

**Notes for Employ with Conviction Conference  
Willowdene  
Friday 20th September 2013**

I don't want to overload you with statistics and take the fact that you have come today as indicating that I don't need to establish the link between employment, or rather the lack of it, and offending with this audience, although I do want to be clear that it is not a straightforward causal link. Nobody is saying that all unemployed people offend, indeed I am constantly amazed at how some people manage beyond the point where others crack, neither is anyone saying that having a job is a panacea for offending.

**But the association is very strong**

**Why?**

**What do we get from work?**

- Money, lack of money and the link to acquisitive crime is fairly clear
- Friendships and with them access to support and advice networks
- Self esteem and self respect, reasons not to let oneself or those who trust us down
- Meaningful use of time, I have always been quite clear that amongst all the other therapeutic benefits of Care Farms, at a very simple level the students are away from offending opportunities and so it is with work
- Vocational and personal development opportunities
- A sense of purpose and making a contribution

Turn those things round, no cash, no friendship or support network, idleness, lack of self esteem and self respect, not being able or worth developing, no socialising experience and it seems to me you have a recipe, if not an invitation, to offend and get those things, of which material gains are only a small part by illegitimate means if necessary.

I said I would not bore you with statistics, but let me have a couple!

- Nearly a third of men have convictions for offences that could have merited a 12 month prison sentence by the time they are 30
- For every offence that goes through the system and ends up under the supervision of probation around 100 offences have been committed, if you like we work with the failed offenders the good ones get away with it.

I throw these at you to make the point that we are constantly surrounded by people who have offended. If you don't believe me and think that those figures can't possibly be right, try this exercise that I used to carry out for real , initially with trainee probation officers, but also with very upright groups such as magistrates.

Think of the categories of offending:

- Dishonesty
- Violence
- Alcohol and Drugs
- Public disorder
- Violence
- Sexual
- Traffic/vehicle related

Assuming you assume that you are a non offender, you'll say you have never committed any of these offences, but I am standing here in front of you as that most upright member of the community, a probation officer, and I didn't have a wild upbringing, but I would have to plead guilty to most of the above categories, if I care to remember some student pub crawls, all in the name of charity mind, but not much of an excuse for the people inconvenienced by late night drunkenness, various rugby matches returned from in high or dejected spirits, the lack of documentation, on occasion, with early motor bikes, you'll have your own experiences and I'll wager that there is nobody who cant think of a time when they could have been labeled an offender and pulled into the system, or who, as in my case, knew from our upbringing how to address the police officer and was let off with a friendly request "not to let me catch you doing that again". Even on one occasion being escorted from Portsmouth Dockyard under the threat of being charged with the then capital crime of spreading sedition in H.M. Dockyards.

I make a point of this because so often employers talk about the risk they are taking by employing offenders; they are already employing offenders, it's just that they don't have the label and sometimes it's the label we are afraid of not wants in the tin.

In fact, and here's my first offer in marketing offenders as potentially good employees, precisely because we know about someone's offending status employers can work with offender managers to sort out work related problems, poor attendance, verifying reasons for not being at work, or understanding behaviours which in the case of employees might remain a closed book.

I want to go further though, remember all those war movies from Dirty Dozen to Inglorious Basterds where a group of offenders in civilian life are brought together to undertake a critical mission because of their skills which have been misdirected but can now be used to save their country? Well real life can be a bit like that, just like any group who are denied full access to the jobs market there are all sorts of skills that do get fully utilised and on which employers miss out and in turn feeds back into those feelings of resentment and lack of work that fuel offending.

At its extreme, think about the knowledge of how markets work if you are going to survive, sometimes literally survive, in the drugs world.

How thin is the line between street scrapper and the olympic and world champion boxer we had address a staff conference a few years ago.

Or more prosaically the story told at a similar conference by an employer in the motor trade who had responded to an invitation from us and the Chamber of Commerce, to take a risk on an offender. To begin with he had been reluctant, but when he could not find anyone else who wanted to take a car from Telford to Newcastle he contacted us in desperation what he did not know, but we did, was that the offer to drive someone else's car on a long journey with someone else paying for the petrol is a reformed joy riders idea of, if not heaven then certainly the dream job.

Offenders have skills, employers need those skills and we, as probation should be looking to celebrate and use those skills not always looking at the weakness and gaps in what offenders bring to the table.

One of the things that most impressed me about Willowdene, when I first met Matt, was the idea that they took recovering drug users and rather than wrapping them up in cotton wool they put a chain saw in their hands and taught them a real skill, for which they had employers queuing up. And so it has continued both with the agricultural skills but also the welding and other skills that we can identify a need for in the community. Bring on the

opening of the JLR plant up the road between Telford and Wolverhampton, Matt will have all the welders they need ready to go.

Which brings me to my final point about offending and employment and it's about the wider community. We have sought to place West Mercia Probation firmly in the context of its local communities, and although the government has made it clear that we will close in six months time to be replaced with a National Probation Service and a nationally commissioned private sector Community Rehabilitation Company, I would urge you to hold on to the local, if you can because what holds communities together is the provision of work locally where people can make their contribution, can make their lives and pass on knowledge and wisdom to the next generation. Unfortunately in many of our local industries, agriculture and tourist related employment our young people move away to the cities, hard working itinerant workers move in behind them and do good jobs I am sure but over time the ties that bind communities together and protect them from offending get weakened over the generations and we lose the resilient communities that make this part of the world special, so let's not make it any more difficult for our young people to stay and work locally just because they have offended, most of us have, and most of us don't any more. In the title words of the project that we ran with Monty Don and kicked off our interest in working with Care Farms, let's help people "Grow out of Trouble".

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