

Fact Sheet 19

Helping people in prison and ex-offenders

There are currently more than **88,000** men and women in **122** prisons throughout England and Wales. According to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), this figure is almost 80% higher than it was just 30 years ago.

Statistically, people in prison don't always match the stereotype. For example, only **5%** of **prisoners** are **women** and **7%** of **prisoners** are **aged over 60**.

However, whilst most prison statistics are quite surprising, one that is truly shocking is that whilst more than **58,000** people are **released from prison every year**, almost **30% have reoffended and are back inside within 12 months!** Many others are recalled because they breach their release licences.

There may be many varied reasons, but it is poverty in all its guises – family background, bad housing, poor education, lack of opportunity, unemployment, addiction, substance abuse or feelings of worthlessness will have contributed to a greater or lesser extent.

Among people in prisons themselves, 30% of the inmates have recognised learning disabilities, up to 90% are estimated to have some form of mental health issues and many will have suffered traumas during their lives, such as being abused as children.

Today, because of austerity cutbacks, infrastructure failures and staffing shortfalls, some prisoners are locked up for 23 hours a day.

Time out of cells is significantly reduced on weekends, with 37% of men and women having less than two hours out.

Most prisoners in the UK have access to a small, in-cell television, usually provided as a privilege for standard-level inmates; not a right. TVs are generally funded by the prisoner through weekly deductions from their earnings, and access is removed if they regress to 'Basic' behaviour status.

Thus, some have no TV and have nothing to read (or can't read because they're illiterate or simply don't have reading glasses). Many are so anxious, depressed or fearful (often of other inmates) that they self-isolate, self-harm or become acutely aggressive. Others have such dark thoughts that they attempt suicide. [Self-inflicted deaths in prison fluctuate but are now about 100 annually.]

What can we do?

In 2021, the SVP launched the SVP Working with Prisons Group as a 'special work' of the Society. The group encourages Members to work focusing on the needs of prisoners and prisons, ex-offenders and their families.

Our primary source of help for inmates is Prison Chaplains. Most prisons have full or part-time Chaplains. Some are ordained clergy and some are lay members of the Church and work in a multi faith department. They can identify people in prison who are vulnerable or who need some kind of support and/or assistance.

How do we Turn our Concern into Action?

Even small acts of kindness can make a big difference. There are many ways that Members can provide support.

- **Join the SVP Working with Prisons group**

We are building a network of support for prisons, ex-offenders and their families. We need more volunteers to be able to support more prisons and help ex-offenders and their families.

- **Open links with Prison Chaplains**

Chaplains will know the men and women in prison and be aware of their needs and requirements. Chaplains are great points of first contact.

- **Donations and fundraising**

Austerity measures have led to cutbacks on both prison funding and on support services outside. Funding also remains a constant challenge for specialist support organisations. SVP Members can provide vital support with donations and fundraising.

- **Clothing**

Without family or friends, prisoners are released in the clothes they were wearing when they first came in! In many cases, they could be imprisoned during the summer and released in the winter. So, on release, they would have no winter coat or warm clothing.

Clothing can be donated through the Chaplaincy. [Each prison has its own rules and therefore you must check with the Chaplains about what you can donate.]

- **Reading Glasses**

Cheap reading glasses can transform someone's life, providing a wonderful opportunity for him or her to read, write or draw.

- **Activity resources**

Boredom is a major issue for many people in prison. Puzzles, wordsearches, crosswords and even colouring books will help to pass the long hours.

- **Help Families visit loved ones in prison**

See if you can help with transport for family members to visit their loved ones in prison, or with the cost of travel to and from prison.

- **Register to become an Official Prison Visitor (OPV)**

Many prisoners are never visited by family or friends. Your visit will help ease their isolation and keep them connected to the outside world.

- **Contact specialist support organisations (Fact Sheet 21)**

They do what they do well. Develop links with them and work together. For support that you are unable to provide, contact them for help.

SVP Working with Prisons - Top tips

- Contact your local Prison Chaplain and offer to help. In most cases, Chaplains are delighted to receive offers of support and assistance and will be able to provide the required information and links.
- Offer help through the many specialist organisations who know prison work well.

- The lives of people in prison and ex-offenders can be improved by simple acts of kindness that don't have to cost much.
- People in prison often feel excluded, marginalised or ostracised. If you can, spend time with them and listen to them - their hopes, dreams, worries and fears.
- Always remember that SVP Safeguarding requires that we protect ourselves and protect those people in prison and ex-offenders.

For more information about the SVP: Call 0207 703 3030 Email prisonwork@svp.org.uk
Visit svp.org.uk

Find out more

For more information about 'SVP Working with Prisons' look at our Factsheets:

- Factsheet 19: Helping people in prison and ex-offenders
- Factsheet 20: Helping the families of people in prison
- Factsheet 21: Specialist support organisations working with people in prison, ex-offenders and families