

# What do the punished think of punishment?

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A new study from *The Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research* gives an insight into what offenders really think about their punishment.

The report - Users' views of punishment: Qualitative research on the experience of community and short prison sentences – led by Sarah Armstrong, University of Glasgow and Beth Weaver, Glasgow School of Social Work is published today (12 November) on the research centre's website: [www.sccjr.ac.uk](http://www.sccjr.ac.uk)

Sarah Armstrong, a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow said: “Scotland is currently engaged in one of the biggest penal reform projects in a generation, seeking to fundamentally change its approach to punishment, which is characterised by high use of imprisonment compared to other parts of Europe, and the use of very short prison sentences.

“Around three quarters of prison sentences handed down by the courts are for six months or less. But because short sentences are seen as minimally intrusive compared to long-term or life sentences, there has been, until now, little research on their effects.”

The study sought to fill this gap in knowledge by speaking with those serving short prison sentences or a community-based sentence (the main proposed alternative on the reform agenda). The researchers spoke with 35 men and women ranging in age from 19 to 55 about their experiences of punishment. The aim was to accurately describe the experience for offenders of doing a short sentence, in prison or the community.

Beth Weaver said: “Even people who felt negatively about community-based sentences said they would prefer them to a short term in prison. None of them felt prison was a more useful, helpful or meaningful form of punishment, except in some cases of serious drug and alcohol problems - this would suggest that more may need to be done to support people to access the kinds of support they need in the community to address their drug and alcohol dependencies, which could benefit them and society more widely.”

“By contrast, what made community sentences more meaningful and more constructive was that people understood they were about getting or giving help and the idea of paying back had less to do with taking away and more to do with making good.”

### **In summary, the key findings of the report are the following:**

- Short prison sentences in Scotland are a form of ‘doing life by instalments’. Most of the people interviewed counted the times they had been in prison not in terms of numbers but as frequencies, that is, by how many times per year they are in prison.
- It is the cumulative effect of doing many short sentences, more than the experience of any single sentence, which carries the largely negative impacts of short-term imprisonment. For many people short prison sentences have become a regular life activity, and the constant coming and going between community and prison interrupts the ability to deal with drug and alcohol issues, strengthen family relationships, and become employable.
- The extensive use of short sentences is a function mainly of drug and alcohol dependency. For nearly everyone interviewed, the offending

which led to their imprisonment was motivated by drug and alcohol use. Common offences were shoplifting (to pay for drugs) and minor assaults (while under the influence of drugs or alcohol). This finding suggests that prison and the criminalisation of addiction have become primary strategies of dealing with drug and alcohol problems, particularly for those in the most marginalised socio-economic groups.

- Prison has produced positive life changes for some but in a way that is almost impossible to predict. Some people reported that it was during their short prison sentence they had achieved the resolution to abstain from drugs. In one case this resolution came after only serving two brief sentences in prison, while for another it took nearly twenty years of serving short sentences to make this step towards recovery. The finding suggests prison is an expensive and unpredictable technique of getting people to change.

- Contrary to prior research, nearly everyone would prefer a community-based sentence to a prison sentence. Past research showed many people would choose a short period in prison over a longer period on probation. Armstrong and Weaver found the opposite: most people would prefer serving their time in the community, largely to preserve links to family and work. However, the preference was affected by the state of an addiction problem, suggesting reforms to community-based sentences need to develop effective means of addressing drug and alcohol dependency.

**More information:** The full report is available for download from: [www.sccjr.ac.uk](http://www.sccjr.ac.uk) and a follow up report which looks in more depth at how people experience community sentences will be published shortly.

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