rather they sought to *recover* an identity which they felt had been disrupted as the result of circumstance and error. They hoped that their employment records would encourage future employers to see past their mistakes. Dan, a 29 year-old construction worker who had recently completed his sole custodial sentence put forward this point of view;

"They [employers] can check me criminal history out and know full well that was just one mistake, so I'm not really bothered about them checking. They're not going to see a big list of offences, they're going to see one little offence, one blip that's it, but if they compare that with my work history then I'd like to think they'd give me a second chance".

The other four probationers interviewed differed from this group significantly. Three of the four had not worked for a period of longer than a few months in their entire lives, while one had not held down stable employment for a considerable number of years. Just as the 'non-starters' had used their employment records to cast themselves as 'normal', working individuals, so too this group recognised the normalising role that employment could play. Anthony, a 28 year-old male with a history of 96 prior offences and now engaged in his first significant period of employment declared that the most satisfying aspect of work for him was, "just being a law-abiding person and all that". Debbie, a female in her forties, further endorsed this view. Despite having been employed intermittently, her work history had been disrupted as a result of serving three custodial sentences, including a recent spell of over three years. Having re-entered the labour market, she explained the impact that this had had on her sense of self:

“Since I’ve got the job I feel as though my whole life’s changed”

*“In what way?”*

“I feel normal, honestly I do feel normal, I’m getting on the bus in the morning with all the workers and honestly I feel really, really good”.

It has already been suggested that employment alone is not necessarily the main motivation behind desistance from crime. Gadd and Farrall (2004) point out that labour market restructuring in advanced industrial societies has rendered the forms of employment in which ex-offenders are most likely to engage (low-paid, low-skilled) unrewarding in and of itself. Rather it is important to the extent that it forms part of a broader shift as individuals seek a more adult, legitimate identity (Uggen et al, 2003). It was clear from the four probationers with little history of employment that it was the development of such a self-understanding which resulted in employment being both necessary and valuable. For this group it was their social relationships which had encouraged this shift, most notably family formation. Social ties performed a *constitutive* function for this group in the sense that the desire to assume roles such as the ‘responsible’ parent or partner fostered identities in which employment played a key part. Maruna observes how, “other-centred pursuits provide socially excluded offenders with a feeling of connection to or ‘embeddedness’ in the world around them” (2001:119). It is clear that social relationships with partners and children fostered such a conception. A good example of this can be seen in the case of Steven, a 25 year-old male who had recently served a seven-year sentence. He had a long history of criminality and had amassed 86 offences since the mid-1990s. He had utilised his time in prison very effectively, completing a number of courses and also gaining work experience. He stated that the separation that he had endured from his partner and children had made him re-evaluate his attitude towards work. He expressed a desire to be a good role model for his children

*“What are you looking forward to about work?”*

“The income, go to work, keeping myself occupied and coming back home and knowing there’s money in case we need anything, that’s it, that’ll do for me. Better than robbing all the time, like ‘where’s the next money coming from, what am I going to do now?’ I just want to do me work, come home and chill out with my family...be a dad like I should’ve years ago”.

*“Is that important to you?”*

“I missed the both of them the first days at school, the first time they rode their bike, everything. They grew up too fast and I’ve missed out on it, the best years of them shooting up...”

*“Are the responsibilities you have with your family important in terms of your views on work?”*

“Of course because it shows my kids that you do have to work, absolutely”.

The four probationers who had entered work after a series of custodial sentences closely resemble Burnett’s ‘converts’ (2004:166). According to Burnett, this group, “had found new interests which were all pre-occupying and overturned their value system: a partner, a child, a good job, a new vocation. These were attainments which they were not prepared to jeopardise” (ibid). An investigation of probationers in England found that 44 per cent of probation officers identified family formation as the ‘biggest single’ life change for ex-offenders (Farrall, 2002:146). It is important to note that all four of the probationers with poor employment histories cited partners and/or children as they key factor in their decision to seek employment and desist from crime. John, a 29 year-old male who had previously served five custodial sentences, represented an interesting example of this. Between committing the offence and subsequently being charged and imprisoned, he and his partner had a child and this forced a re-evaluation of his lifestyle. Having previously ‘breezed’ through prison, this time around he found it a much more difficult experience;

“I’d been there [prison] before, but when I was there before I was just young and wasn’t arsed to tell you the truth, but when I went this time I knew me daughter was on the outside and that’s what changed really. I just did what I had to do”.

John stated that although his decision to seek a more ‘legitimate’ lifestyle was something he wanted to do for himself, it was also for his partner and child. He stated that these responsibilities were now extremely important to him; “it is now, it wasn’t at the time years and years ago, I wasn’t bothered about anyone to tell you the truth but now them two come first”. For John, and the other probationers with poor work histories, social ties to partners and children rendered criminal activities unacceptable. As Vaughan argues, “to establish desistance, agents must regard their new identity- the commitment that they have chosen- as incompatible with ongoing criminality...These [new commitments] encourage the agent to look at criminality, not simply in instrumental terms, but also as morally incompatible with whom they wish to be” (Vaughan, 2007:394). Not only that, but such social relationships also inject employment with a value which it may have previously lacked (Maruna, 2001). It was clear that employment enabled John to cast himself as the responsible, male ‘provider’. He enjoyed the ability to provide financially for his family; “if I go out for a day out with the family I know I’m spending it out of my own and not someone else’s and its just good to see the smile on their faces”. The roles that both John and Steven sought were both heavily gendered; the ‘male’ provider and role model (see Farrall and Gadd, 2004). For Debbie, the female with a poor recent employment history it was her role as a mother which played an integral part in her decision to seek work. She saw paid employment as offering her a chance to build a stable lifestyle and to secure her own accommodation, which would provide her with an

opportunity to regain custody of her children. The rebuilding of family relationships, especially with children, has been viewed as the key concern of many female prisoners following their release (McIvor et al, 2004; Richie, 2001; Rungay, 2004). The Corston Report stated that, just 5 per cent of women prisoners' children remain in the home following the mother's imprisonment. Up to 25% are cared for by grandmothers, 29% by other family or friends, while 12% are placed into care, are adopted, or live in foster care (Home Office, 2007:20). It has been argued then, that employment was seen as integral both to *recovering* a legitimate identity which imprisonment had disrupted or in *constituting* a new identity for those with poor work histories. However, while for the former paid work possessed an inherent worth, for this latter group of 'converts' it was social relationships as partners and parents which offered a framework for self-identity in which employment was necessary.

### **The performative function of social ties**

In considering the narratives of desisting women offenders, Rungay observes that it is not only necessary to imagine an alternative lifestyle. There must also be the means through which it can be performed; "Specific personal identities carry with them socially recognised behavioural routines, or 'scripts' for their enactment which not only portray the individual who has a credible claim on that identity, but are accepted by onlookers as the hallmarks of its possession" (2004:409). All twelve of the interviewees can be seen to have made efforts to raise their employability and to place themselves in a position where they were more equipped to take on these new or recovered 'routines'. All of the probationers had used their time in custody constructively, completing a range of courses and work experience. It is also important to note that any issues around drug or alcohol misuse, a key barrier to obtaining employment (Niven and Stewart, 2005), had generally been addressed by the individuals in question. Just two of the interviewees reported ongoing problems with alcohol and drugs, for which both had entered treatment programs. As already observed, accommodation is the key foundation upon which a more stable lifestyle has been cultivated. Those with accommodation are much more likely to secure employment on release from prison. Here, social ties were extremely important. 11 of the 12 interviewees had returned to live with family or partners, while Debbie lived in a hostel under a curfew as part of her licence conditions. The reliance on social bonds for accommodation has been recognised elsewhere. A US study found that 80 per cent of male prisoners in Cleveland lived with relatives following their release (Visher and Courtney, 2006:7). While not all of the probationers saw such housing arrangements as permanent, they recognised the importance that this held in relation to their ability to enter employment and build a more stable lifestyle. All of the interviewees had maintained contact with their families while in prison and relied on both their emotional and financial support. This financial support was particularly important immediately following the completion of their custodial sentence. The interviewees reported waiting times of up to four weeks between release and receipt of benefits, leaving them with just the prison discharge grant of under £50 to live on. Regular contact with family members is integral to successful resettlement. Research suggests that family visits correlate with more positive outcomes in terms of beating drug and alcohol addiction, entering employment, and obtaining housing. For example, 75 per cent of women prisoners

released in 2003 who received at least one visit from friends or family had accommodation arranged on release, compared to just 35 per cent of those who didn't receive visits (Niven and Stewart, 2005:5).

Not only were social ties important in terms of providing both a stabilising presence and resource for the interviewees in order that they might be in a position to seek employment, they also often represented the most effective means by which the probationers could find paid work. The possession of a criminal record and the issue of disclosure was a constant source of anxiety. They viewed it as a barrier to them entering or re-entering the labour market. Tony, a 28 year-old male who had served four prison terms, predominantly for acquisitive crime, and with no prior work experience illustrates this. He found employment through a relative however, it was clear that the wider labour market was seen as a place from which he would more than likely be excluded;

*“Does your record worry you about applying for jobs in the future?”*

“No. the only reason it'd put me off is if they asked for my criminal record and all that but if they didn't ask I'd probably go on the job. Once they see me record they're just going to beat me off aren't they”.

*“Why do you think that is?”*

“Because they just see a thief and that, which is obviously right. But like I say people change don't they”

Disclosure was also of concern to those with good employment histories who had served just one custodial sentence. Kevin who, as observed above, was keen to disassociate himself from 'everyday' criminals recognised that he was not exempt from the stigma of a criminal record. On release from prison he contacted an employer with whom he had applied previously. He was successful in his application however he was not asked and chose not to disclose his offence. Since commencing work he had been promoted and had confided in his manager who stated that it did not threaten his position within the company. He questioned whether he would've been given the chance to prove his value as an employee if he had disclosed his record from the outset;

“Its like you can't judge every book by its cover because people have had crap starts in life and they actually need that chance but its trying to find an employer that will give them that chance. Because I thought do I go to an employer and tell them straight away what I've done or do I take the chance and not tell them? It's a case of you don't tell them and they might find out or you do tell them and you don't get that chance”.

This view was endorsed by an employment worker based within probation who liaised with employers to encourage them to take on ex-offenders.

“[employers] have preconceived ideas about ex-offenders and I think that’s where a lot of work needs to be focused really, on working with employers and letting them meet people that’ve got criminal convictions. I mean I went to a company last week and I talked to them...and the first thing he said really was, ‘well I’ve got £10,000 worth of goods here, I’ve got £20,000 worth of goods there’, his impression was that anyone with a criminal conviction is likely to steal”.

With the negative perceptions the probationers had about approaching employers with their criminal records, it is not surprising that the majority of those interviewed sought employment through friends or family. It was these contacts who were most likely to allow the individuals to perform an integral part of their new or recovered roles in employment. And seven of the 12 probationers found work this way, including three of the four ‘converts’. It is interesting to note that all seven of these individuals found work with self-employed tradesman whom they knew or were related to. It was clear that re-entry into employment within the construction industry represented one of the most effective routes (Brown et al, 2006). The probationers often stated that it was important that social ties ‘knew’ them, and understood the circumstances surrounding their offending. There seemed to be a feeling that as a result of this knowledge friends and family were less likely to define these individuals via criminality, unlike unknown employers who they felt failed to see beyond the criminal record. For John, with no significant record of employment, this was extremely important. After completing a plastering course in custody, John began to work with his brother, a plasterer by trade. John stated that: “if I didn’t have me brother here I don’t know what would’ve happened when I got out”. He put this down to a lack of confidence and experience; “I’ve not been confident enough to like talk somewhere and sit down and say whatever. I found it easy ‘cos I didn’t have to say nothing to him [his brother] ‘cos he knew”. This is an important point as a survey indicated that a greater knowledge of the circumstances surrounding an offence would make employers more amenable to recruiting ex-offenders. When asked what the employer would do if an employee was convicted, 64 per cent suggested that the action they would take would depend upon the circumstances of the offence (Brown et al, 2006:18).

So it has been suggested that social ties provided a *performative* function for the majority of the probationers. They represented a means by which the more formalised and exclusionary processes of the labour market could be avoided. Social ties were also important for the ‘converts’ in the sense that they offered both recognition and validation of the new roles these individuals had carved out. They offered the probationers an opportunity to perform these new roles within a relatively familiar environment. Both probationers and officers identified anxiety about how workmates would respond to them and their backgrounds as well as interacting within the workplace more generally. One probation officer explained how this had impacted upon a client;

“It’s been a big barrier for one of my offenders in particular. He’s very concerned about disclosing his offences, what people will think of him. It comes back to his confidence, he’s not confident at writing down what his

convictions were and he's concerned if he does get taken on if people are going to find out his background or the circumstances around his offence".

As Rungay (2001) states, the adoption of new 'scripts' requires their execution. In this sense, social ties represented the 'gatekeepers' to an alternative and legitimate lifestyle. Not only did they grant the probationers the opportunity for a new self-identity, they often seemed to provide role models to show them how such a role could be fulfilled. Farrall has termed this, the "inheritance" of social capital (Farrall, 2004:166). However, the danger in this conception is that for those who had found employment in this way, the work occupied a peripheral space within the labour market. This work did not require a CV, disclosure of a criminal record, the successful completion of an application process, or prior interaction with new work colleagues. So while, finding work in this way demonstrated that the probationers interviewed possessed bonding social capital (i.e. social and family ties), it did not necessarily indicate the presence of 'bridging' or 'linking' capital, which would connect individuals to more mainstream opportunities (McNeill, 2006). An example of this relates to the fact that those probationers who had become employed via a social contact rarely saw the opportunity as a bridge into more formalised forms of employment. Instead, they saw it as a chance to develop a trade which would if necessary allow them to strike out alone in the future. However, without the existence of these social ties there were problems for those seeking self-employment. Nancy was a 28 year-old female who had an excellent record of employment prior to her imprisonment but her sentence excluded her from returning to the type of work she had previously engaged in. In custody, Nancy trained so that she could become a self-employed tradesperson. However, on release she had found that her criminal record meant that she was unable to obtain public liability insurance. She felt that her lack of contacts, allied to her age and her gender, excluded her from many of the apprenticeships and employment opportunities available in this field. With the help of an agency she was able to gain some contracted work, but this was temporary and didn't offer the prospects of long-term sustainable employment that Nancy sought. As she stated: "you've got to compete with 16 year-olds, you've got to compete against that you've got a criminal record and you've just come out of prison. It's practically impossible to get someone to hire you". It was clear that for those lacking social contacts, while committed to a role in which employment was integral, barriers often remained preventing these individuals from performing these roles.

### **The issue of provision**

Of the individuals such as Nancy who did not find work through social ties, their experiences were much more varied. As mentioned, Kevin found work almost immediately following his release. He did not, however, disclose his criminal record. David maintained contact with his previous employer and returned to work there just two days after his release. However, the other three individuals relied much more heavily on existing provisions to assist them into employment. Ironically, it appeared to be particularly difficult for those with higher skills and greater work experience to find employment of a comparable pay and status that they had previously enjoyed. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in the case of Paul. As mentioned, Paul was a highly-

skilled manual worker who had worked for a prestigious employer for over a decade. However, he had recently served a prison sentence for possession of a firearm. He found the months following his release to be an extremely difficult period as he struggled to find work. He attributed his return to drug misuse as a response to these difficulties. Paul had been referred to Progress2Work, however; “they were supposed to sort out loads of stuff for me and I don’t think they ever did...They just printed me off a couple of jobs just like what they do at the Jobcentre anyway, so they weren’t doing anything for me really”. Paul lacked any social contacts through which he might be able to find similar employment. His old manager had since left the company he previously worked for. Despite writing to this employer it appeared there was little prospect of him returning to work there. After approximately eight unsuccessful applications, all secured through his own efforts, he had taken employment with a business which had required no references and had not rejected him on the grounds of his criminal record, which he disclosed at the interview stage. With previous applications, “some places I did tell the truth, other people I’ve tried to lie to, do you know what I mean, because I’m a bit ashamed of what I’ve done...I got in trouble for being in possession of a firearm and the first person [employer] that I told, he laughed at me, it was at an interview”. He stated that he was now paid 50 per cent of his previous salary in work for which he was over-qualified.

Two of the other probationers, Debbie and Dan, relied heavily on the support of agencies to find employment. As observed above, Dan was a construction worker who had recently completed his first custodial sentence. Immediately after leaving prison he had been offered work with his former employer, but this would have involved working away in Ireland, which he was unable to do as he was on an electronic tag. He found this extremely frustrating, as someone who had always worked; “I don’t know what to do when I’m not in work”. Via his probation officer Dan was referred to an employment service co-located within a probation office. The agency secured him a placement with a local employer, with whom he has subsequently been recruited on a permanent basis. Dan found this support invaluable and felt that the help he was offered was a constant source of motivation. He stated that he felt he would’ve returned to jail if it wasn’t for the service, as he may have removed his tag in order to go and work. Debbie also relied heavily on existing services. During prison, she had worked for a retail outlet on Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). Following her release she continued to work for this employer despite the fact that this involved a round-trip of over three-and-a-half hours per day. She struggled with this exhausting routine and relapsed into alcohol misuse which led to her breaking a curfew and being recalled to prison. Following her release this time, Debbie was just as keen to return to work. PS Plus helped her to secure an interview at a local employer. She found this to be a particularly nerve-wracking experience as she stated that she had not attended a formal job interview for over 20 years. Although she had worked more recently than that, a lot of this work had been in pubs where employment could be obtained through more informal means. With the support of PS Plus she was taken on a work trial as a caterer which she successfully completed and was then taken on permanently. Through PS Plus she was also able to secure a Crisis Loan which allowed her to purchase clothes for work. It became clear from the interviews that for those probationers who lacked social ties, finding employment was much more difficult. Although Debbie and Dan were clearly

beneficiaries of existing services, the heavy reliance of seven of the 12 interviewees on social bonds perhaps serves to highlight some of the frailties in provision and the employability of ex-offenders as only three of the probationers found employment through existing services and agencies.

A number of the probation officers pointed to a scarcity of resources at their disposal to help ex-offenders into employment. The quantity and quality of services varied greatly across the different probation areas within Greater Manchester. One problem appeared to be a lack of information sharing, with knowledge being concentrated in the hands of specific individuals rather than as a collective organisation. A number of probation officers reported being unaware of where to direct probationers to in order for them to find employment. As one officer explained;

“The contact that we’ve had here through probation, the guy who works with basic skills, he’s got really good connections and only if you were referred onto him would he be able to help with knowing which people will take people on with criminal records and we don’t always have that information, so I can’t say to someone ‘right go and find this person or go onto this because this job has come up that says they take ex-offenders”.

The same probation officer reported that the main agency to which clients were referred, Jobcentre Plus, appeared to have a poor record of aiding individuals into employment. Another officer concurred stating that the Jobcentre seemed to represent a “last resort” for his clients. Rather, focused programmes offered such as Progress2Work yielded more positive outcomes. This view was endorsed by other probation officers. However, the restriction of the scheme to substance users posed problems as officers lacked knowledge of alternative programmes for those that didn’t meet the criteria. One of the probationers reported fabricating a drug misuse problem in order to access a Progress2Work scheme. A number of the officers and an employment worker pointed out that this was an issue in relation to women ex-offenders. Probation officers also stated that a shift in emphasis resulted in them having less time to dedicate to clients. While acknowledging the importance of employment in reducing re-offending, one probation officer stated that, “I tend to take the view that finding work is not part of my remit directly but I would have some points of advice to offer people”. Although this view was not endorsed by the other three probation officers there was a consensus that it was enforcement rather than rehabilitation that guided their roles. Further, it was suggested that time constraints, from heavy caseloads and an increasing focus on high-risk offenders, meant that it was simply not feasible for officers to grant sufficient attention to all of their clients. As one officer explained:

“Caseloads have gone up, and targets as well I think...it’s enforcement and breaches which is fair enough but you can’t sit down with them. If I sat for an hour every week with mine, God. It’s impossible. I think probations shifted from rehabilitation, which is a shame really”.

As mentioned, social ties were important for the majority of the probationers interviewed as they offered access into employment and a means of bypassing the formal processes involved in recruitment into the labour market. The reliance on social ties can be seen as highlighting the poor employability of many of the interviewees. In the first instance, it is interesting to note that none of the 12 individuals reported having a CV on leaving prison. Many also lacked any experience of the formal application process, revealed by the fact that four of the probationers had never attended a job interview. A particular problem, which was mentioned by the probation and employment workers, was a lack of vocational skills provision. Officers identified trades in particular as offering access to sustainable employment; “the people who’ve got trades are the ones who stay in work”. However, it was clear that there was a difficulty in accessing vocational courses within custody. Just three of the 12 probationers directly utilised skills that they had acquired in custody in their new employment. This is not to say that the more generic skills and experience gained are not important. However, previous publications have indicated that there is a need to align the training offered in prison with the needs of local labour markets (SEU, 2002; HM Government 2005; 2006). The employment worker made the point that this still did not appear to be occurring:

“There is a lot of stuff available in prisons but you’ll speak to the clients and some will take advantage of it and they’ll come out with absolutely everything but I don’t always know if the courses that they’re doing are looking at the kind of skills gap in the labour market and gearing the courses towards that”.

It was also recognised by all of the interviewees that even where courses were available inmates were often unable to access them if they were serving shorter sentences or subject to high rates of transfer between prisons. One probation officer stated that those on short-term sentences, “in my experience they just kind of get left to it until they’re due to come out because there’s not enough time to be interacting with them or getting stuff set up for them, they’re kind of left” (SEU, 2002; HM Govt, 2005). Four of the 12 interviewees reported being unable to either access or complete courses that they felt would’ve benefited them in their search for work. One such individual was ‘convert’ Tony. He had gone into work with a relative following his release. He felt disappointed that as a result of a number of prison transfers he had been unable to access courses in custody that would have made him better equipped for this role within the construction trade;

“I tried to do every course, everything, but the time I had left I wouldn’t have time to go on it [bricklaying course]. I was going to go on a course for joinery but they shipped me out again, they messed me about really. If I’d just been in one place I probably would’ve got something but three places in six months, I didn’t really get much”.

It is clear that the importance of social ties for ex-offenders seeking employment is a means by which individuals can redress the balance of the labour market in their favour. Obstructed by a lack of formal qualifications and experience, probationers often tap those

resources most readily available. Unfortunately, it appears that this reliance on social bonds is not always simply a preference but may often be a necessity.

## **Conclusion**

It has been argued that social ties represent an integral resource for ex-offenders seeking employment upon release. Social relationships played a *constitutive* role for many of the probationers interviewed as ties to children and partners in particular encouraged the construction of a 'responsible' and 'legitimate' identity in which employment played a key role. This was especially important for those 'converts' with long records of criminal behaviour and relatively little experience of employment. The desire to be a 'good' parent and partner meant that employment carried with it an increasing value, while criminality became incompatible with this new self-identity. Social ties were also important in a *performative* sense. At the most basic level, they offered accommodation and financial and emotional support, which represents a necessary precursor to stable employment. Furthermore, faced with the exclusionary processes of the labour market, social bonds represented a means through which employment could be entered into without the disclosure of criminal offences, the potentially negative reaction of colleagues, the possession of formal qualifications, and a formal application process. Indeed, seven of the 12 probationers found work in this way. Those others, who were unable to draw upon such relationships, relied on the existing services that were available to aid ex-offenders. This is problematic in the sense that both provision and knowledge of availability varies between probation offices. And with particular regard to those without drug problems, officers were often unsure of where to send such clients for assistance. Probation officers also felt that both time constraints and a shift away from rehabilitation to enforcement had reduced the time available to them to spend with probationers and their employment issues. Finally, the use of social ties seems to highlight the extent to which those leaving prison lack both the relevant vocational training and experience of the application process to compete effectively within a labour market that is already set heavily against them.

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