

Pen pal is powerful boost to prisoner wellbeing

9 November 2015, by Nicola Jones



Prisoners' lives can be significantly improved – and sometimes even saved – for the price of a stamp.

A prison pen pal scheme, currently operating in 52 prisons in England and Wales, is contributing to prisoner wellbeing, offering early warning of potential suicide and improving the chances of successful rehabilitation, says an in-depth study from the University of Warwick.

"We found that something as simple as a pen pal relationship can lead to tangible benefits for prisoners," says researcher Professor Jackie Hodgson. "Given the recent rise in prison violence and suicides, increased prison overcrowding and the current resource pressures on the prison system, letter-writing seems an extremely valuable way to provide greater support for prisoners, based on genuine relationships of care and trust, at remarkably little cost."

The potential of the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme and other initiatives to improve prisoner wellbeing will be discussed by prison campaigners, practitioners and policymakers at an event, 'Prisoner wellbeing and the experience of

punishment', on 14 November at Warwick Arts Centre, held as part of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science. At this one day, multi-format event Professor Hodgson will highlight evidence from unique research into the experience of more than 90 offenders, sex offenders and their volunteer pen pals.

Prisoner pen pals, her study (conducted together with PhD student Juliet Horne) shows, are typically male, serving long or indeterminate sentences and experiencing little or no contact with anyone else outside of prison. A quarter of prisoners surveyed said they had no contact at all with anyone outside the prison walls before they started writing to their pen pal.

Prisoners said having a pen pal helped them:

- feel less isolated,
- make changes to their self-identity,
- boost their happiness through having a distraction from the routine of prison life, and
- raise their hopes for life beyond prison.

"Prisoners told us about growing feelings of engagement with 'the outside world' and, as a result of being 'accepted' by their pen friend and experiencing friendship with someone who believes in their capacity for change, they began to see themselves as more than just a prisoner," Professor Hodgson, from the University of Warwick School of Law, states. "All of this raises the prisoners' chances of successful rehabilitation."

As one prisoner wrote of his pen friend: 'He is very helpful and caring and very understanding. He makes me feel like I can achieve things in life. It's made me want to be a better man when released and achieve my dreams if possible.'

Virtually all prisoners said they intended to remain

pen pals for the length of their sentence: the longest pen pal relationship being nine years. As volunteers are generally aware of their pen pals' usual state of mind, they have been able (through the pen pal scheme coordinator) to alert prisons to increasingly depressed or suicidal prisoners. The scheme, Professor Hodgson points out, is viewed very positively by prison governors, not only because it helps prisoners feel happier and more positive but also because it's recognised that having someone to listen is important for prisoners who are at risk of suicide and self-harm.

Most prisoners expressed great satisfaction with their pen pal experience and gratitude to their volunteer pen pals, despite the restrictions imposed on the correspondence. To protect volunteer safety, boundaries are firmly protected and all volunteers receive training in the letter-writing process. Volunteers' personal details are never revealed, all letters – both ways – are sent via a box number and correspondence is supervised, and correspondents are not allowed to meet, even on release.

"Volunteers give no information about their families or personal circumstances, but despite these constraints, I was surprised to hear how warmly the volunteers described the people they were corresponding with and how much, despite keeping a certain distance, they enjoyed writing to their pen pal and looked forward to receiving a reply," she points out.

With more funding and more assistance from prison staff to advertise the scheme in prisons, researchers believe Prisoners' Penfriends could have far wider reach with the prison system, including, perhaps, young offenders. "Writing letters is simple but potentially quite powerful," she says. "There is so little rehabilitation in prisons that schemes such as this, which our study shows to be highly valued by [prisoners](#), offer a win-win situation for all those involved at very little financial cost."

Provided by University of Warwick

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