

Do Black Minority ethnic ex-offenders reduce or desist from offending through employment?

(Middlesex University Professional Doctorate, Project Summary)

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This article presents excerpts of doctoral research project focused on some of the issues faced by Black Minority Ethnic (BME) ex-offenders. It considers whether their offending is reduced or if they desist from offending behaviour as a result of employment following their release from custody. The research introduces a model that may assist all organisations to address the needs of former offenders from the BME community.

The report *Reducing Re-offending*¹ by the Social Exclusion Unit in 2002 states that employment reduces the risk of re-offending by a third. However, to what extent does this apply to BME ex-offenders? Farrall, et al (2010)² refer to evidence of Black British offenders being the least resourced and unable to find suitable employment compared to other ethnic minority groups.

A small scale study that I conducted, *An exploration of the impact of Offender Employment Training & Skills on employability to reduce re-offending*, considered the views and experiences of BME ex-offenders focusing on employment opportunities and their impact on their attempts to reduce or desist from offending.

Statistics show the following results for BME people:

¹ Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*, Crown: London
www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk

² Farrall, S., Bottoms, A. and Shapland, J. (2010) *Social Structures and Desistance from Crime*, *European Journal of Criminology*, 7(6), 546-570

- BME people make up 26.1 per cent of all prisoners that reported their ethnicity and declared themselves as BME, Black or Black British according to a recent report published by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS)³
- This group accounted for 13.1 per cent of the prison population at 31 March 2012 and 2013 and is over-represented at each stage of the criminal justice process.
- Black males are more likely to be excluded from education and are present at all levels of the Criminal Justice System
- Black men are seven times more likely to be stopped and searched, arrested and convicted.
- Black people make up 6 per cent of community provision on probation and their percentage in the system is substantially higher than their 2.9 per cent share of the population of England and Wales aged 18 and over, as recorded in the 2011 Census.
- Educational statistics show that children from a Black Caribbean background are on average four times more likely than white pupils to face permanent exclusion from school⁴
- In London 80 per cent of excluded boys are black⁵.
- BME males are between 5 and 12 times more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia than their white counterparts and then prescribed anti-psychotic drugs rather than access to counselling and appropriate therapies according to Dr Kwame McKenzie, psychiatrist at University College London.⁶
- The proportion of black population in prison in England and Wales is higher than in the United States and another publication called *The New Jim Crow*, claims that in 2011 there were more Black men in prison than were enslaved in 1850.⁷

These statistics would suggest that regardless of training opportunities, BME ex-offenders are less likely to gain employment after they are released from custody. Are this country's statutory 'systems' failing the BME community as a whole, which inevitably impacts on

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/256911/noms-offender-equalities-annual-report.pdf

⁴Palmer, G *United Kingdom School Exclusions*; <http://poverty.org.uk/27/index.shtml> accessed November 2013

⁵*Exclusion is no laughing matter* www.blackeducation.info/news/articles/news.aspx?p=102534: Hackney Gazette accessed October 2013

⁶ McKenzie, K (2007) *Being black in Britain is bad for your mental health*: The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/02/comment.health> accessed November 2013

⁷ Price, D (2011) *More Black Men Are in Prison Today Than Enslaved in 1850*: *LA Progressive March 27, 2011*; <http://www.laprogressive.com/black-men-prison-system/> accessed October 2013

offenders? By the time prisoners and offenders involved in the criminal justice system, many may have already experienced educational exclusion and according to the Equality and Human Rights Commission,⁸ a lack of an understanding of how to support BME people to address this phenomenon may result in a continual cycle of exclusion.⁹ What is the effect on the individual?

Addressing the needs of BME – Offenders and ex-offenders

As part of the research study, I conducted interviews with a group of BME ex-offenders to identify common emergent themes after the release from custody. Did they experience difficulties gaining employment as suggested by the statistics? The process of engaging with the group of 12 males enabled me as the researcher to gain first-hand data and attaining a heuristic understanding of their views and experiences.

In describing their views on employability some contributors ascribed their failure to gain employment to their criminal record. Some decided not to apply rather than face what they described as 'inevitable rejection'. Another issue raised was having the confidence to present themselves for jobs because although they attained certificates and qualifications, they felt they had to compete with younger applicants that did not have criminal records. Some felt that the hard work and long hours to attain the minimum wage compared unfavourably to the potential earnings through criminal activity.

Overwhelmingly; four characteristics were expressed by the subjects, which could support this group to desist from offending behaviour through possible employment.

Using triangulation analysis as the methodology for interpreting the data, reducing re-offending policy, my experience of working within the sector and the ex-offenders experiences were all considered.¹⁰

⁸ Ramesh, R (2010) *More black people jailed in England and Wales proportionally than in US*: The Guardian, Monday 11 October 2010 <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/oct/11/black-prison-population-increase-england> accessed October 2013

⁹<http://www.icpr.org.uk/media/31989/YJB%20Final%20Report.pdf>

¹⁰ www.justice.gov.uk/offending

The findings identified the areas in which support was required as well as their potential impact on employability:

Self-identity – the ability to re-address the self-fulfilling prophecy used to define individuals through the media; defining themselves as men, leaders, fathers, sons as opposed to the last description they heard from a judge, “You are a menace to society”.

Acknowledging failures within the education system that resulted in 90 per cent of the group experiencing school exclusion, and the criminal justice system which incarcerates them disproportionately was important to this group.

Self-esteem – Addressing this characteristic would require defining the concept and acknowledging their experiences and its impact. It would also encourage individuals to take responsibility for ownership and reshaping their future.

Competence – would result from positive self-esteem; developed through education, hope and optimism for a ‘successful’ crime-free future. .

Subsequently and more importantly, **Resilience**, which according to Masten (2001)¹¹ is a process whereby humans adapt to their situation or surroundings, or, as simply stated by Fredrickson (2004), is the ability to ‘bounce back from negative emotional experiences.

The literature shows that issues facing the BME community could result from discrimination or racism on the part of an institution and further discriminatory practice could also be reflected by individuals involved in decision making who may not consider the over-representation an issue. Having recently reviewed 24 research reports and articles on this issue, a range of recommendations have been made but have yet to be implemented. At a recent meeting of professionals with an interest in this issue, there was a suggestion that a need exists for BME researchers to be commissioned. The outcomes and recommendations could be compared with existing data and where agreed, actions implemented, monitored and reported upon. We will then have an understanding of **how** to address the issue of

¹¹ Masten, A. S (2001) Ordinary Magic; Resilience Process in Development, American Psychologist Vol.56 No. 3

disproportionality and over-representation of BME people throughout the criminal justice system.

The following points are derived from anecdotal contributions from ex-offenders, statistics and recommendations as part of an unpublished doctoral thesis that may at least prompt debate;

- Christopher (2013) addresses the cultural competence. All organisations should consider deploying professional, qualified, experienced staff from the BME community into strategic, decision making roles.¹² They can contribute to effective policy development and implementation. Role modelling enabling offenders to progress and desist from reoffending may then be effectively reflected throughout the organisation. This suggestion may be considered controversial but where there is a commitment to effective change, this could be an answer but will require further enquiry appropriately conducted.
- To create an assessment tool to adequately measure and address possible needs of BME ex-offenders. The provision is often influenced by current government policy, national statistics and perceived outcomes, which determine how organisations develop their funding bids. Standard assessment tools achieve efficiency but cannot identify the specific needs of the BME population.
- Black people are over-represented in unemployment statistics, reaching a level of 50 percent. Therefore reducing reoffending through employment may be impossible for this group.¹³ Agencies that offer employability skills and training should assist this group to consider self-employment, or depending on their crime, encourage them to work towards a profession that is excepted under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act of 1975. Agencies should communicate the truth about ex-offenders chances post release and support them to explore viable options.

¹² Christopher, A (2013) An exploration of the impact of Offender Employment Training & Skills on employability to reduce re-offending Unpublished manuscript; WBL, Middlesex University.

¹³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2113094/UK-black-unemployment-More-half-young-black-men-able-work-jobless.html#ixzz2ki0vEy6P>

- To develop and provide programmes with the support of identified BME professionals to enable BME ex-offenders to develop a positive identity despite negative stereotypes and experiences. Through role models, to create opportunities to explore and acknowledge the effects of their experiences through structured programmes or therapies. Programmes already exist to support the development of self-esteem without which according to Maslow (1968) could impede progress towards self-actualisation.¹⁴ When an individual has a positive sense of themselves they are more likely to develop confidence and competence in themselves and their abilities.
- Resilience and the ability to bounce back despite the challenges is a characteristic BME prisoners, offenders, ex-offenders (and staff) need to develop. This again will require partnerships and engagement with BME professionals with the skills to support this process.

Many studies commissioned regarding the disproportion of BME people throughout the criminal justice system have shown that their proportion has not diminished. Interventions directed at improving employment prospects, attitudes of society and employers towards people from the Black community and BME ex-offenders could be considered in order to bridge the gap between relevant training and employment opportunities. A real commitment to address these issues would require further exploration by culturally competent researchers across all offender management services and recommendations that if implemented could make a difference.



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¹⁴ Maslow, A. H. (1968) *Toward a psychology of being*. 2nd ed. Van Nostrand Reinhold: New York

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5 December 2013

