

Support for ex-offenders inquiry – Results and analysis of our survey

Work and Pensions Committee

Background

Unlock was approached by the Public Information and Resources Group and asked for input from people with convictions into the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry into the support for ex-offenders.

Alongside Unlock's own consultation response, a set of questions were agreed and links to this survey were promoted on Unlock's self-help [information hub](#), [theForum](#), our online magazine ([theRecord](#)) and the main [Unlock website](#), as well as on social media.

The results

In total, 82 people responded to the survey with the following results:

Question 1 – When you left prison, what support did you receive to find paid work?

- Excellent support 1%
- Very little support 21%
- No support 78%

The majority of responders felt that there was a lack of support for people serving short sentences despite it possibly being easier for them to reintegrate than those who had served long sentences. Another issue appeared to be the lack of knowledge that job centre staff have around the difficulties that arise when trying to secure employment with a conviction.

'The job centre was a waste of time although I don't think I got any different treatment to non-offenders. The people there were very pleasant and supportive but they just had nothing for me.'

'Advisors treat those with convictions the same as those without. Jobseeker Agreements still expect you to apply for x number of jobs (even though once you've disclosed) you know you have zero chance of securing that job. You still get sanctioned and lose your benefits'.

'The DWP staff seemed to disregard any barriers you may have due to time spent in prison. I feel they fail to understand often the barriers are mental such as just having to adjust to the volume of people around you'

Question 2 – What access to benefits did you have when you left prison and how long did it take to receive them?

- Access to JSA or housing benefit 65%
- No access to benefits 30%
- Did not apply for benefits 5%

Of those that were able to access benefits:

- 30% were provided with support whilst they were in prison
- 70% were provided with no support whilst in prison

Of those who received support whilst in prison, several responders mentioned problems with paperwork being lost between the prison and JCP or other administrative problems which resulted in claims having to be restarted.

'I was entitled to JSA. This was organised well before my release so as to take effect immediately upon my departure from prison. Unfortunately, my paperwork had been lost somewhere between the prison and JCP meaning I had to fill it all in again but – more importantly – I wasn't in receipt of benefits for approximately 3 weeks. Obviously this was probably human error, which is easily forgivable but it did have fairly significant monetary consequences for me'.

'I made a claim whilst in prison. When I attended the appointment made for me at the job centre, they knew nothing about my claim. I had to apply for an advance which was extremely stressful'.

'I filled out my application for benefits 5 weeks before release but there was no knowledge of my application at the job centre meaning that I lost out on £450 of benefits'.

Of those who stated they could not access benefits, this was often as a result of not meeting the necessary criteria to claim, or not being aware that they could claim.

'I had no help. I wasn't asked if I had anywhere to go on leaving prison. I didn't know that I could receive benefits. It was only 6 months later I found out I could'.

'I am a 67-year-old female and it took me 12 weeks to receive my state pension again'.

Of those that gave details of how long it took to receive their first benefit payment, the average time was 4 weeks, although there were examples of the timescales being much shorter and also much longer.

'I went straight onto JSA on leaving prison, this was actually very easy to deal with. I received my first payment within 2 weeks'.

'I received no support accessing my benefits in prison. It took 7 weeks to sort out once I'd left.'

Question 3 – Did you join any education or work programmes whilst in prison and were they helpful I finding a job later on?

- 61% joined education or work programmes
- 37% did not join any education or work programmes
- 2% did not respond to the question

Of the 61% that joined an education or work programme:

- 12% had found work
- 8% had found the courses useful but had not found work
- 68% had found them to be no help
- 12% were unsure how helpful they would be

Comments included:

'I did every course available to assist me with finding work when I left prison. I was lucky enough to be able to do an NVQ in Advice and Guidance and that, combined with a voluntary job, led me into paid employment.'

'I completed a number of courses whilst in prison and I think the education department and tutors were without question the best part of that pretty dreadful experience. I did a short course called 'CV and disclosure' which was unbelievably useful; it meant that I had a new CV ready to go on my release and was absolutely secure in my knowledge of when and how to disclose.'

'I attended all the courses I could – ECDL, CITB Brickwork. Unfortunately on leaving prison I've been rejected from all 570 job applications I've made due to having a criminal record.'

'I was able to study for the European Computer Driving Licence Level 2 and a CISCO course to undertake computer repairs. As I'm subject to a SOPO which states I must allow a police officer to look at any internet enabled devices, the courses I took have been no use to me whatsoever.'

Question 4 – If you did receive any support how do you think this could have been improved

The majority of respondents appreciated that support systems were poorly resourced and under staffed and were often provided by charitable organisations. Many of the comments revolved around the fact that despite having attended training courses, a change in employer's attitudes is needed to ensure that people with convictions are assisted in getting back into work.

'Something urgently needs to be done to de-stigmatise all people with criminal records, to give them realistic and meaningful opportunities to contribute to society again.'

'It's been said many times that support needs to be aimed at getting people into work. I spent nearly five years working in prison print shops and got qualifications, but I'm not qualified to work in one outside.'

'The whole being released is a stressful and scary experience, you are on a roller coaster of mixed emotions. So having relevant staff trained in this so they can be more understanding would help. I am lucky that I worked for the DWP for 7 years prior to my custodial sentence and I have a vast amount of experience from signing to taking fresh claims. If it hadn't been for this knowledge, I feel I would have suffered financial and definitely emotionally.'

Our analysis

The responses to the survey suggest that despite the Government's 'Fresh Start' initiative (which aims to get JSA claims started 5 weeks prior to release from prison), in practice this often doesn't happen. Even when the system is implemented within a prison, the process often isn't streamlined, with the result that claims go missing or jobcentre staff don't know what to do with the paperwork when they receive it.

For anybody over the age of 25, the rate at which JSA is paid is £73.10 per week. Individuals leave prison with a discharge grant of £46.75 which in theory was the equivalent of one weeks JSA when it was originally set. However, the discharge grant has not increased for the past 20 years and is not adequate when delays in receiving benefit payments are taken into account. Using the average time delay reported in this survey of 4 weeks, this is the equivalent of £292.40 in JSA payments, resulting in a deficit of £245.65.

Respondents felt that jobcentre staff were not adequately trained in dealing with people with convictions and were often too quick to impose sanctions when they believed that Jobseeker Agreements were being breached (for example when individuals refused to apply for jobs which they felt they should not apply for). In Unlock's experience, many jobcentre staff are aware of their lack of knowledge and would like to do more to help. However, without funding in place to provide additional training to jobcentre staff, this situation is likely to continue.

Although there appeared to be a good take-up of education/training programmes in prison, many stated that they signed up to 'pass the time'. One respondent stated that an NVQ course he did was full of participants who all had degrees who simply 'wanted something to do'. However, none of the participant's found it challenging or learnt anything new. Others mentioned how many courses offered were 'dumbed down' to accommodate classes of mixed ability. Of those that did not join education/training programmes this was generally because the individual did not qualify as they were serving only short sentences. As the examples above demonstrate, 68% of those who had undertaken education/training did not believe that they had been helpful in securing them paid work. This was often because the education/training had not been relevant to what they wanted to do or, nor was it recognised by employers.

One of the biggest challenges highlight was the need to change employer attitudes. More money can be invested in setting up relevant and practical courses with the aim to getting people into a profession or career upon release. However, if employers are not prepared to give people a second chance, then any investment will be wasted.

What we do

We help

- We support people with convictions by providing information, advice and support through our [websites](#) and [helpline](#)
- We help practitioners who support people with convictions by [providing criminal record disclosure training](#) and useful resources
- We [recruit and train people with convictions as volunteers](#) to help support the information and advice we provide
- We [support employers](#) in the fair treatment of people with criminal records

We listen and learn

- Our [helpline](#) and [forum](#) provide an ear to ground on the problems that people face as a result of their criminal record
- We [collect evidence and undertake research](#) into the barriers caused by criminal convictions

We take action

- We [challenge bad practice by employers and push for improvements to the way that criminal record checks operate](#)
- We advocate for a fairer and more inclusive society by [working at a policy level](#) with Government, employers and others

More information

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