



Helping people in prison and ex-offenders

There are currently more than 83,000 men and women locked up in the 117 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 those are women and 6% are actually aged over 60.

However, whilst most prison statistics are quite surprising, one that is truly shocking is that whilst more than 70,000 people are released from prison every year, almost 50% are back inside within 12 months!

The reasons for this will be many and varied but poverty in all its guises – family background, bad housing, poor education, lack of opportunity, worklessness, addiction, substance abuse or feelings of worthlessness – will have contributed to a greater or lesser extent. Among people in prison themselves, 30% have recognised learning disabilities, up to 90% are estimated to have some form of mental health issue and many will have suffered traumas during their lives, such as being abused as children.

Today, in the UK, because of Covid-19 restrictions, austerity cutbacks, infrastructure failures and staffing shortfalls, some people in prison are locked up for 23 hours a day. Some have no TV and have nothing to read (or can't read because they're illiterate or simply don't have reading glasses) and 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; last year 80 people in prison did actually kill themselves.



So, what can we do?

The primary source of help for inmates is Prison Chaplains. Most HMP's or Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs) will have full or part-time Chaplains and it is these men and women who are in the best position to identify people in prison who are vulnerable or who are in need of some kind of support and / or assistance.

Recently, the SVP has set up: **SVP Working with Prisons**. This is a new area of special work, aimed at focusing on the needs of men and women in prison, ex-offenders and their families. Under the leadership of SVP Board Member and Trustee, Ian Kempzell, the group is making contact with Central and District Councils and also with individual Conferences throughout the country, to encourage them to make contact with prison Chaplains and also with the many support organisations already working in prisons, and to find out what they need.

How do we Turn our Concern into Action?

SVP Fact Sheet 21 lists many of the specialist support organisations that are currently working with prisons, and provides contact details. These specialist support organisations have a clear understanding of exactly what people in prison, ex-offenders and the families of people in prison really need and they can often advise SVP Members on the best way to help.

What kinds of support are we talking about?

Even small acts of kindness can make a big difference, so there are many ways that SVP Members can help to provide support.

- **Open links with Prison Chaplains**
Chaplains will know the men and women in prison and will have an acute appreciation of their needs and requirements. Chaplains are great points of first contact.
- **Contact specialist support organisations**
They do what they do well, so make contact with them and try and complement their work with our unique SVP offering – spending time with people is our greatest gift!
- **Listening and Befriending**
Sitting alongside those who feel lonely or isolated, listening to them – their hopes, dreams, worries and fears – and letting them know that we care and are there for them.
- **Donations and fundraising**
Austerity measures have led to cutbacks on both prison funding and on support services outside. Funding remains a consistent challenge for specialist support organisations so there is significant opportunity for SVP Members to make an impact with donations and fundraising.
- **Items of Clothing**
Collect items of clothing and donate these to people in prison through the Chaplains. Please remember that, without family or friends, they are released in the clothes they were wearing when they first came in!

- **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 to 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.

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 priceless information and links.**
- **Offer help through the many specialist organisations who know prison work well.**
- **The lives of people in prison 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.**

For more information about the SVP:

Call 0207 703 3030

Email info@svp.org.uk

Visit svp.org.uk

John O'Sullivan | August 2022

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**

Together with our various Newsletters and Videos. Or email one of the lead contacts or advisors:

SVP Prisons Lead: Ian Kempself

✉ ian.kempself@gmail.com

Secretary: Kevin McKenna

✉ kevin.mckenna70@ntlworld.com

Prison Visiting: Tony Blackburne

✉ tonyblackburne@virginmedia.com

Spiritual Advisor: Fr Paul Shaw

✉ werburgh465@btinternet.com

Working 
with Prisons
Supporting men and women in prison, ex-offenders and families