



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

Interview with Darren Burns

Update 'Nothing about me without me', 3rd April 2024

Darren Burns (D.B.) is the Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Timpson group. Having been convicted of committing an offence while on duty as a senior police officer, 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 programme 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 for success for which the foundation received the British government's [King's Award for Enterprise](#) this year.

In April 2024 **Laura von Mandach** (L.V.M.), Sociologist and Head of the Analysis and Practice Development Department at the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Prison and Probation, SCEPP, did interview Darren Burns, at the University of Cambridge where both are part of the Master of Studies (MSt) programme in Applied Criminology, Penology and of the Institute of Criminology. Following is a transcript of the interview in slightly condensed form.

Laura von Mandach Thank you for offering me some time for this interview. Could you please introduce yourself? Your name is Darren.

Darren Burns Yes. My surname is Burns, and I am the Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Timpson group. I'm also Head of the Timpson Foundation. So just for some context, the Timpson group are the largest service retailer in the UK. They have a number of other businesses that come under that Timpson banner. We were established in 1865. The Timpson Foundation, which I head up, is essentially the philanthropic arm of the Timpson business. We specialise in the recruitment, training and retention of marginalised groups or people who face barriers to employment. So predominantly people with convictions or who have left prison, but also refugees, military veterans, disabled people, etc.

L.V.M. Thank you. You are a person with lived experience. What does that mean?

D.B. So in this context, lived experience means you've got lived experience of being imprisoned, going into custody. So why that rationale? I spent some time in prison a long time ago now, so I'm viewed as somebody with lived experience.

L.V.M. And as a person with lived experience in prison, I understand you're committed to improving the system.

D.B. Yeah. So essentially the work that we undertake in the Timpson Foundation – we were the first employer to employ people with convictions, certainly with any volume, in the UK. And we're the largest employer of ex-offenders in the country. So we work very closely with the governments, with the Ministry of Justice, and we drive that agenda. We try and break the taboo, the stigma. We strongly believe in giving people

a second chance, and we lead from the front, essentially. So much so that we now spend a lot of our time helping other businesses to recruit from this particular cohort.

L.V.M. Could you explain what your organisation does?

D.B. Essentially, we are a service retail business. The services that we offer the public are shoe repairs, key cutting, watch repairs, engraving, dry cleaning, etc. We've also got a number of other businesses that come under the Timpson banner. We've got two photography businesses, we've got a large dry cleaning business, we've got a mobile locksmith business, we've got restaurants, hotels, pubs – all come under the Timpson banner. So that specific work that I conduct, is in the Timpson Foundation. And the Timpson Foundation essentially is that philanthropic arm of the Timpson business. What we do is provide employment and training for marginalised groups or people who face barriers to employment.

L.V.M. What drives your motivation?

D.B. I get lots of satisfaction from my job. Timpson's is a great organisation to work for. It's got a really strong positive culture of kindness and compassion. And obviously, the role I do for Timpson enables me to meet people often at the lowest point of their lives where they've lost everything. So often, they'll be in prison, they've lost their job, they've lost their partner, they've lost their homes, they've lost access to the children. Everything is typically pretty hopeless for people. And on behalf of Timpson, I get to be the person that goes in and offers them something positive. So I get a real sort of kick out of being able to help people to put the past mistakes behind them and move forward.

L.V.M. When you relate to people, for instance, or you organise the work, I guess you need networking. How does your experience translate into the quality of your work?

D.B. Well, I think the first thing is I have enough familiarity with the prison setting. So if somebody has not been to prison before – actually going into a prison with all the noise, the sights, the smells, the bars – it can be quite disconcerting for people. Because I'm used to that environment, it doesn't hold any fear for me. So I'm quite comfortable to go into a prison setting, and sit down and interview prisoners. I think the other thing is that I'm not scared of prisoners. Lots of people demonise prisoners. People think they're very dangerous people who are not to be trusted, they're inherently dishonest, you shouldn't be in the same room as them. Obviously, because I don't think that, because I've been in that position myself, I'm very comfortable to sit down with somebody and have an honest and open conversation with them – ask them why they're in prison, what offences they've committed. And in previous offences they've committed, take them through a full risk assessment process. And then I'll make an assessment on their suitability to work.

I mean, I can identify with the people, because, obviously, I've been in the same situation. So when people disclose to me what offences they've committed and what impact it's had on their lives and the fact that they've got to start again – the fact that I've been in that exact same position, I've got that empathy and understanding – that puts me in a really good place to make that judgement. I think that the other major benefit of having lived experience for me is that we employ lots of people on a scheme called ROTL, which stands for release on temporary licence. This is effectively where people get released from prison every day to go and do a full day's work, paid work in our stores or branches, and then they will return to prison in the evening. In order to navigate that prison system – all the bureaucracy, all the security, all the rules and regulations – the fact that I have first-hand knowledge of that makes it a lot easier. So our business has been able to benefit from my experience.

L.V.M. When and how long were you in prison, and how did this time shape you?

D.B. I was sentenced to four years in custody. I served two years. So two years in prison and two years in the community on licence reporting to a probation officer. In terms of it shaping me, I was already successful before coming to prison. I was a detective inspector for Merseyside Police. So I always worked. I was determined to come out and restart. But like the examples I mentioned before, I lost everything. I lost my job, my pension, the savings, my partner, my house. I had to start from scratch. I was very lucky in that I have a supportive family. And obviously, I managed to get a job with Timpson. When I started working with Timpson, I was able to turn my experience both as a senior police officer and also a former offender, ex-offender, to drive the work that we did in the Timpson Foundation.

My experience was quite negative, so in terms of it shaping me, it certainly wasn't anything positive. Prison is an incredibly dehumanising place and, obviously, because of my status as an ex-police officer, it made it even more difficult being in prison.

L.V.M. There was a lot of mistrust.

D.B. Yeah, which manifests in violence and attacks.

L.V.M. I'm sorry about that. Now some questions about the general learning made possible by contributions from people with lived experience. Let's say I'm going to launch a project or initiative that involves people with lived experience. What should I consider?

D.B. You should consider whether people have made enough positive changes in their lives so that their offending history is very much in the past. So somebody who's still in the midst of offending, somebody who has still got maybe a couple of sentences left, is not suitable. It needs to be somebody who's stable, somebody who's realised that offending is not the way forward. When it comes to any issues such as addiction, mental health – these issues need to be addressed prior to giving somebody that opportunity.

I think the biggest thing that you need to bear in mind is, essentially, just because somebody has been to prison and has lived experience doesn't mean they've got all the answers, and it doesn't mean they're going to be particularly great at that specific job. So they've got to have a skill set. Prior to that, yes, people can learn and develop. But ultimately, people need a particular skill set anyway to do a specific job. Often, just the fact they've been in prison isn't going to qualify them. That depends on the job or task, obviously. So for example, what makes me successful at my job, being a former prisoner, having lived experience, that's definitely a part of it. Probably a bigger part is the time I've spent in the police and my education.

L.V.M. Leadership skills, organisational skills, work ethic?

D.B. Yes.

L.V.M. Let's say I have lived experience. If I participate in an initiative, what will my opportunities be? But also, what risks will I face?

D.B. For you, as an employer, or for a user with some of the lived experience? As for the risk of somebody with lived experience who's going to disclose that to an employer, the risk is that they will be judged. They will be discriminated against. They will still face stigma. There will be that mistrust. So depending on the organisation that the individuals are coming into, there's a real risk that they're going to be ostracised and they're going to be discriminated against because they're there as the token ex-offender, the token person with lived experience. 'They don't deserve to be here.', 'They're only here because they've got lived experience.'. Such statements could be said or thought. So that's a danger. Not with my organisation, Timpson, because it's so embedded within our culture. It's so normal for us to employ ex-offenders. We've got so many working for us, it's not a big deal.

L.V.M. And on the other hand, what is the risk for me running an institution, a business?

D.B. Reputational damage. We are a retail business, so, obviously, we depend on customers spending money in our business. If we give the wrong person an opportunity in our organisation, there's a huge risk of reputational damage, which will ultimately affect our profits. Aside from that, there's fallout with our existing colleagues. If our colleagues don't want to work with a particular person, or think a particular person is too chaotic or dangerous or has committed an offence that they don't agree with or can't get along with, then that's going to cause issues for us internally.

So it's our responsibility to make sure that we give the right people the opportunities at the right point in their lives, so they can make the most of these opportunities. If I meet somebody in prison who's in the midst of addiction, maybe they've got a 20-year addiction to a Class A drug, the last thing these people need is a job. They need abstinence-based recovery. They need support, care, love. They don't need a job at that point. It's

only when this is in the past, and after some clear period of abstinence, that people can be taken and considered for employment.

Our estimation is that in the UK, probably only one third of the prison population are what we would consider to be 'employment ready' or 'work ready'. The other two thirds have got lots of complex needs and issues, including addiction, mental health, physical health, homelessness, or a combination of all four at once. We don't want to throw that cohort on the scrapheap. But it's not our job as a business. It should align with the government to address these issues. And only when these issues have been addressed should these people be put in front of employers. Because otherwise, it goes wrong.

The other group are the ones who are work ready and who have got a good work ethic, but the offences they've committed wouldn't be a good fit for our culture and we couldn't manage that level of risk – such as sex offenders, those who have committed the offence of arson, lighting fires, and those convicted of terrorism offences. These cannot profit from our programmes.

L.V.M. On a general level, how do you assess the development of the use of lived experience in England and Wales?

D.B. I think in the UK, it's something we should be proud of, considering the state of our criminal justice system. Our prisons aren't fit for purpose. People aren't rehabilitated. People often come out in a worse physical and mental state than when they came into prison. And wider society still judges and ostracises and stigmatises people with convictions. However, all that being said, the government, the Ministry of Justice, the Civil Service, they've put their money where their mouth is, and they've got schemes now to employ ex-offenders. So there are lots of people with lived experience in some quite senior roles working for government. So I think, weirdly, whilst the prison system is generally bad and not very forward thinking, this particular policy is quite progressive.

L.V.M. What would your advice be if I were to implement a lived experience approach in Switzerland? Where should I start?

D.B. So I think in the UK, there are 14 million people with a criminal conviction more serious than a driving offence – in other words one sixth of the UK population. For employers to assume that that whole swathes of the population are not worthy of a job – that they are inherently dishonest, dangerous, have got nothing to offer – is madness. Your first starting point should be a change of mind. All of these people are going to fall into that category. Surely some of them, thousands of them, are just going to need a second chance, just going to need an opportunity. So my advice will always be to speak to people. Don't use broad brush strokes to generalise about people's offences. We take on people who committed very serious offences, such as murders. We've got about 60 people serving life sentences working for us. They've since been released. It'd be very easy to say: 'Well, all murderers have the same evil; they've killed somebody'. But that's not the truth. The fact is all these offences are very nuanced. So sit down with people talking about the offence: 'How did it come about? What happened? What were the circumstances?' And then make judgements when you've spoken to people.

The other thing to bear in mind is that prison leavers and ex-offenders are very hardworking. They're very loyal. They're statistically more loyal than people who get recruited from more regular streams, they stay with us longer. And that's often because they realise that their options are limited. So because we've given them that opportunity, and that second chance, they don't want to betray that trust, and they want to stay and have a long career with us.

Studies show that 61% of prison leavers will reoffend within two years of leaving custody, but that is reduced to 19% if people have full-time employment. So there is clear evidence that employment is a key factor to reducing reoffending. It's not the only factor, because first and foremost, people need somewhere to live. They need a support network, family, friends, people to care for them, love them, support them. But after that, employment is that all-important factor.