

Sociologist calls for national improvements on criminal rehabilitation

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A sociologist who has spent the past seven years researching how people with criminal convictions, including prison sentences, have worked with an employment and training charity says important lessons can be

learned to improve criminal rehabilitation in the country.

Dr. Julie Parsons, Associate Professor in Sociology, in the School of Society and Culture at the University of Plymouth, has worked with more than 50 people with [criminal convictions](#) who've attended the LandWorks charity in Dartington, Devon, on long-term placements.

Called "trainees," people released on temporary license from the local prison and others referred through the Probation Service have the chance to take part in training and work experience in the charity's wood workshop and market garden. They also take part in projects such as communal food preparation and eating, learning traditional crafts, making photographic blogs, and documenting their efforts to reintegrate into the community.

Through the course of 120 interviews, Julie has recorded their experiences and says there are powerful lessons to be learned from listening to those who've been through the criminal justice system.

"The Ministry of Justice estimates that the social and economic cost of re-offending is £18.1bn per year," Julie says. "As a society, if we are really serious about rehabilitation and resettlement of people back into the community, we have to do more to support them and really listen to their stories and get an insight into the lived-experience of what it is to be criminalized. The way that LandWorks keeps us in touch with people—often years after they have attended the placement—is unheard of with statutory agencies."

Julie's work spans three research projects that run consecutively. The first focuses on commensality—the act of communal eating around a table—with the trainees preparing a lunch with a volunteer cook and sharing it with members of the community, with whom they can talk to about their experiences.

The PeN (Photographic Electronic Narrative) project involves the trainees co-creating a reflective blog with Julie and student volunteers from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business, that both charts their activities at LandWorks and their lived experience of punishment. Once published, members of the public can comment upon them, and leave messages of encouragement.

The third strand to the work is "Finishing time and moving on: Life after punishment." Here, the trainees are asked to document their experiences in the community and their attempts to reintegrate—whether that focuses on accommodation, work or relationships.

Julie says: "The projects are giving a voice to people who are criminalized, enabling and empowering them to tell their story in their own words. And these are voices that are rarely heard—and as a sociologist, I am really interested in the structural and systemic problems that these individuals face and the lived experience of the criminal justice system. These projects have provided real insight into the problems faced by those with multiple disadvantages and the trauma of criminalisation."

One such a person is "Quentin," who has been featured in a new video produced by LandWorks, and FotoNow CIC, which captures some of the voices of those involved. Summing up the extreme difficulties he faced, he says:

"The prison system is broken. When I got home, it didn't feel like my home. I'd been away for two-and-a-half years; it had been redecorated; my wife had her routine, and everything felt strange. You start applying for jobs, and every application asks if you have any unspent convictions. The resentment that comes your way...all of this is after prison—so prison, as hard as it was, was the better part. Coming home, that was tough"

"Jarvis," meanwhile was a career criminal, but thanks to his time on placement has been able to obtain a job in the NHS working on criminal justice and mental health.

"When you come from my background, you don't know how to show your feelings because you have to guard yourself," he says. "You can't let people in and that brings a lot of damage. I have been able to express myself here, whether it's talking or working. I used to be an armed robber and now I'm making hedgehogs from pine cones! I've got self-worth now; I'd never been proud of myself before."

"John" came to LandWorks six years ago during the final 12 months of his license and has worked for the charity ever since.

"One of the big things was people trusting me with tools," he says. "In prison, you are not trusted with anything—everything is checked in on shadow boards and it is all very degrading, if I'm honest. So, to come here and be trusted and left to my own devices to get on with something was a powerful sense of normality. LandWorks didn't judge me for what I'd done and they were trying to help me back into society so that I could live my life again. It made me a better version of myself. It made me realize I was not the bad person that prison made me feel that I was."

LandWorks has officially operated since 2013, based on the Dartington Hall Estate. Alongside the training and [work experience](#), the charity provides practical support such as help with finding suitable accommodation, sorting finances and finding employment.

Steve Bradford, Charity Manager at LandWorks, added: "The research projects have been invaluable in giving the trainees a voice and in helping us to understand their perspectives and the impact of the charity. On a human level, we want people to be the best they can be, and if we are holding them back because of the stigma of criminal labels then they

are not going to be contributing to society. We are convinced that comprehensive and sustained support like that provided at LandWorks can break the cycle of offending and reoffending—in everyone's interest."

Provided by University of Plymouth

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