

'No church, no friends - how can I reintegrate?'

Life after prison can be tough, especially for people convicted of sexual offences. Here, the humanitarian Sir Terry Waite calls for a change in attitudes, while one former prisoner describes how he has struggled since his release



Sir Terry Waite

"If my neighbours knew that I was a former sex offender I would be hounded out of my home, and probably killed or seriously injured." Those are the words of a former sex offender who had been released on licence and was attempting to rebuild his life. It is hard enough for many a former offender to rebuild their life, but for a sex offender the odds against them doing that are massive. It is understandable that most people regard sex offences, particularly those against children, as reprehensible. When a centre was recently opened in the UK to support the reintegration of former sex offenders into the community there was a massive public outcry. Sex offenders are beyond the pale!

“ Until attitudes change, return into the community for former offenders will continue to be extremely difficult. ”

Experiences of former offenders vary. Some get 15 minutes each fortnight with their probation officer, who has such a caseload that he or she cannot even begin to discuss rehabilitation. Some are so restricted that they can barely move out of their house. In such

cases, loneliness and social isolation become a real problem, leading in some instances to mental illness.

Research has shown that long prison sentences do little in terms of rehabilitation, with the possible exception of where there is a strong therapeutic element in the prison. Given the lack of trained staff and resources, this is increasingly rare.

There is little doubt that public perception of offenders needs to change. Circles UK, the charity which runs volunteer support networks to help convicted sex offenders lead crime-free lives after release from prison, has done a remarkable job in assisting with rehabilitation - but with 18 per cent of the prison population serving time for sexual offences, and more than 60,000 on the Sex Offenders' Register, the challenge is massive.

There is certainly a need for the public to be better informed about this matter and for research findings to be more generally available. Until attitudes change, return into the community for former offenders will continue to be extremely difficult. Admittedly this is a hard matter to deal with, but deal with it we must.

Sir Terry Waite was held hostage in Beirut from 1987 to 1991 while working as a special envoy for the Church of England. He is president of the homelessness charity Emmaus UK and a patron of Storybook Dads.

Outside Voices

My battle to resettle

Name withheld

“ This is a message of warning to anyone who has committed sexual offences against children and is looking forward to their release. I committed such an offence, in which I touched children in my care. I received short sentences to be served consecutively, totalling 12 years in jail. I was released after six, having been a 'well behaved' prisoner - but facing eight years on licence. I participated in all the courses expected of me, both inside prison and with probation, and received positive reports from all of them.

My wife is wheelchair bound. I try to see her as often as possible, but she was advised by probation to forget about me. She continued to meet me with the dogs in a local park until an additional exclusion zone stopped me from getting there. When she had two of our grandchildren staying with her, the police raided her house at 4am. She had to hoist herself out of bed into her wheelchair to let them in, and they woke the children as they searched the house looking for me. I was five miles away and they could have just knocked on my door to check on my whereabouts. But they chose to punish her with this needless and insensitive act.

On release from prison, I hoped to obtain a university

degree. I had been offered a full grant for a degree course in philosophy and religious studies. I had made a full disclosure to the head of department at the university, and she was happy to take me. Unfortunately, probation/police decided that I could not attend because I would have unsupervised access to computers. (I had, and have, no computer-related offences). Also, they asked if there would be children there. It's a university, not a junior school.

My faith is important to me, so I went to my local Anglican church and after some discussion with their safeguarding team I was allowed to attend a 30-minute service at 8 o'clock on Sunday morning, with eight other senior citizens, for communion. I was also permitted to go to Bible study, coffee mornings, afternoon tea, and to help maintain the church grounds. I accepted this in the hope that things would improve as I progressed through time. I also helped produce the church magazine. Unfortunately, despite complying with all the rules, when the safeguarding officer changed it was decided that I could no longer participate in any activities other than the 8 o'clock service. Then, three years in, they decided that as I had been seen having lunch in a Sainsburys café with a 58-year-old female, I had breached my conditions - and

they barred me from church. No discussion, no conversation, and the new minister refused to even see me.

I tried several other churches of different denominations, but after they had spoken with my probation/police supervisors, none of them would let me attend. I asked my supervisors what they had said to the churches; as I have never been violent, I have never raped anyone, I deeply regret my actions in touching the girls, and I have served my time. What is it about me that makes me so dangerous? I was told by the police officer that it was all my fault; "Stop whinging, shut up, and do as you're told."

It seemed that each time I made friends, they were taken away from me; either directly or by the imposition of additional exclusion zones. I have five added zones in addition to the original zone which covered three towns, and these stop me meeting my new friends.

So guys; on release, be prepared for severe restrictions, total control of who you see and talk to, and continuous moving of the goalposts.

I still have three years of oppression to endure. From my experience so far, I can honestly say that despite having done every course and group offered to me, I have not seen or experienced any form of real 'rehabilitation' or integration back into society.

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