

Release – what happens next if you do nothing?

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Prisons across Europe are filled with foreign national prisoners.

Despite the important work that goes on in the prisons and probation services in Europe, surprisingly little thought is given as to what will happen to these people when they reach the end of their sentences and are released to go back to their home countries and the impact on their communities where they will return. Of course they have resettlement needs just like any other prisoner but these are complicated by language and distance.

For 34 years Prisoners Abroad has been working with British citizens detained not just in Europe but around the world.

We are currently working with over 1,700 prisoners a year in over 90 countries, who are often isolated by language and culture. Around a third of these cases are in Europe, a third in North America and a third in the rest of the world. Interestingly only half of them are detained for drugs offences. The remainder are a full cross section of offences and often relate to the fact that people are living overseas not just travelling for short periods. Additionally we work with 1,500 family members both in the UK and abroad.

You are probably wondering what a small British charity can do and why our intervention is so important both to the prisoners, their families, the government and the public at-large.

Prisoners tell us we are a lifeline for them and that our support and intervention improves their health and welfare. Approximately 500 people are released each year; we provide a resettlement service for around 200 people a year returned from a sentence overseas. These are generally the complex cases. Between 10% and 20% are dangerous offenders including sex offenders, the others may have lost all their connections in the UK and need help to resettle. We work with significant numbers of people who are deported back from the USA – this is unlikely to be unique for the UK and your countries are probably receiving them too. But these are people who have served long sentences and then deported to the country of their childhood where they have no family, accommodation or even identity and require considerable support to prevent them falling straight back into prison.

So for the government – we are ensuring that a critical gap in government provision for ex-prisoners is closed. In the UK – there is no legislative basis for the usual prison or probation authorities to work with people who have served their sentence overseas. The only exception is that sex offenders need to be put on the Sex Offenders Register when they return - this is more about knowing where they are than managing their needs. So we provide a vital service to government – doing what it cannot, even though it recognises that dangerous offenders become a greater risk to themselves and the public when unsupported.

For prisoners and their families we provide a range of services – we are non-judgmental and so our services are only based on need. They promote health and well-being and maintain contact between family members. We have time to listen to the problems and issues from both the prisoners and their families and so provide greater emotional support than the Foreign Office or other agencies are able to do. This may sound like a secondary concern compared to reoffending – but in reality it helps to prevent family break down and the costly fall-out that occurs afterwards and damage that affects future generations.

For the public at-large – we take our public protection role very seriously. We give people a second chance and provide the support for them to build a crime-free future. We promote their return to the UK as an opportunity for a fresh start.

What is very clear to us is that without our help and on-going support at such a traumatic time – people would be forced to commit crime in order to survive. They often have no social security number and so no way of getting benefits. They have no accommodation and very often not even a change of clothing. They need a bed for the night or they will sleep on the street. They are often in poor health and need a medical check-up for problems ranging from unset broken limbs, suspected TB to blood pressure problems amongst so many other things and of course money to buy food.

The help we provide at Prisoners Abroad with reintegration is vital if we expect them to re-join society in a positive way.

To achieve this we start when people are detained – information about our services is distributed to prisoners by the Foreign Office. We focus on providing humanitarian support to reduce isolation, information, advice and language materials and importantly we maintain communication between the family and prisoner.

Long before the end of the sentence we begin the preparation for release. This can be a crisis point in the sentence for someone who has spent many years in prison and faces release and return to the UK after years of institutionalisation. We advise them to bring back identification and medical records. We provide stories of people who have done it and survived and re-joined society successfully whilst acknowledging what an immensely difficult time it will be. We use newspapers to help familiarise them with local issues as well as the name of the current prime minister and the price of bread.

But our resettlement service is just a short-term sticking plaster! Our resources are limited and so we focus on what we can do to achieve the best outcome for people which ranges from 3 weeks to 6 months. But most critically we get them into the benefit system even though that may mean we support people for some weeks – paying for their accommodation, food and travel card. We then work closely with other charities and seek other sources of help and support for people in the longer term so that their progress continues.

We hope to start very soon, an economic and social impact study of our work which will provide further evidence to sit alongside the anecdotal testimony which attests to the importance and quality of our work.

What we do isn't rocket science, it's not luxury either, but it is very professional, humane and supportive and by working closely with government, it can be a highly cost-effective solution to working with this challenging group of people. The only other alternative is not to work with this group who have no choice but to return to survival mode and all that that implies which of course includes:

- A fast return to crime – generating more victims
- Family estrangement and an impact that will continue through future generations
- With no second-chance, no other career options, the prison system will remain full.

So despite being a small British charity:

- We fill a gap in the system and provide public protection
- We are non-judgmental and provide support when no other organisation can or will
- We have developed a exceptional knowledge base and understanding of the issues
- We make funding go further – 40% from government is enhanced and augmented by a further 60% from charitable donations. So very cost effective
- We give people a second chance
- and we save lives – so people tell us