

This report was compiled by Daniela Venero, Turing Scheme trainee at the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) from the University of East Anglia (UEA). The report is based on information gathered from online research. This is a preliminary study to gather information about volunteering as a means to help ex-offenders to be reintegrated into society.

## **Volunteering as a tool for social reintegration of ex-offenders in Europe**

**December 2024**

---

## Index

Introduction	2
Ex-offenders in Europe	3
Potential role of Volunteering	4
Existing schemes for reintegration and lessons learned	6
Prison Managing Volunteers in EU (VOLPRIS)	6
Prison Smart Europe- Stress Management and Rehabilitation Training	7

## Introduction

Marginalised people can generally be defined as those that are not well integrated into varying segments and systems in society due to a particular attribute,<sup>1</sup> and this can typically render them vulnerable to multiple forms of social exclusion. Both the UN and the European Youth Forum define social exclusion as a multidimensional phenomenon that can be created by many different factors, including material and non-material conditions. The UN further defines social exclusion as the inability for individuals to “participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life.”<sup>2</sup> Individuals can often become excluded on a basis of age, sex, religion, ethnicity or economic status, but social exclusion can also stem from a wider set of underlying factors such as unemployment, poor social skills, poor health, mental illness, disability, behavioural problems and poverty, many of which ex-offenders and those leaving the prison system, commonly struggle with.

Ex-offenders are one of the most marginalised groups in society, facing stigmatisation and discrimination that prevent them from re-engaging positively into society as citizens. Krienert, Henderson and Vandiver<sup>3</sup> assert that prisons contain some of the most vulnerable members of society in relation to race, ethnicity and social class. Ex-offenders tend to face an array of difficulties, particularly to find employment and housing.<sup>4</sup> Other common challenges within the group include financial obstacles, addiction, educational limitations and attitudinal barriers.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these factors, societal stigmatisation of ex-offenders is particularly hindering for reintegration, and often leads to perpetuating a cycle of crime. There is a 50% re-offending rate after one year after release in the UK, over 25% in Norway and Sweden, and 70% in Finland.<sup>6</sup>

Research has found that those that received support upon release were more likely to see change as a possibility for themselves. Thus, it is essential to create a support system for prisoners upon release, that facilitates a smooth transition into housing, the labour market, and society more widely. This is the first, and perhaps most essential step, to achieving an equal society that does not disadvantage ex-offenders. A society with foundations of solidarity should aim to breach gaps of social inequity, and one of the potential ways to do so is through volunteering. Although this task should not fully fall upon the non-profit sector, volunteering can significantly assist in and be an integral partner to the reintegration of ex-offenders.

---

<sup>1</sup> Harley, D. A., Cabe, B., Woolums, R., & Turner-Whittaker, T. (2014). Vulnerability and Marginalization of Adult Ex-Offenders with Disabilities in Community and Employment Reintegration. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 45(4), 4-14.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/2016/chapter1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Krienert, J. L., Henderson, M. L., & Vandiver, D. M. (2003). Inmates with Physical Disabilities: Establishing a Knowledge Base. *The Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice*, 1, 13–23.

<sup>4</sup> No second chance. (2023). In *Human Rights Watch*.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/11/18/no-second-chance/people-criminal-records-denied-access-public-housing-0>

<sup>5</sup> Ewert, S., & Wildhagen, T. (2011). *Educational Characteristics of Prisoners: Data from the ACS*. U.S. Census Bureau Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division.

<sup>6</sup> EQUAL (2006). Approaches and Thematic Clusters within EQUAL: Ex-offender development partnerships.

This report will explore issues surrounding the reintegration of ex-offenders, including the impact this has on individuals and society more widely, before discussing the potential role of volunteering in aiding the re-integration process. Recommendations will then be established, based on observations of the current challenges faced by this group and the success of existing schemes.

## Ex-offenders in Europe

In Europe, 35% of ex-offenders are homeless upon release, according to a report from the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA).<sup>7</sup> Lack of opportunities to make use of their skills and the evolution of technology also contributes towards long term prisoners losing marketable work skills. Social reintegration is a great challenge for many prisoners, with both social barriers and employment barriers playing a role. Social barriers affecting ex-offenders can include poor social skills and self-esteem, lower education levels, psychological issues and insecure living conditions. Employment barriers are generally related not only to a loss of employable skills, but also severe stigmatisation from employers.<sup>8</sup>

Challenges faced by ex-offenders to reintegrate into society can thus be divided into three main categories: social; relating to behavioural issues and poor self-esteem, employability; such as poor literacy and lack of or deteriorated employable skills, and stigmatisation. Tackling stigmatisation should most definitely be a priority, but it is a long-term goal that will take time to see significant change. The success of volunteering schemes has the additional specific potential of being able to dismantle public stigmatisation of ex-offenders as well. The first two categories should be addressed and distinguished on a person-by-person basis, avoiding wide generalisations, as each individual will be facing a different specific situation.

In terms of tangible shorter-term goals that should be addressed, finding employment for recently released prisoners is essential, as there is a strong link between unemployment and recidivism.<sup>9</sup> A study in 1995 that drew from a sample of 40,000 juveniles found that the most effective factor in reducing reoffending was having stable employment.<sup>10</sup> This was concluded to be a result of providing structure and an income which may have previously been generated illicitly. Tarling found the relationship between unemployment and crime to be interactive, with both problems being related to the effects of social and economic disadvantages.<sup>11</sup> A criminal record can be both a source of (informal) employment, consequently dissuading them from finding legitimate employment, and a cause of unemployment itself, he finds. Hearnden et al (2000) suggest the implementation of

<sup>7</sup> Casey, J. R., & Jarman, B. (2011). The social reintegration of ex-prisoners in Council of Europe Member States. *Quaker Council for European Affairs*.

<sup>8</sup> Brazier, J., Tumor, I., Holmes, M., Ferriter, M., Parry, G., Dent-Brown, K., & Paisley, S. (2006). Psychological therapies including dialectical behaviour therapy for borderline personality disorder: a systematic review and preliminary economic evaluation. *Health technology assessment (Winchester, England)*, 10(35), iii–117. <https://doi.org/10.3310/hta10350>

<sup>9</sup> Woodier, N. (2013). Employment, reintegration and reducing re-offending—a short look into a offender resettlement within Europe. *EuroVista*, 2 (3), 134-143.

<sup>10</sup> Lipsey, M. (1995). 'What do we learn from 400 research studies on the effectiveness of treatment with juvenile delinquents?'

<sup>11</sup> Tarling, R. (1982). Unemployment and Crime. *Research Bulletin*. (14) (28-33)

employment opportunities through supervised probation schemes in order to prevent reoffending. These vary from education, training and employment projects.<sup>12</sup> The availability of programmes to help develop skills and facilitate integration is vital not only for the well-being of ex-offenders, but society, as it would help lower rates of re-offending too. Support for reintegration is vital not only upon release but leading up to release and throughout the prison experience, as it allows for prisoners to become accustomed to a work schedule and a normal working week. It should be considered that it is the nature of the prison system that is largely causing this alienation and therefore creating a difficult reintegration for ex-prisoners.

It is necessary to address the treatment of ex-offenders as one of marginalisation in order to adequately remediate vulnerability which has been created by societal structures that disadvantage those that have previously offended or been imprisoned. There are a multitude of solutions that can be explored to address this issue, ranging from reforms within the prison system, implementing working programmes (this has been partially implemented in the UK, with the existence of working programmes in prison that allow prisoners to make clothes, furniture and gain experience in electrical engineering), and creating opportunities for shelter employment, but naturally the contributions accessible to the volunteering sector are significantly more limited and reliant on individual action. The current state of the volunteering sector could potentially be improved with larger amounts of funding and non-monetary incentives to promote volunteering. The following section will expand further upon the potential role of the voluntary sector in aiding in the reintegration of ex-offenders.

### **Potential role of Volunteering**

Drawing on the observation of ex-offenders' loss of skills throughout their time in prison, volunteers could potentially help the reintegration of ex-offenders into society through support programmes that focus on enhancing the skills they have lost. The volunteering sector is most likely to have the most impact for enhancing social skills but the side of practical work skills could also be explored in more ambitious and amply funded projects. To address this, mentorship programmes that engage volunteer mentors are a potential avenue.

Volunteers could offer a community that strengthens self-esteem and social skills through regular social interaction. Through this dynamic, ex-offenders would become better equipped to navigate effective communication when re-entering both the work force and day to day interactions. Group activities that may be seemingly insignificant to the average person could be vital for ex-offenders to regain comfort after what is essentially alienation from society. In a study from 2000 assessing probation programmes<sup>13</sup> Nee et al found that there was a profoundly positive sentiment of appreciation from ex-offenders towards workers and volunteers that exhibited non-patronising

---

<sup>12</sup> Hearnden et al. (2000). Working their way out of offending: an evaluation of two probation employment schemes. Home Office Research Study 218.

<sup>13</sup> Sarno, C & Hearndon, I & Hedderman, C & Nee, Claire & Herrington, Victoria. (2000). Working their Way out of Offending: An Evaluation of Two Probation Employment Schemes. Home Office Research Study 218.

attitudes and treated them “like friends”. This is telling of the protruding negative stigmatisation of ex-offenders which, aside from directly impacting their labour and housing situations, affect their mental health and perceptions of themselves. This can subsequently further aggravate their situation. Thus, there is a large opportunity for volunteers to positively impact ex-offenders’ situations by simply interacting with them without judgement and providing a sensitive, and accommodating social avenue.

Previous research has found that volunteer mentoring schemes are potentially very effective, but complex and difficult to implement appropriately. It is difficult to locate, train and match mentors, especially to support such a group facing as much stigmatisation as ex-offenders, and challenges for recruitment may be even greater, especially considering there is no monetary remuneration to attract mentors in the volunteering sector. However, this could be counteracted through adequate allocation of resources and covering of volunteer expenses such as travel to and from prisons or the programme site, which could be a barrier impeding participation in such schemes.

Hearnden et al. note that similar benefits can still be obtained in a less specialised mentoring environment.<sup>14</sup> With a less rigid matching and training system, mentoring in the volunteering sector can be further explored to expand ex-convict skills. It is likely that volunteering’s maximum potential is in improving social skills, as this requires little training compared to other forms of mentorship. Nonetheless, hard skills that increase chances of employability are also a potential route for mentorship that could be spearheaded by retired seniors that are keen on sharing their knowledge. Through the improvement of both social and hard skills, volunteers hold the potential of increasing employability rates for ex-offenders upon release.

There are several existing schemes to develop skills amongst ex-offenders that are not oriented in a mentorship dynamic. In England, the non-profit organisation Blue Sky Development and Regeneration hires exclusively ex-prisoners with the aim to support skills development and getting back into a regular work routine. They provide qualifications for an array of skills as well, including forklift driving, horticulture spraying and provide assistance in gaining their drivers licence. As a result, 57% have gone on to acquire full-time employment or education. There are other similar schemes that are oriented similarly, such as the Access Industry Passport Scheme. Although these programmes have proven incredibly effective for their goals, and they are undeniably creating a huge positive impact, the method is not particularly suitable for the volunteering sector. Despite this, the programme’s success can be used to tailor volunteering endeavours in the field, as will be discussed utilising case studies through this report.

Skills development programmes such as the ones mentioned above are consistent in their support of both work skills and social skills, as they consider both to be key factors for employability. For volunteers, the most realistic and impactful way they can assist ex-offenders is by fostering social skill development. Hard skills mentorship could also be a fruitful avenue to explore but it requires further

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

training and funding. As previously mentioned, the recruitment of senior mentors should be explored for this as they are potentially more experienced, and therefore potentially less vulnerable while requiring less training than younger volunteers. Nevertheless, for a more budget limited programme, social skills training is a more promising option.

## Existing schemes for reintegration and lessons learned

The following section will expand upon select existing schemes for reintegration of ex-offenders in Europe and draw lessons for their implementation into the volunteering sector. By examining schemes that have already been implemented, both positive and negative effects can be drawn in order to tailor volunteering programmes accordingly.

### ***Prison Managing Volunteers in EU (VOLPRIS)<sup>15</sup>***

VOLPRIS was an initiative funded by Erasmus+, which aimed to improve the management of volunteers active in prisons throughout Europe. Through many different activities, the project sought to provide a sense of community for people in prison by maintaining emotional and physical ties through volunteering. VOLPRIS stressed the need for an active and engaged society, robust enough to support prisoners, and viewed volunteering as a key expression of the solidarity needed to achieve this. Through fostering cooperation and collaboration, VOLPRIS sought to support the best practices in volunteer management, and influence policies to recognise and enhance the role of volunteers in the prison system. One of the programs endorsed by VOLPRIS is SPPF (Sport in Prison, a Plan for the Future). Taking place in Italy, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia and the Netherlands, the programme intended to give stakeholders the tools to develop good sport practices within prison, to further act as a bridge to other sectors in society through volunteers and sports clubs. Programmes such as these are vital for enhancing the mental health of prisoners, providing a positive outlet for stress, and promoting social skills prevalent in sport such as teamwork, discipline and communication. All of these are essential for a smooth reintegration into society and accessible for the average person to support as a volunteer. Future volunteer programmes should take programmes such as these as reference to develop accessible opportunities for volunteers to help prisoners in the social aspect.

### ***ESF Funded 'Follow-up support for those released from prison' project in Estonia (2016-2023)***

Taking place in Estonia, during the last 6 months of prison sentence and for up to 12 months following release, ex-prisoners are assigned mentors that assist them with entering the labour market and support them.<sup>16</sup> They meet once per month on average. They also receive housing services, access to a housing community free of charge where they can receive additional support. Daily schedules of work and 12 step programmes were provided for those that were unemployed in

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://volprison.eu/>

<sup>16</sup> *Support services for ex-offenders | European Social Fund Plus. (2024, May 31).*  
<https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/social-innovation-match/case-study/support-services-ex-offenders>

order to combat re-offending. This project received 4.1 million euros in funding provided by the ESF and the Estonian Ministry of Justice, with an array of Estonian NGOs providing the mentorship and housing services. By the end of 2021, 67% of ex-offenders involved were employed and the reoffending rate was the lowest it had been in 7 years (34%). ESF funding for the project ended in 2023 but it will continue to run with government funds.

The project focuses mainly on employability skills rather than social rehabilitation and although it is government funded, is an excellent example to be drawn upon for possible volunteering schemes that could be funded through both public and private funding sources. Volunteers could potentially help ex-offenders expand employability skills that are inhibiting their job searches. However, as mentioned earlier, the volunteering sector could be limited in teaching work skills due to the more complex training processes for volunteer mentors and difficulties in recruiting people, particularly due to the additional stigma surrounding ex-offenders. Once again, this model has a lot of potential for exploration for projects with larger amounts of funding.

### ***Prison Smart Europe- Stress Management and Rehabilitation Training***

Present in over 60 countries, Prison Smart is a rehabilitation program that aims to change mindsets and attitudes of ex-offenders through stress relief in order to ultimately 'break the cycle of violence'<sup>17</sup>. Focused on the link between individual change and societal improvement, the programme offers services for ex-prisoners, individuals on probation or still in prison, youth at risk and people struggling with mental health or addiction. Prison Smart uses breathing techniques, physical exercise and skills training in order to reduce the impact of stress, violence, anger and depression.<sup>18</sup>

This project focuses on social and behavioural issues that ex-offenders may face rather than on employability skills such as the previous scheme. This type of scheme is a great example of the potential of volunteering, which, when facing smaller amounts of funding, can have a great impact on social issues. Volunteering has immense potential in increasing confidence, reducing stress and making ex-offenders feel more comfortable with communication. Further elaboration on activities volunteers can engage in will be provided in the next section. It may still be challenging to recruit volunteers for this type of service, predominantly due to stigma, even though it is a less complex process. Moreover, it is likely a risk assessment will be called for, depending on the nature of the crimes previously committed by the ex-convict.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Prison SMART Europe* |. (n.d.). <https://www.prisonsmart.eu/>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



---

## Recommendations for the potential role of volunteering

Developing volunteering schemes that support ex-offenders could have a huge impact in facilitating a smoother transition for prisoners into society and make a significant contribution in lowering re-offending rates. These could be oriented around the categories previously outlined: employability and social skills should additionally be tailored to the individual depending on their needs. Characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and background should be considered, as they may alter the barriers they face. Ethnic minorities and people with disabilities face additional social barriers which must also be considered and addressed.

Addressing stigmatisation should also be a goal for the future but it entails more long-term projects that may be less suitable for the volunteering sector. However, through interactive volunteering programmes, the presence of negative stigmatisation of ex-offenders may also decrease. Moreover, by increasing visibility of the success of these schemes, stigma may be further dismantled. If the public is able to understand the causations and aggravating factors of recidivism, which are largely to do with the struggles that ex-offenders face with employability and the housing sector, then they are less likely to perceive them with sweeping negative connotations.

Employability can be promoted through mentorship and assistance in housing and labour searches. The role of the volunteering sector may be a bit more limited here as it requires technical knowledge that not all volunteers have, and would thus require training. Matching mentors to ex-offenders is also a complex process that the volunteering sector may be limited in its funding abilities. Nonetheless, it is a possibility that can be explored and could be extremely beneficial for ex-offenders and re-offending rates.

Volunteering has the potential to fill gaps which European governments have been unable to and create the support that this marginalised group requires for an adequate reintegration. The promotion of social skills is the most accessible area to contribute to for volunteers and is also the area that government schemes and the past projects discussed have explored less in depth, so the potential for volunteering is immense.

Volunteer support groups that encourage social interactions and communication with others could have a huge impact on developing social skills and building self-esteem. Most European countries do not offer courses showing how to open a bank account and access basic utilities<sup>19</sup>, volunteering groups could support ex-offenders in this way. Through simple social interactions and activities, volunteers could play a vital role in making ex-offenders feel more comfortable in social settings and regain the confidence they need to re-enter the workforce. Oftentimes it is confidence rather than actual skill sets which are lacking. Stress exercises such as Prison Smart's, PPF's Sport activities and general social activities, could be effective for facilitating reintegration of ex-offenders into society. It should be considered that oftentimes what ex-offenders need is simply to feel like they are a part of a larger social group in order to make them feel normal once more. Ideally, this support should also

---

<sup>19</sup> Casey, J. R., & Jarman, B. (2011).

---

begin before release from prison, throughout their sentence, as to prevent a feeling of alienation in the first place.

To conclude, this report has outlined the current challenges facing the re-integration of ex-offenders into society, ranging from a loss of skills, a lack of a stable situation to return to, and stigmatisation among wider society which can exacerbate the exclusion facing ex-offenders, contributing towards a cycle of re-offending. These challenges, while they cannot and should not be tackled by the voluntary sector alone, could be tackled through closer cooperation with volunteers. Volunteers can play a crucial role in providing skills workshops, and more importantly the chance for offenders to develop their social and interpersonal skills, interacting with an empathetic volunteer, prior to their release. Volunteers could play a role in developing more hard skills and knowledge, even acting in some cases as a bridge or pointer to other services such as social housing, and furthermore mentorship could provide a key avenue for aiding the re-integration of ex-offenders with the support of volunteer mentors. These opportunities should be taken with care, consideration, and importantly collaboration between the state, public services, prison services and voluntary sector, in order to begin to tackle the issues facing the re-integration of ex-offenders.

While reintegration is a complex and gradual process, it is crucial for the benefit of individuals and society more widely that innovative and impactful methods are used, the involvement of volunteers and mentors is one such method highlighted throughout this report, with huge potential for a positive impact.

## References

- Brazier, J., Tumur, I., Holmes, M., Ferriter, M., Parry, G., Dent-Brown, K., & Paisley, S. (2006). Psychological therapies including dialectical behaviour therapy for borderline personality disorder: a systematic review and preliminary economic evaluation. *Health technology assessment (Winchester, England)*, 10(35), iii–117. <https://doi.org/10.3310/hta10350>
- Casey, J. R., & Jarman, B. (2011). The social reintegration of ex-prisoners in Council of Europe Member States. *Quaker Council for European Affairs*.
- EQUAL (2006). Approaches and Thematic Clusters within EQUAL: Ex-offender development partnerships.
- Ewert, S., & Wildhagen, T. (2011). *Educational Characteristics of Prisoners: Data from the ACS*. U.S. Census Bureau Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division.
- Harley, D. A., Cabe, B., Woolums, R., & Turner-Whittaker, T. (2014). Vulnerability and Marginalization of Adult Ex-Offenders with Disabilities in Community and Employment Reintegration. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 45(4), 4-14.
- Hearnden et al. (2000). Working their way out of offending: an evaluation of two probation employment schemes. Home Office Research Study 218.
- Krienert, J. L., Henderson, M. L., & Vandiver, D. M. (2003). Inmates with Physical Disabilities: Establishing a Knowledge Base. *The Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice*, 1, 13–23.
- Lipsey, M. (1995). 'What do we learn from 400 research studies on the effectiveness of treatment with juvenile delinquents?'
- No second chance. (2023). In *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/11/18/no-second-chance/people-criminal-records-denied-access-public-housing-0>
- O'Brien L, Burls A, Townsend M, Ebdon M. Volunteering in nature as a way of enabling people to reintegrate into society. *Perspectives in Public Health*. 2011;131(2):71-81. doi:10.1177/1757913910384048
- Santos, J. (2024, January 11). *Turning Blue - IPS Innovative prison systems*. IPS Innovative Prison Systems. <https://prisonsystems.eu/projects/turning-blue/>
- Support services for ex-offenders | European Social Fund Plus*. (2024, May 31). <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/social-innovation-match/case-study/support-services-ex-offenders>
- Tarling, R. (1982). Unemployment and Crime. *Research Bulletin*. (14) (28-33)
- Woodier, N. (2013). Employment, reintegration and reducing re-offending—a short look into a offender resettlement within Europe. *EuroVista*, 2 (3), 134-143.