

How have people with criminal records been affected by Covid-19 and social distancing measures?

Covid-19 and the social distancing measures introduced to help control it have created widespread challenges. For people with criminal records, some of these challenges can be particularly difficult to overcome.

Since the UK went into lock-down in mid-March, we've been contacted by people with criminal records – those in the community, people in prison and people who are subject to licence or community orders – concerned about what Covid-19 means for them. Unlock has published [information and advice](#) on Covid-19 and how it impacts on those with a criminal record.

Emerging issues

We are looking carefully at how Covid-19 and the social distancing rules might affect people with criminal records in the future. Based on the issues raised through our helpline and our survey (see below) we have identified the following areas of concern (and explored in more detail on [our website](#)).

- Court delays meaning children are left with adult criminal records
- Supervision arrangements
- Finding a new job when unemployment is higher
- Disclosure rules and DBS checks
- Applying for university
- Housing

Survey

From May to June 2020, Unlock ran an online survey asking people with criminal records about their experiences of Covid-19 and social distancing rules. Respondents expressed concerns about isolation, loss of employment now and/or in the future and their financial security. At a time when the nation was pulling together to help each other, some respondents felt helpless – unable to volunteer because of the fear of rejection after disclosing their record. Below are a selection of quotes from respondents.

- *Although some new jobs have been created in the retail sector they all require online applications and most seem to want some sort of DBS check which effectively prevents me from applying.*
- *I feel lonely and anxious and need to be especially mindful of the risk that my isolation might result in a relapse into the addictive behaviour which led to my arrest and conviction.*
- *As odd as it may sound, at least in prison you are part of a 'community', with work and other voluntary roles you can feel a sense of purpose and part of society.*
- *Feeling very isolated, worrying about paying my bills and having an uncertain future.*
- *My concern is being made redundant as it was very hard to find a job in the first place. It will be even harder with mass unemployment and having a criminal record.*

The survey was completed by 67 respondents:

- 62% had one or more unspent convictions
- 25% had spent convictions
- 6% had one or more cautions

The remainder had a mixture of spent and unspent convictions, or spent or unspent convictions and cautions.

- 16% were on licence from prison
- 22% were serving a community or suspended sentence
- 62% were not under supervision

The findings are summarised below.

1. Problems immediately after leaving prison

We asked about problems faced by people leaving prison since 16th March.

Over half of respondents who had left prison since 16th March had difficulties with finances, such as opening a bank account or claiming benefits. They reported a variety of other problems including finding somewhere to live, physical or mental health problems that they needed help with, and anxiety or depression that they had not experienced before. Difficulties using a mobile phone or smartphone, and transport from the prison were also reported.

2. Supervision arrangements

We asked those who were under NPS/CRC supervision to tell us about changes to their reporting arrangements.

Of those who previously had face-to-face supervision, 47% said this was now carried out by telephone. 23% said supervision now took place at the doorstep or through a window. Some were supervised by a mixture of the two. 1 person remained on face-to face supervision although it was now carried out through a window. One person who had recently been released from prison had been on doorstep/telephone supervision from the outset.

24% of people reported that they were in more frequent contact with their supervisor than when they had met face-to-face. 18% reported that frequency remained the same. Only one person reported that supervision took place less frequently.

3. People required to sign the sex offenders' register (SOR)

67% of respondents were required to sign the SOR. This is much higher than the proportion in the population of people with convictions and may skew the findings.¹

People on the SOR reported several problems related to changing supervision arrangements. These included lack of clarity about what would happen with visits, police/PPU coming to their address in full PPE, making

¹ As of March 2018, 60,000 people were required to sign the SOR – 0.6% of the total number of people with criminal records.
<https://hub.unlock.org.uk/applying-to-come-off-the-sex-offenders-register/>

them highly visible to neighbours, anxiety about the possibility of additional restrictions being imposed, and feelings of isolation due to lack of contact with supervisors.

Other problems included being unable to use the internet due to restrictions on owning devices, feeling more visible due to not being on local social media groups or being unable to volunteer, abuse from neighbours exacerbated due to everyone being at home more often, feeling isolated and anxious.

4. Work before Covid²

Before 16th March 2020, 43% of respondents were in employment: 33% full-time, 6% part-time and 4% on zero hours contracts. 24% were self-employed. 3% were retired, 3% were in education or training. 25% were unemployed.

People on the SOR more frequently reported being self-employed. Unemployment was significantly more common among people on the SOR. The number of people in employment (full or part-time or on a zero hours' contract) was about the same for those on the SOR and others.

5. Work after lockdown³

Respondents were asked about changes to their employment status as a result of lockdown and social distancing.

- For 9% their employment status remained the same.
- 7% were furloughed
- 14% reported that their business had lost customers – two people said their business had folded completely
- 14% reported that their business was busier and/or they were working more hours.
- 28% reported that they were not working previously and not working now

One person had been made redundant. One person was officially working from home but unable to fulfil their duties due to SOR-related restrictions on IT systems.

6. Housing

We asked respondents whether social distancing rules had affected their housing situation.

- 70% of respondents were in housing they rented or owned.
- 16% lived with friends or family.

Others lived in supported housing, in accommodation provided by a family member or friend, either temporarily or permanently. None reported living in approved premises.

Three respondents reported that they were planning to move but, due to lockdown, were unable to. One was not planning to move but now had to.

² Respondents could select multiple answers, total may not add up to 100%

³ Respondents could select multiple answers, total may not add up to 100%

Financial security was a concern – two reported difficulties paying their rent or mortgage, but had made arrangements to resolve. There did not appear to be any problems specific to a criminal record.

7. Other problems caused by Covid-19

We asked respondents to tell us, in their own words, about any other problems they were facing. Responses are grouped into themes.

Isolation and/or loneliness

Several people reported that they had been in self-isolation for a number of years already. Others were experiencing isolation for the first time – not being able to see friends or family, or even probation supervisors, as before. Being, or feeling, unable to join in local support groups or social media created feelings of isolation but also of standing out. For some, isolation prevented activities that were done to prevent 'relapse into offending'.

Helplessness

Several people reported that they felt they could do so much more for people in their community but were unable, or felt unable, to volunteer because of criminal record disclosure requirements. This was not unique to people on the SOR (who would likely find it impossible to volunteer) but others with cautions and spent convictions.

Financial problems

Losing work or business was an issue, but others who were dependent on friends or family for financial support were also finding it difficult as this was no longer possible.

Health

Several respondents reported concerns about their own or loved ones' health, including a partner with underlying conditions in prison and one person reported having had Covid-19.

Other

Several respondents expressed feeling fortunate to have what they did and that they felt others were suffering more.

8. What might the future hold?

We asked respondents to tell us, in their own words, about the anticipated long-term impact of Covid-19 and social distancing, in general and on them personally. Responses are grouped into themes and we include quotes from respondents.

Employment

View of the future were dominated by fears about job security or finding a new job, or the loss of their existing business. This wasn't exclusive to people with unspent convictions or on the SOR – spent convictions and cautions were still a worry. Concerns about the impact of a recession on people with 'something to declare' were common – fewer jobs, more discrimination and worries that people would be less compassionate/forgiving. Others thought it may lead to reoffending as people faced more difficulty finding work and that all of this could have a negative impact on mental health.

Disclosure/DBS

Some responses pointed to the disclosure regime as having a role to play in preventing the negative impact on employment. The length of time a conviction remains unspent, as well as the ongoing disclosure of old and minor cautions and convictions created a sense of dread. The availability of DBS checks for any job underlined this.

Technology

Some were positive about the change to remote supervision and support in particular, as well as the use of video technology in prisons. Conversely there were worries that contact tracing technology might be applied to people on the SOR. The specific needs of people on the SOR in relation to home working was mentioned – high security standards meant this was not possible for everyone.

About Unlock

Unlock is an independent, award-winning national charity that provides a voice and support for people with convictions who are facing stigma and obstacles because of their criminal record, often long after they have served their sentence. Our focus is predominantly on people in England and Wales.

Firstly, **we help people**. We provide information, advice and support to people with convictions to help them to overcome the stigma of their criminal record. This includes running an information site which has over 1 million visitors a year, and a confidential peer-run helpline that helps around 8,000 a year. This work is charitably funded; we do not deliver government-contracted services. We help practitioners support people with convictions by providing criminal record disclosure training. We support employers, universities and others to develop and implement fair and inclusive policies and procedures that enable the recruitment of people with convictions and that treat people with criminal records fairly.

Secondly, **we advocate for change**. Every year we hear from thousands of people who are unnecessarily held back in life because of their criminal record. We work at policy level to address systemic and structural issues. We listen to and consult with people with criminal records, undertake research and produce evidence-based reports to inform policy makers and the public. We challenge bad practice, influence attitudes and speak truth to power. We co-founded and support the Ban the Box campaign and we are pushing for reform of the criminal records disclosure regime. We have a track record of constructive engagement with government, the DBS and employers in working towards a fairer and more inclusive approach.

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