

Study reveals potential value of prison pen pal scheme to rehabilitation of offenders

June 23 2015, by Lee Page

The prison pen pal scheme 'Prisoners' Penfriends' has an important role to play in helping to rehabilitate convicted offenders, new research from the University of Warwick has found.

The findings are revealed in a report from the Law School's Criminal Justice Centre, which is being presented at the House of Lords on Thursday (25 June).

Professor Jacqueline Hodgson and PhD student Juliet Horne focused their research on the work of the small charity Prisoners' Penfriends, which puts offenders in touch with trained [volunteers](#).

They found overwhelming support for the scheme but have raised concerns about the threat to its expansion due to funding constraints and advertising restrictions.

Using a combination of questionnaires and interviews, the researchers assessed the effectiveness of the arrangement for both those in prison and the volunteers who write to them.

Prisoners said the scheme made them feel less isolated, helped change their self-identity, provided a distraction, boosted their happiness and raised their hopes for life beyond prison.

Meanwhile volunteers spoke of how they get feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction writing to their penfriends – seeing the letters as a two-way

relationship, which broadens their outlook on life.

"The prisoner and volunteer accounts paint a rich picture of genuine relationships of care and trust between penfriends which demonstrate that even within the constraints necessary for the protection of volunteers, simple letter-writing relationships can lead to tangible benefits for both prisoners and volunteers," said Prof Hodgson.

"Prisoners told us about growing feelings of engagement with 'the outside world' and acceptance by 'normal people'. Regular and frequent letters provide a distraction from the routine of [prison life](#) as well as giving prisoners the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and express themselves. Letters from their penfriends made them happy."

Prisoners who participate in the scheme are typically male, serving long or indeterminate sentences and many have little or no contact with anyone else outside prison, the study found. Volunteers came from a wide variety of backgrounds and geographical areas and are typically well-educated females over the age of 50.

Prof Hodgson added: "As a result of being 'accepted' by their penfriend, prisoners experience friendship with someone outside their criminal contacts and come to see themselves as 'more than just a prisoner', they feel less stigmatised and 'like a normal human being'."

But the authors of the report are concerned Prisoners' Penfriends may face challenges as it seeks to expand due to funding shortfalls and suggest restrictions on advertising in prisons means the service is not being taken up by as many offenders as it could be.

They also suggest more research should be carried out to understand why few women prisoners access the scheme and the impact of letter writing on prisoners' literacy skills.

Prof Hodgson concluded: "In truth these challenges arise out of the success of the Prisoners' Penfriends project in providing a service that, as was made so clear in the responses to this research, is highly valued by prisoners."

The Criminal Justice Centre at the University of Warwick is set build on this research by hosting an event in November for social science researchers, activists, ex-[prisoners](#) and policymakers, which will examine the experience of punishment and how it affects prisoner wellbeing.

More information: "Imagining More than Just a Prisoner: The Work of Prisoners' Penfriends." (April 18, 2015). Warwick School of Law Research Paper No. 2015/12. Available at SSRN: ssrn.com/abstract=2607575 or dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2607575

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