



Schweizerisches Kompetenzzentrum für den Justizvollzug
Centre suisse de compétences en matière d'exécution des sanctions pénales
Centro svizzero di competenze in materia d'esecuzione di sanzioni penali

“Nothing about me without me”

The phrase ‘Nothing about me without me’ originates from the political movement set up by and for people with disabilities. It encapsulates the idea that affected people should have a direct say in decisions that are relevant to them. The involvement of (ex-)offenders is also beneficial for the prison system.

Lived experience

The term lived experience means that people have their own expertise in a specific area thanks to life experiences they have had. They know the system from within. The fact that these people are a valuable resource for defining strategies to pursue and measures to take has already been recognized, giving rise to patient committees, legislative initiatives from people with disabilities and so on. In the case of the prison system, the people with lived experience are current and former offenders. They can be involved in a variety of ways, such as:

- In **consultations and feedback**
- On **committees of affected people**
- As **peers**
- As part of **projects**
- At **management level**, e.g. in an advisory capacity as employees or as members of management boards

Experience from the UK

We spoke to two ex-offenders who now campaign for improvements in the criminal justice system in the UK.

Darren Burns (hereafter: D.B.) is a trained police officer. Having been convicted of committing an offence while on duty, he lost his job, money, partner and house. His family stood by him. After his release from prison, he was able to find his feet again on a jobs program at Timpson, the largest British provider of shoe repair, key-cutting and dry cleaning services. Today he is Head of the Timpson Foundation, which is responsible for integrating hundreds of former offenders back into the workplace. A recipe of success for which the foundation received the British government's [“King's Award for Enterprise”](#) this year.

Caragh Arthur (C.A.) is a mother, wife and sister. She lives in London and works for His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, HMPPS. Now a qualified social worker and anthropologist, Caragh has a difficult journey behind her. Problems with addiction, domestic violence and mental illness affected her from adolescence, and as a result she ended up in prison numerous times as a young woman. For her great professional commitment, Caragh was honoured with the ["Butler Trust Award"](#) in 2023 for outstanding achievements in the prison system.

How do you both contribute to improving the criminal justice system?

C.A. I train specialists and help to develop future models of the prison system. For example, I work with people who want to implement a program to help those who have been in prison to find jobs after their release. But they don't know how to word their policies or approach the people in question, so I help them to understand the mindset of people who are in prison.

D.B. The Timpson Group was the first employer in the UK to employ people with convictions. To get these people on the work programs, you need a sense of where it is possible and how. I am responsible for these programs. I talk to people who are or have been in prison and make assessments in order to find places for them and support them.

C.A. We noticed that prison officers and support staff did not believe that prisoners could be rehabilitated. And why should they? After all, prison staff lose sight of the people who are successfully rehabilitated. I worked on a project that made the voices of former convicts audible for the staff of the institutions. This was important because it enabled the prison officers to see the results of their work and realize that their engagement was meaningful.

Which abilities has your lived experience given you?

C.A. In the past, I constantly engaged in criminal behavior because I had addictions. I led a very dangerous life. I was threatened, kidnapped, mistreated and put under pressure from all sides. As a result, I'm really good at anticipating risk. This is very useful for work in the prison system. I also have an excellent understanding of non-verbal communication. I'm good at maintaining relationships and assessing people.

D.B. I know what prison is like from personal experience. For people who don't, it can be quite disconcerting: the noise, the sights, the smells. I have no fear, prejudices or mistrust against people with convictions. My conversations with them are therefore more open and honest. My experience of working in the police also helps me. I gained leadership experience and developed organizational skills there.

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Why do you work on behalf of people in prison?

C.A. There is a small percentage of people who are really evil, but 99% are not. They are misguided youth. They too had dreams and hopes as children – and going to prison certainly wasn't one of them. Of course they've made a mistake, but they might also have been victims at the same time. For me, it is about giving something back to these people.

D.B. Through my work, I meet people who are often at the lowest point in their lives. On behalf of my employer, I get to be the person who goes in and offers them something positive, a job and prospects. I get a real kick out of being able to help people put past mistakes behind them and move forward.

What are the risks of using lived experience in the prison system?

D.B. Discrimination can occur, especially when (ex-)offenders work for companies. Integrating a person with lived experience can put pressure on existing team dynamics. And if they are employed by an organization that works with customers and do not behave as expected, this can also be difficult for the company.

C.A. We implemented projects where former offenders went back to prisons. In this situation, you have to be able to guarantee that these people have distanced themselves sufficiently from their former lives. What if someone recognizes them from their time in prison and this leads to violence, for example? What if they use their lived experience to smuggle things into prisons for their acquaintances? It is definitely important to make a good assessment beforehand.

What do I have to bear in mind if I launch a project that involves people with lived experience?

C.A. Some of these people come from a very disadvantaged background of poverty, addiction or violence. Many suffer from mental illnesses and low self-confidence. It takes time, money and structure to work with people who have 'baggage' like this.

D.B. Issues with addiction or mental illness may need to be addressed beforehand. And people with lived experience also have to have the necessary skills for their new job. If you choose carefully, these people can be very hard-working, loyal and honest. At Timpson, former prisoners stay in their jobs much longer than other employees.

Examples from Switzerland and potential for the future

In Switzerland, too, something is happening with regard to lived experience: in recent years, for example, peer projects have been developed in forensic psychiatry. Cantonal initiatives to optimise the planning of an inmate's stay in prison in a participatory process have been launched. In the Concordat Latin, the ["Objectif Désistance"](#) project has involved people with lived experience in the de-sign of probation services.

The Swiss projects confirm that the inclusion of people with lived experience offers benefits for both sides. For (formerly) convicted offenders, it brings more self-esteem, confidence, social skills and greater autonomy. For the prison system, the inclusion of 'lived experience' allows for an improvement in processes and structures. This promotes the acceptance and impact of the system as a whole.

Links

Center for Crime and Justice Studies (publisher) (2022). [Prison Service Journal – Special Edition : Engagement and Co-production.](#)

Buck, Gilian, Tomczak, Philippa und Kaitlyn Quinn (2022). [This is How It Feels: Activating Lived Experience in the Penal Voluntary Sector.](#) In: The British Journal of Criminology, 62(4), p. 822-839.