

How to stop released prisoners reoffending: What the evidence says

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In the midst of a [prison overcrowding crisis](#), the UK government has decided to release some prisoners early.

This will certainly ease pressure on prisons and [prison staff](#) (who are drastically low in numbers). But a crucial question needs answering: what happens to the people who leave [prison](#) early?

The percentage of adults who [reoffend after leaving prison](#) in England and Wales is 37.4%. This increases to 56.1% for people serving short prison sentences.

People released early are still supervised by probation services upon release. Community sentences such as probation are [better at reducing reoffending](#) than short prison sentences.

But the probation service is already under intense pressure thanks to its own structural reorganization, [high-profile failures](#) and [recruitment and retention](#) crisis.

The new early release scheme will lead to an inevitable increase in the probation caseload over the coming months, which could cause real problems. High workloads have been shown to [reduce the quality of probation supervision](#), making it more difficult for staff to work effectively.

As the probation inspectorate has [highlighted](#), people are often released homeless, unemployed and lacking appropriate access to [support services](#) in the community. All of this increases the likelihood that people will reoffend.

An early release scheme introduced by the previous government earlier this year, which released people up to 70 days early, resulted in around [10,000](#) people being released with very little preparation or support. Many were recalled within a matter of days after violating their probation.

The probation service has responded to the increase in demand arising from past early release schemes through a "[probation reset](#)". Under this model, people will be supervised in the community up to the two thirds point of their allocated time (with some exemptions).

Beyond that point, those who work in probation are being asked to manage people reactively. This means they will only act on information they receive—rather than proactively supporting people and looking out for signs they are at risk of reoffending.

Analysis by [academics suggests](#) that this approach is not underpinned by evidence.

Government plans to extend existing efforts to [recruit and train](#) an additional 1,000 probation officers will ease some of these pressures. However, it will take several years for the effect to be felt on the ground. There are also [calls](#) for the probation service to be moved out of the civil service and organized more locally.

Preventing reoffending

Overcrowded prisons result in disorder, fewer opportunities for prisoners to engage in productive activities and prepare for release.

The government's emergency measure will reduce overcrowding, but it is a short-term solution. In effect, it opens the back door a little wider while doing nothing to stop people coming in through the front. The answer to a more sustainable prison population lies in preventing people from going back into the criminal justice system.

The causes of crime and reoffending—and therefore the solutions—are complex. We know that people who use alcohol and [illegal drugs](#) problematically are more like to engage in harmful, criminalized

behavior. Thus, [providing drug and alcohol treatment](#) has been shown to reduce the risk of reoffending.

People with high levels of compulsive behavior and low self-control are [more likely](#) to end up in the criminal justice system. Treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy can—in some circumstances, and with certain people—[reduce reoffending](#).

Unemployment, low educational attainment and homelessness can also push people into having to commit crime. Supporting people to overcome some of these more [social challenges can also help](#).

However, these individual approaches will not be effective if delivered in isolation. For example, people who use drugs and alcohol often do so because of past trauma. Any treatment needs to support people holistically, before we can expect them to recover.

Social barriers such as poverty and discrimination get in the way of people who are trying to move on, and no amount of cognitive behavioral therapy can overcome them. As such, [interventions](#) that respond to peoples' multiple needs have a much stronger evidence-base around what works to reduce reoffending.

Research has shown that people who can [exercise their agency](#) are more likely to move on from crime. One way of supporting people to do that is to provide opportunities to build [social capital](#) (connections and networks) as well as human capital (skills).

By securing a job or a stable relationship, people can believe they have a future, and start to be accepted and trusted by others. This can then lead to improvements in self esteem and their sense of identity. In this sense, targeting people who are motivated to change (and working to improve motivation) has also proven [effective](#). Removing some people from the

harmful prison environment earlier than planned may also have a positive effect on their risk of reoffending.

Crucially, all of this takes time and flexibility: leaving a life of crime behind often involves setbacks, and this needs to be factored into any responses to reoffending.

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