

British Muslim Prison Leavers: Supporting Desistance and Rehabilitation



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CARESTART

CareStart is a policy, research and charitable organisation. We use our expertise to support wider society, with a special focus on ethnic minority and Muslim communities, by taking a culturally sensitive approach to mental health, rehabilitation and social mobility. We aim to help break any stigmas through policy and research, practical support and educational sessions.

Our research agenda is based on key evidence-based issues identified by secondary research and community consultations. We publish primary and secondary evidence-based research reports and policy briefings pertaining to the key issues surrounding ethnic minority and Muslim mental health, rehabilitation and social mobility. Through our research and public consultations, we disseminate key findings to policymakers and practitioners to help influence meaningful change for grassroots initiatives.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current research on the rehabilitation of Muslim Prison Leavers in the UK is limited and still an emerging field of study. This report advances understanding of the needs of British Muslims leaving prison through an analysis of existing literature and primary research conducted by CareStart. This research sought to identify the challenges facing British Muslim ex-offenders in their post-release phase to generate policy recommendations and strategies that assist their reintegration into communities. This study will be of use to professionals working within the Criminal Justice System (CJS), as well as agencies and grassroots organisations active in ex-offender rehabilitation.

We use the terms 'ex-offenders' and 'Prison Leavers' interchangeably for the purposes of research. However, we recognise that these labels are not always helpful, particularly when trying to reduce stigma for these communities, and therefore, with thanks to those who attended our webinars and stakeholder consultations where we shared our preliminary findings, we suggest a gradual shift in public discourse to 'returning citizens'.

The main findings of this report are:

- This report calls attention to the immensely challenging circumstances that drives and explains ex-offender behaviour. Muslim and ethnic minority ex-offenders are confronted by an often-insurmountable range of challenges upon leaving prison, with hard-to-access support services, which are very often irrelevant to cultural needs of such prisoners. Accordingly, and expectedly, Muslim and ethnic minority ex-offenders have adverse experiences within the Criminal Justice System. Personal moral responsibility is not to be absolved by these circumstances, but shame and regret is piled upon ex-offenders, adding vilification and demonisation on top of pre-existing challenges.
- Adverse housing and employment conditions go some way in explaining the disproportionate representation of Muslim and ethnic minorities in conviction and re-offending rates. One of the most frequently cited factors determining the success or difficulties experienced by ex-offenders after release from prison is the socio-economic constraints they face, particularly in relation to housing and employment.
- The quality and availability of social relations, be they familial, religious or professional, play a major role in determining whether an individual reoffends or not. Stigma from any of these relations is often cited as a significant explanatory factor across different forms of evidence. Female ex-offenders are especially vulnerable to stigma and shaming.
- Rehabilitation services are often not designed with consideration of cultural needs. This drives disengagement. This is especially true for female ex-offenders. The inefficacy of rehabilitation services is compounded by their shortness in length.

- The complexity of the experiences of ethnic minority and Muslim ex-offenders upon release from prison demand 'culturally aware solutions.' Such solutions must show awareness and knowledge of the problems faced, and recognise the need for specific, tailored programmes to reduce recidivism. They must be holistic, approaching the individual as a whole and recognising the wide variety of cultural, structural, and individual factors that impact a person's experiences upon leaving custody. In absence of such considerations, rehabilitation programmes will be ineffective in supporting individuals to reform.
- Over longer sentences, this entirely changes an individual's identity, and accordingly, their behavioural patterns. When this compounds with the lack of appropriate rehabilitation programmes, complex family relationships and adverse employment prospects, ex-offenders are left with a monumental – and often insurmountable – struggle for self-reformation.
- There are many organisations, charities and individuals already making a vital difference to the lives of ex-offenders through dedicated work and it is important that this is recognised. A lack of funding is the single most common hinderance to existing efforts.

FOREWORD



Combating crime and reducing repeat offending are amongst two of the main priorities in the Police and Crime Plan 2022-2025. To date, there has been limited research undertaken, locally and nationally, on the extent of challenges British Muslim ex-offenders face in the post-release phase, and the influence of the Criminal Justice Sector (CJS) on their health and social requirements. This study delves into the factors that are closely associated with the experiences of Muslim Prison Leavers: faith; culture; mental health; family relationships; and, emotional wellbeing, as well as the barriers faced by Muslim families in accessing mainstream support services when they are most needed.

I applaud the findings of this study, conducted in various regions of the United Kingdom, which highlight the need for more support and information for Muslim families throughout the CJS processes, from arrest to post-sentencing, as well as CareStart's ambition to help improve rehabilitation. Policing by itself cannot stop crime and reoffending in any society. In order to assist ex-offenders and their families in changing their behaviors, it is essential to provide them with individualized assistance and access to resources through a variety of partnerships. I look forward to this research making a real difference in protecting our communities and in helping provide a culturally-sensitive approach to desistance.

Afzal Khan MP CBE
Shadow Justice Minister

GUEST CONTRIBUTIONS



This report comes at a critical time for British Muslim communities. It reflects the challenges faced by, alongside the unmet needs of, diverse communities who are alarmingly over-represented within the prison population. It is interesting to see how this report highlights the myriad reasons why Muslims find themselves within the prison system and how these feed into wider narratives around British Muslim communities, which are often distinctly negative in nature.

Many who are released from prison find they lack real support as they navigate their reintroduction into society. Much of this is linked to the failings of rehabilitation services and the urgent need for a system that understands cultural nuance and the practical needs of former prisoners from minority communities.

Whilst this report highlights the impact of some of these issues, it also asks the question: where do we go from here? In the last twenty years, we have sadly seen Muslim communities increasingly racialised, marginalised and disadvantaged. British Muslim communities were identified to be amongst the most socio-economically disadvantaged with 46% of Muslims living in the bottom 10% of the most deprived Local Authority Districts in England. Successive ongoing crises in recent history, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which is understood to have had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority communities, and the increasingly severe cost-of-living crisis, have likely significantly worsened the challenges faced by British Muslims.

It is my hope that we can work collectively towards securing reform within the prison system, supporting vital work being done in this vein. We need a prison system that is ready and willing to address the fundamental issues raised in this report, one that will tackle existing structural inequalities and be equipped to provide effective post-carceral support to those released from prison.

I offer my gratitude to all of those who have contributed to this important report, and all whom are working tirelessly towards achieving prison reform.

Zara Mohammed, Secretary-General, Muslim Council of Britain



Islamic Relief UK are pleased to have supported CareStart and are grateful for this extremely important report exploring how prison leavers can be better supported in their rehabilitation journey. The findings tell us that as a community we must do more to help and support ex-offenders as they rebuild their lives.

The findings indicate that the stigma of prison sentences remains a huge issue within the Muslim community and creates a significant challenge for Muslim ex-offenders, particularly women facing additional pressures in their communities. Many women are disowned by their family, and others struggle to rebuild a future for themselves and their children.

It is deeply concerning that young Muslim ex-offenders are more likely to reoffend than their non-Muslim counterparts and, that this is often due to a lack of support from probation officers, prison staff and family members.

This report examines the need for a more targeted approach to support prison leavers. Rehabilitation programmes for ex-offenders need better funding, for longer periods, that must be culturally relevant and cater for ethnic minorities and Muslim women.

Local authorities, families, mosques, charities and community groups also have a role to play to support prison leavers as they reintegrate back into society. The stigma that these individuals face needs to end. Islamic Relief UK is committed to working with ex-offenders as they rebuild their lives.

Tufail Hussain, Director – Islamic Relief UK

INTRODUCTION

British Muslims are significantly over-represented in the prison statistics, making up only 5% of the general population but almost 20% of the penitentiary population [1]. This trend has been increasing over the past two decades. Accordingly, it is essential to consider the needs of those vulnerable to re-offending. Primary research can contribute towards the foundation of high-quality services and the introduction of new evidence-based policies to better support desistance and encourage rehabilitation.

Scholarship on British Muslim Prison Leavers is scarce. Existing literature focuses largely on comparisons between ethnic minorities. A common theme that emerges in the literature is the significant lack of research on rehabilitation that focuses on Muslim offenders [2]. This lack of research affects all areas of this topic including a lack of assessment of the effectiveness of rehabilitative programmes aimed at Muslim offenders and ex-offenders, including a lack of understanding of offenders needs upon leaving prison and a lack of research on culturally specific challenges to rehabilitation [3]. This report is an attempt to fill some of these gaps.

There are significant intersectional themes between ethnic minority and Muslim communities, with one in three ethnic minority individuals in the U.K identifying as Muslim [4]. An apparent overlapping issue is the experience of discrimination and prejudice. Young men from ethnic minority and Muslim backgrounds are more likely to be stopped and searched, more likely to be tried, and receive longer sentences compared to young White men [5]. The Lammy Review examined the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System (CJS), noting a widespread feeling among ethnic minority inmates of being treated less well than White prisoners [6]. Young Muslim men have also reported bias and negative experiences in the CJS; complaining of poor cultural awareness and little recognition of their needs on the basis of religion, culture or social background [7]. Ethnic minority offenders frequently report more difficulties in prison; more time in segregation; higher rates of victimisation; and, lower rates of temporary release grants [8].

The current literature on the experiences of ethnic minority and Muslim ex-offenders post-release finds that resettlement is also made more difficult due to higher rates of economic and social marginalisation before and after imprisonment. Simultaneously, social relationships prove a crucial, but sometimes mixed influence on the individual, as they can be sources of support, but also ostracization and shame [9]. These difficulties within and outside of the prison system contribute to higher reoffending rates among ethnic minority prisoners and exemplify the importance for tailored rehabilitation solutions. Our research also identified four key barriers to rehabilitation after release: difficulties around accessing employment and housing; complex relationships with family members and wider community support networks; the lack of culturally appropriate tailored support; and struggles with mental health. The socio-economic position ex-offenders find themselves in upon release from prison can be a barrier to desistance. Difficulties in gaining employment and housing can push people towards crime as less than 14% of ex-offenders are employed within six months of release [10].

The nature of relationships with families, partners and their wider support network also play a significant role: positive relationships can be vital in reducing reoffending, while feelings of isolation or ostracization hinder this [11]. The availability and quality of tailored, culturally relevant support programmes, whether provided by charities, community groups or government branches is essential for supporting ex-offenders to gain employment and build community relationships, but also to help with high levels of mental health issues. Lastly, the ex-offenders must reconstruct their identity and behaviour in line with what is needed upon release [12].

A meta-theme which emerges from across this report is the sheer extent of the challenges and difficulties faced by ex-offenders; they find themselves in a nexus of personal, professional and social challenges, with the insufficient support. There are barriers upon barriers to healing and self-transformation faced by ex-offenders. Yet, statistics on prison populations and re-offending rates are always mentioned in isolation, without consideration for the colossal, and often insurmountable, set of circumstances that ex-offenders must contend against. Personal moral responsibility is not to be absolved by these circumstances, but shame and regret is piled upon ex-offenders, adding vilification and demonisation on top of pre-existing challenges. This report calls attention to the immensely challenging circumstances that drives and explains ex-offender behaviour.

This report is structured as follows; Section 1 documents the methodology of this report, which is a combination of literature, statistics and primary research conducted by CareStart. Section 2 presents precedents and context to the discussions around rehabilitation, highlighting recent policy changes, and the relevant demographic groups. Section 3 discusses the centrality of housing and employment, and how instability in both areas is a major driver of re-offending. Section 4 highlights the complexity of relationships encountered by ex-offenders, and the ensuing challenges to self-transformation. Section 5 discusses some of the problems of pre-existing rehabilitation programmes, and why they leave Muslim and ethnic minority offenders especially vulnerable. Section 6 accordingly presents some of the requirements of successful rehabilitation programmes. Section 7 assesses the complexities in reinventing an identity after a long sentence. Section 8 showcases the unique role that religion can play in rehabilitation through concepts of forgiveness. Lastly, Section 9 presents some of the positive work being done to assist ex-offenders by existing charities, organisations and chaplains.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Alongside the analysis of the secondary literature, we conducted primary research. We began by contacting just over 135 organisations and stakeholders, who are currently, or were previously working with British Muslim ex-offenders, requesting both written evidence and suggestions of participants who could participate in this study. With thanks to these groups, many of them reached out to their networks, requesting participation in our interviews and survey. A large proportion of these stakeholders included charities (including those with faith-sensitive services); HMP probation officers; Muslim prison chaplains; and officials from the Ministry of Justice, many of whom also forwarded our call for evidence to their networks. The [Muslim] police officers we contacted often did not stay directly in touch with offenders and so were unable to refer ex-offender participants. We also supplemented this with multiple social media campaigns, via WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. Additionally, we contacted non-Muslim prison leavers to explore the possibility of them putting us in contact with their British Muslim contacts.

There appeared to be a sentiment of apathy and research fatigue within communities, some who expressed disappointment in researchers and policy officials who had not taken their previous participation in similar projects forward for 'top-down' actionable change, nor provided grassroots support. Many of these organisations and professionals were also heavily under-resourced, and therefore did not have the time to participate or follow-up for our call to evidence. Some individuals therefore also requested substantial payments to remunerate their time, in both administrative costs and to pay each ex-offender they had connections with, which was out of scope for the budget of this project. Almost 5% of organisations of the organisations we contacted in England and Wales, who previously had direct bespoke projects supporting British Muslim ex-offenders, had decommissioned their short-term projects assisting these communities. The main reasons for this were limited funding and resource. Such projects were unsustainable without long-term funding. This meant that even groups who created rehabilitative projects over the last decade were no longer in touch with the ex-offender communities they once served. There was also considerable ambiguity as to how their organisations can work in conjunction with mainstream public services to assist adult ex-offenders in a way that provided long-term, sustainable support. The lack of data storage on existing engagement with British Muslim ex-offenders, such as support via helplines, also seemed to be a key issue. Even when organisations had some ongoing contact with these groups, their data was not always recorded.

'Gatekeepers' in social research are referred to those who can arbitrate access to either a social role, field setting, groups or an individual. Such gatekeepers exist for our research communities, either in the form of organisations and officials who are currently serving or supporting British Muslim ex-offenders in some way, or the ex-offenders themselves. The ex-offenders who actively engaged in the project were vocal about the need for support that is sustainable and had concerns that the rate of re-offending amongst both their Muslim friends, and people they had spent time within prison, were very high. Some ex-offenders, including non-Muslim ex-offenders, who had Muslim ex-offender friends, expressed their disheartened views that all the contacts they thought could engage in this research, or our desistance workshops, were either back inside prison, or their mental health had severely deteriorated to the point of disengagement. As one interlocutor described,

"I went through my contact list and thought of others [Muslim ex-offenders] who could chat to you, but none. All of them are back inside, or their mental health is that bad they can't do it."

This itself provides evidence of the necessity of targeted support for these communities. The ex-offenders who informed our gatekeepers that they were unable to assist this project often cited their reasons as lack of support from researchers and policy professionals once their projects had been completed; research fatigue; and hesitance due to social stigma once they leave prison. The latter was particularly the case for female Muslim ex-offenders, of whom our gatekeeper contacted twelve individuals, none of whom participated in this study.

It is therefore no surprise that many of the organisations that have previously completed research on British Muslim ex-offenders, were groups who already ran supportive projects for these groups and had pre-established a network and rapport with them (such as, the Khidma Centre, the Salam Project, Muslim Aid, Maslaha and Arooj). The data gathered from these groups in our literature review was pivotal in shaping our recommendations, but we supplemented this with our own research, both with Muslim ex-offenders and organisations who had, or were currently working with, British Muslim ex-offenders. These reasons were two-fold: a) much of this data dates back 5+ years, and b) this was sometimes included with the experiences of wider (non-Muslim) ethnic minority communities, and we wanted to use religion as a specific factor, particularly as recidivism rates seemed to be high amongst British Muslims communities.

We gathered a total of eighteen responses. Participation in our oral and written evidence (see Appendices 1 and 2), telephone interviews and focus groups were therefore relatively low, totalling three interviews with Muslim ex-offenders; four interviews with stakeholders working with ex-offenders; and, two written evidence submissions, primarily due to the reasons cited above. We therefore extended our methodology to include a short anonymous survey link, which included the same questions that we would have asked in the interview (see Appendix 3). We received nine further responses directly from ex-offenders this way. We are aware that this sample is not representative and therefore not statistically generalisable. Despite our best efforts, there were challenges on the response rate from female British Muslim ex-offenders. Though we recommend that further research is done in this field, we recognise that the issues we faced in gathering responses are far-reaching. All of our respondents were male, and our youngest interlocutors fell into the 18-24 category, while our eldest was over 60 years of age. The questions we asked were limited to people's post-release experiences in order to focus on the resettlement needs and causes of recidivism amongst these communities. All our data was analysed and then anonymised. The names in this report are pseudonyms, used to keep our participants anonymous. Lastly, our findings and data analysis inform our strategic policy recommendations.

Religion/ethnicity nexus, defining Islamophobia

Although this report is expressly concerned with British Muslim ex-offenders, it will cite literature around ethnic minorities as well. This is firstly because of the substantial overlap between British Muslim and ethnic minority populations. 88% of British Muslims are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Accordingly, experiences of ethnic minorities often (but not always) translate to experiences of British Muslims. This is not to say that there is not a meaningful distinction between ethnicity and religion. Indeed, one of the novel contributions of this report is to document experiences of British Muslims by virtue of their faith. These experiences would thusly account for the British Muslims who are not from ethnic minority backgrounds.

A related consideration here is how Islamophobia and discrimination are to be operationalised. This report uses the APPG definition of Islamophobia; "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" [13]. Aside from the widespread adoption of this definition across political and civil society groups, the APPG definition aptly captures the racist tropes that find expression in Islamophobia, to the extent that Sikhs often find themselves victims to Islamophobic sentiments. Accordingly, much of the experiences of racism that are documented in this report do form part of the Islamophobia.

THE BACKGROUND TO REHABILITATION

Before delving into our findings, this section discusses the context of rehabilitation in Britain, highlighting that Muslims and ethnic minorities experience relatively adverse outcomes in the CJS owing to difficult socio-economic conditions amid a rehabilitation system that has had limited success.

Increasing privatisation of rehabilitation services

There have been significant changes to the Government's rehabilitation policies in recent years. Most significantly, rehabilitation has become the remit of private Community Rehabilitation Companies [14]. When these private contracts were introduced in 2015, they were accompanied with a promise of transforming rehabilitation services and reducing reoffending rates [15]. However, their success has been limited: a 2018 government review of these contracts found that these companies had not invested in rehabilitation services and the quality of these services had deteriorated as a result [16]. Similarly, a 2017 report by HM Chief Inspector of Probation, Dame Glenys Stacey, which aimed to review the U.K.'s rehabilitation processes, found that Community Rehabilitation Companies were failing to reduce reoffending [17]. The HM Inspectorate of Probation found that this government policy trapped people in a pattern of low-level reoffending, noting that almost two-third of people released from sentences of under one year reoffend [18].

Negative experiences of British Muslims with the CJS amid adverse socio-economic conditions

At the same time, the political and social climate in Britain over the last fifteen years has resulted in Muslims being the subject of increased suspicion, surveillance, and negative stereotyping. Assumptions about Islam and Muslims also appear to be deeply entrenched within the CJS [19]. This reflects wider societal perceptions that associates Muslims with some of the most serious of serious offences, such as 'honour' killings, sexual offences, and terrorism [20]. The literature on Muslim prisoners has been distorted by a disproportionate focus on radicalisation, and an assumption of Muslims as a homogenous group [21].

British Muslims tend to be in lower socio-economic groups. Around 50% of those identifying as Muslim in the UK are aged twenty-five and under [22], partly explaining the over-representation of Muslims in the CJS, since criminality is especially associated with young people, and with economic deprivation [23]. 59% of Muslim prisoners were aged 15-29 compared with 47% of all prisoners. The Muslim prison population has grown significantly over the last decade. This period has seen a 47% increase in the Muslim prisoner population from 8,864 (in 2007) to 13,008 in 2019, increasing the proportion of Muslims in prison relative to the total population of Muslims [24].

As of 2021, there were 13,724 Muslims incarcerated in the U.K [25]. Muslims are overrepresented in the statistics – they make up only 5% of the general population but comprise 18% of the prison population [26]. In maximum security prisons and Young Offender’s Institutions, one in five offenders is Muslim [27]. In some London prisons such as Belmarsh, Brixton and Wormwood Scrubs, a third of inmates are Muslim. Muslim ex-offenders are also overrepresented in the reoffending rates. The Muslim Youth Helpline, a charity who offer faith and culturally sensitive support online or by phone, found that young Muslim ex-offenders were more likely to reoffend than non-Muslim ex-offenders and often cited a lack of support from probation officers, prison staff and family members as a contributor to this [28]. Unfortunately, government data only routinely records reoffending rates by ethnic background and not by religion. The overall reoffending rate for April to June 2020 was 29% [29]. Within prisons, Muslim prisoners experienced the lowest rates of Enhanced Incentives Status (EIS): only 47% Muslim inmates received the privileges that accompany EIS, which is theoretically awarded to prisoners who have showed a commitment to rehabilitation [30].



Overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in prison population

Prisoners from ethnic minority groups are also significantly overrepresented in the prison population; figures from March 2020 show that around 27% of prisoners were from an ethnic minority heritage [31]. Furthermore, 43% of those imprisoned under the age of eighteen are from an ethnic minority background. The rates of ethnic minority children in youth custody are increasing [32]. These statistics combined with poor employment outcomes for all prisoners, compound the disadvantage experienced by ethnic minority and Muslim offenders [33]. Similarly, ethnic minority groups have, on average, longer sentences. In 2020, White offenders had an average custodial sentence length of 19.6 months, in comparison with 26.8 for Black offenders, 28.6 for Asian offenders, and 24.4 for offenders of Mixed and Chinese or Other ethnic groups [34]. Several experts have argued that the additive impact of poverty, race, and social isolation can push young ethnic minority men into a subculture of violence and criminality [35].

Disparity in reoffending rates

In 2021, the Government's reoffending statistics revealed that Black offenders had a reoffending rate of 32.7%; White offenders had a rate of 30.6%; Asian offenders 24.3%; and offenders in the Other (including Mixed) ethnic group had the lowest reoffending rate (20.9%) [36]. However, data released under a freedom information request in 2014, found that among Muslim prisoners released between April 2011 and March 2012, the reoffending rate was the highest of 35.8% [37]. The rate of reoffending is higher for adults with lower sentences: those who had sentences of six months or less had a proven reoffending rate of 60.3%, this lowered to 57.7% for those with sentences of over a year and to 22.3% for those with sentences of over one year [38]. Theft had the highest reoffending rate of reason for imprisonment at 50.5% [39].

Statistics are weaponised to stir xenophobia and Islamophobia

Surface-level presentation of statistics is often used by media outlets and critics of multiculturalism to whip up hatred against ethnic minorities and Muslims. The disproportionate number of Muslims in prison is often cited to assert that the presence of Muslims in Britain and Europe is harmful. Such claims are as inaccurate as they are problematic. The remainder of this report will demonstrate that belonging to an ethnic minority group or being a Muslim does not causally explain the disparity. A nexus of factors (including socio-economic factors, relationships, a lack of funding, and discrimination) together provide a far more robust causal explanation. This is important to point out at this juncture because of the sheer extent of the myths that circulate around this topic. Moreover, as we will see later in this report, the extent of stigmatisation encountered by ex-offenders is a major factor behind re-offending; callous wording, and imprecise analysis can exacerbate this.

HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT

Adverse housing and employment conditions go some way in explaining the disproportionate representation of Muslim and ethnic minorities in conviction and re-offending rates.

Barriers to accessing housing and employment increase the risk of re-offending

One of the most frequently cited factors determining the success or difficulties experienced by ex-offenders after release from prison is the socio-economic constraints they face, particularly in relation to housing and employment [40]. Access to accommodation and employment upon release is vital to reducing reoffending [41]. Gaining employment after prison decreases an individual's chances of reoffending by nearly 10% [42]. However, ex-offenders experience difficulty in acquiring and maintaining jobs, especially for those who have served longer sentences, which can incite people towards criminal methods of making money [43]. As many as 60% of prison inmates already have difficulty with basic literacy skills [44] and the challenges of poor education and lack of qualifications is compounded by having a criminal record [45]. Finding employment is made even more difficult by a high rate of psychological and social problems amongst ex-offenders. Only 17% of ex-offenders manage to obtain employment within a year of release.

Ex-offenders on the importance of quality employment post-release

All the ex-offenders interviewed for this report mentioned gaining employment as something that was particularly important for reducing reoffending. Aabid, who found employment with a supportive employer upon release, emphasised the need for employment that is not just “a job” [46]. Instead, desistance is made more attainable by employment with career opportunities and a living wage that provides people with a motivation and sense of purpose. Intriguingly, although the significance of long-term career prospects rather than just “a job”, was not a recurring theme in the literature, it was mentioned by all the participants we interviewed. Junaid also noted that financial insecurity can often occur while individuals are in employment and is a key driver in reoffending. He summarised the difficulty faced in accessing suitable employment as an ex-offender stating,

“Job centre pays pennies... what job am I going to get? A cleaning £8-9 an hour, where's that going to get you?” [47].

Aabid also explained:

“I've seen guys that have been released, went to work in McDonalds and after they've paid their rent, after they've paid their bills, after they've paid for food, they're left with hardly anything in their hands and they think 'what is the point?...they think, I'll go commit crime, at least I'll get fed' [48].

Aabid also told us that ultimately low paying or unrewarding jobs damage motivation, whereas the prospect of career and decent income encourages desistance. Our participant Kasim also expressed the need for incentives for people to turn their lives around, both in the form of income opportunities and lasting social relationships. In his experience, the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating crime rates as people are unable to support their families, including those receiving full-time wages. Aabid spoke about the importance of supportive employers: employers need to be mindful of the requirements of ex-offenders (e.g., needing to attend probation meetings) and of themselves as Muslim employees (e.g., by having a prayer room at work). One organisation we interviewed works with ex-offenders providing employment, social support and mentoring. Their director specifically hires Muslim ex-convicts to help them achieve careers and skills, as opposed to just employment. He emphasised that this is instrumental, as in their experience a job is not only essential for financial reasons, but also helps build their esteem and self-respect [49]. Shoket, who works with young offenders and British Muslim offenders in Scotland stated that, in his experience, accessing education and employment is the main difficulty faced by ex-offenders [50].

While the interviewees noted that it is increasingly hard for ex-offenders to access employment, individuals from two of the organisations we interviewed stated that in their experience ex-offenders are often some of the best employees, with a tendency to work harder and with greater enthusiasm [51]. Despite this, there is a stigma among employers that ex-offenders may damage their businesses, through either theft, damages, or disrepute.

The centrality of financial stability and employment in reducing reoffending was also highlighted in our survey data. 87.5% of respondents said that gaining employment and managing finances was one of the main difficulties they had experienced upon release [52]. Half of our respondents stated that reoffending rates could be reduced if public organisations were better equipped to support ex-offenders with employment, housing, and financial support [53].

Accessing suitable accommodation is often difficult for ex-offenders, particularly soon after release from prison. Junaid's experience with this was especially challenging as he was homeless for a long time upon release. He highlighted the need for support for ex-offenders to access benefits, education, accommodation, and employment as many lack family support, as he did. Homelessness increases chances of reoffending [54]. The housing that is provided must also be mindful of an ex-offender's needs e.g., would it be helpful or unhelpful for their desistance process to be placed in the same location as they were in prior to offending? One organisation we interviewed found that the processes in place post-release could make rehabilitation more difficult, for example, housing ex-offenders in inappropriate locations [55]. One of their service users had struggled with alcohol before his detention and was housed next to a pub. The combination of this and being alone with plenty of free time led to him drinking again and eventually committing a crime and being jailed.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

The quality and availability of social relations, be they familial, religious or professional, play a major role in determining whether an individual reoffends or not. Stigma from any of these relations is often cited as a significant explanatory factor across different forms of evidence.

Family support plays a crucial role in reducing re-offending

Ex-offenders' relationships with family members and their wider support network play a significant role in their ability to adapt to life outside prison [56]. These relationships, if positive and managed successfully, can be a major support for ex-offenders. However, they can also pose difficulty as relationships are often strained by time in prison, particularly after longer sentences [57]. Many individuals become excluded from their family upon entering the CJS [58]. This can worsen pre-existing mental health struggles. During the pandemic, when those in prison became more isolated from their remaining support networks, calls from prisoners to mental health helpline The Samaritans, increased by 60% [59]. Others feel that their families are unable to understand their experiences in prison and upon release, or struggle to fit back into relationships which functioned before their detention [60]. This can mean that individuals lack the support that is vital in adjusting to life after release [61]. Arooj's study into the reoffending and rehabilitation experiences of 115 ethnic minority and Muslim ex-offenders found that support ought to be provided to ex-offenders' families, as well as the individuals themselves, as families can play such a crucial role in supporting rehabilitation [62]. 39% of their respondents said that an increased understanding of the CJS, drug misuse and crime among their family members would help reduce reoffending. Nearly half of their 115 respondents said that their family had lost respect in the community because of their offending.

Muslim ex-offenders experience displacement from their communities

Although in-depth qualitative interviews in Calverley's oft cited book 'Cultures of Desistance' found that Muslim ex-offenders often have stronger family bonds, they also found that maintaining these relationships is challenging [63]. While close familial bonds provide encouragement throughout the rehabilitation process, family involvement could also add pressure to the ex-offender and increase shame when the ex-offender makes mistakes [64]. This coupled with adverse socio-economic circumstances makes refraining from reoffending difficult [65]. This can lead to the displacement of Muslim individuals from their communities, which impacts not only the individuals and families, but also communities as a whole, affecting how communities perceive themselves [66]. Muslims who converted in prison have particular difficulties embedding themselves in the community upon release as they are often attempting to join a community that they were not part of before their prison time, which combined with their criminal past can leave them marginalised [67].

Stigma encountered by ex-offenders

These family relationships and immediate social networks take place within the context of a wider community. Communities, like families, can have an extremely positive impact on an ex-offender's desistance process, but the reality of experience is often complex. There was a consensus among the ex-offenders we interviewed that speaking about their experience was difficult both for themselves and members of their community. Junaid recalled feeling lost as "The community [was] asking all of these questions, what are you supposed to tell them?" [68]. Aabid spoke of feeling judged by most members in his community, which has resulted in him remaining somewhat isolated. He would attend the mosque for prayers and then swiftly leave. Kasim similarly stated that his experiences of judgement within his community quickly taught him not to open as he "learnt the hard way not to tell people where you've been" [69]. He recalled: "I lost a lot of people. People just judged me...when they find out you've gone to prison you just get judged straight away" [70]. For Kasim, the stigma around ex-offenders ultimately has prevented him from accessing support as he did not want to "to go somewhere and get rejected" [71]. As a Black convert to Islam, Kasim regularly experienced discrimination by organisations and individuals in his rehabilitation journey. He recalled: "when it boiled down to it, I had to help myself" [72]. Junaid also found that a lack of openness around topics of offending in his community made it harder to access support:

"The problem is with going to a mosque is how am I going to speak to them?... they don't wanna know... there's nothing to talk about in the mosque. I've never heard anyone talk about prison in the community" [73].

In our short answer surveys, 50% of respondents stated that their experiences of stigma was the main challenge they had experienced in the wider community, with 12.5% saying they felt the community was supportive [74]. Similarly, the most common response as to why British Muslim ex-offenders may not access support was the feeling that people did not want to give them a chance or take them seriously with their criminal history [75].

The organisations we interviewed noted the struggles of ex-offenders to reconnect with a community, or even to recognise they have a community to reconnect with [76]. In Shoket's experience, gained through working with British Muslim's ex-offenders, community stigma can in turn put pressure on his family relationships. Families often find it difficult to be honest to their community and admit that a family member had been to prison. Because of the difficulties in rebuilding these old relationships, many ex-offenders find it easier to build a social network with other ex-offenders [77]. Consequently, the organisations emphasised the need for openness, education and outreach within communities, in which both mosque and family involvement is essential [78]. They highlighted the importance of forming relationships with people in the community and that socialising with these friends can help rebuild an individual's sense of dignity [79].

Issues of shame and stigma within the community were highlighted as particularly difficult for youth ex-offenders (between ten and eighteen) as this puts pressure on family relationships [80]. One organisation which works with youth offenders and high-risk individuals summarised the difficult decision that community stigma imposes on the family: "you lose kudos in the community [if your child offends or is at risk] and you have to make a decision as a parent if you're going to lock off your child or lock off the community. Especially for drug related offending there is shame" [81]. They suggested that the severity of this tension is because a criminal lifestyle is seen as un-Islamic. Accordingly, young people who feel the pressures from modern life can often end up lying to their parents and living one life at home and a different life with their peers [82]. This can create cognitive dissonance. This experience was echoed among organisations working with adult offenders [83]. In their experience it is not uncommon for families to disown their children or to practice denial, often saying that family members have been abroad for a long time instead of in prison [84]. The stigma and taboo surrounding offending needs to be replaced with an active support for the growing number of British Muslim Ex-offenders [85].

Female ex-offenders face even more stigma

Muslim and Asian women face additional stigma in their community. Many are disowned by their family, and others struggle to rebuild a future for themselves and their children. Furthermore, they may need support with rebuilding self-esteem, confidence and ability to re-socialise as parents, active citizens and future employees [86]. In an interview with the BBC, one Muslim woman stated, "There was a moment when I thought, 'I want to be back in prison', because I found it so difficult on the outside". The shame she felt and other people's feelings towards her, made it difficult for her to leave the house [87]. Bunsy and Ahmed's (2019) study interviewed seventeen Muslim women in Newhall prison to better understand their experiences and found that the women often felt that their community was more accepting of male offenders: many women felt they were viewed as being dishonourable [88]. This disparity has been emphasised in numerous studies [89]. One impact of this was that family relationships had often broken down and that women felt they were unable to return to families or communities upon release [90]. This led to isolation and a lack of support, both economic and emotional, that could make women vulnerable to reoffending [91].

A fifteen-month study by Muslim Hands and The Barrow Cadbury Trust into the experiences, needs and identity of Muslim female ex-offenders found that they either had very negative, or non-existent relationships with their family, whilst others had a very supporting relationship [92]. The Muslim Women in Prison Project has outlined several cultural, emotional, structural and practical issues affecting female ex-offenders as they pass "through the gate" [93]. These include difficulties rebuilding family relationships, finding safe and adequate accommodation (hostels can return women into environments with a high level of drug use), and in finding employment [94]. Their project emphasises the importance of culturally informed interventions, especially related to mental health, an area which remains essential to the rehabilitation of female Muslim prisoners [95]. They recommend a community led approach to developing preventative programmes. These should be tailored specifically to the needs of Muslim women and have contributions from Muslim women with lived experience of the CJS.



Relationship complexities encountered post-release

Our interviewees spoke about the complexity of relationships after imprisonment. Junaid found his relationships to be strained after release; his family and community had questions that he did not know how to answer, such as where he had been during his time away. His father had told people that he was abroad while he was in prison, and they no longer have a speaking relationship. His wife had also left him while he was inside detention. He found that his family was unable to accept the mistakes and decisions he had made in life. As a result, loneliness and isolation were a significant consequence of his imprisonment, which only degenerated post-release.

Aabid's thoughts were similar. The relationships that he held before imprisonment had changed as "everyone else has moved on" [96], often causing him to feel left out and secluded. He found that having been in prison made it more difficult to find a spouse and that this further strained his relationship with his family who have "suffered as well through this process" [97]. However, Aabid found that genuine support and pride from his family e.g., in relation to careers was a strong motivating force. In our interview with Shoket, who has spent over 8 years working with ethnic-minority young offenders and ex-offenders in Glasgow, he pointed out that even when families want to be supportive, they don't always know the best way to do this. Should they be giving their family member space, or should they be imposing rules? This highlights the importance of professional support being in place for families and an increased awareness of the needs of ex-offenders throughout the community.

Mentoring and buddying schemes are highly effective, yet under funded

Additional evidence we obtained from a charity specialising in befriending for Muslims and minority groups found that stigma and a lack of family support can compound other difficulties faced by Muslim ex-offenders. The charity found that these communities needed "buddy systems", support to engage with community members and education on healthy relationships. Unfortunately, the charity eventually had to discontinue their service because of a lack of funding [98]. Another organisation that has worked supported Muslim ex-offenders upon release from prison similarly noted that relationships and support networks are provide ex-offenders with practical assistance e.g., in applying for benefits and accessing jobs and accommodation [99]. Henley Homes, an organisation who support ex-offenders particularly with employment, noted that both the lack of a supportive social network, and peer pressure from old social networks could be factors in reoffending [100]. Finally, one individual we interviewed who worked with ex-offenders in numerous capacities such as through Mosaic, an ex-offender mentoring service, noted that when ex-offenders are ostracised by families, the temptation of returning to gangs is often more compelling and that people are often aggressively re-recruited upon release [101].

DIFFICULTIES WITHIN REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES

The evidence gathered highlights several critical failings of rehabilitation programmes. These failings are to the extent that they can be considered a causal factor behind re-offending rates. This is especially true for Muslims and ethnic minorities, who have cited a lack of culturally relevant programmes (especially for women), experiences of Islamophobia, and a neglect of factors such as mental health.

A lack of culturally relevant rehabilitation services drives disengagement

There are specific difficulties faced by Muslim and ethnic minority prisoners in the rehabilitation process [102]. Experiences of rehabilitation can be worsened by programmes that fail to recognise this, and consequently become perceived as not 'culturally relevant' [103]. A 2020 thematic review by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that male ethnic minority prisoners were less likely to feel their prison had a 'rehabilitative culture', and that this term held less meaning to them than their White counterparts [104]. Muslim Youth Helpline found that rates of accessing rehabilitation support was particularly low among young British Muslim ex-offenders, with 48% not contacting resettlement services [105]. They suggest that this is caused by fear that they will not be understood by these mainstream services and a lack of understanding of how to access support [106]. The failure of such services to reduce the levels of reoffending is frequently highlighted in the literature, which suggests that these operations fail to distinguish between individuals who are dangerous and who are not [107]. Furthermore, many offenders have short term sentences, of less than two years, which is below the statutory period where support must be provided [108].

Both Junaid and Kasim experienced racism and Islamophobia throughout their incarceration and rehabilitation processes. Junaid stated that his experiences of racism in prison made moving towards rehabilitation post-release much more difficult. Kasim's experiences of racism and Islamophobia came from officers, inmates and even charities dedicated to supporting ex-offenders. For those working with ex-offenders, it was clear how of discrimination and racism contribute to a mistrust of authority [109].

Rehabilitation programmes and organisations need to be aware of this. Junaid found that support organisations couldn't provide support that was fitting for him as a British Muslim ex-offender as "*they [did not] understand the way the people are, how the community is, the way they talk to people*", [110] echoing the research on the cultural irrelevance of rehabilitation processes.

Rehabilitation services for ethnic minority and Muslim women are especially rare

Programmes that specialise in rehabilitation of ethnic minority or Muslim women is particularly sparse, as is the literature on the topic [111]. Ethnic minority women are more likely to be sentenced than White women and report lower feelings of safety, less access to mental health facilities and discrimination from prisoners and staff [112]. Of young women ages eighteen to twenty-four in prison, 22% are from ethnic minority groups, compared to only 13% of the general population [113]. The experiences of young ethnic minority women are often overlooked in policy and subject to overlapping disadvantages [114].

Rehabilitation programmes are often too short

A recurring theme that came from both ex-offenders and organisations was that the length of support offered to ex-offender's post-release was often inadequate. This means that support can end while it is still vital. It is important for supporting caseworkers and individuals to build rapport and trust with service users [115]. This means that 1-1 support that lasts from inside prison to significantly after release is necessary. However, organisations often lack the time and funding to achieve this.

Rehabilitation programmes often do not recognise structural barriers to reintegration

Finally, rehabilitation programmes need to recognise individual as well as the structural barriers to re-entering society. One interviewee asked, "is it about the barriers to re-entry into society or the reasons why they went into prison haven't gone away, such as undiagnosed needs, SEN and learning difficulties, problems with finance?" [116]. As everyone has different needs and drivers for offending, they will need individual rehabilitation plans. For Kasim, rehabilitation programmes need to recognise and understand the experiences of the ex-offender, which he believes would be best done by someone with lived experience of the Criminal Justice System:

"You see somebody that's come out of jail, and they've turned their life around. I believe they should be the people that are supporting somebody that's just come out of jail because somebody that's just got a 9-5, that's never been inside a jail cell, not even a police station, how are you giving advice to somebody that's got so much problems. You see the whole like jail lifestyle, it comes with so many other things... You can't talk to somebody that hasn't lived that and find a solution" [117].

Kasim's comments echo the sentiment in the literature that there seems to be a disconnect between the support offered and the experiences of an ex-offender, that in turn decreases trust in support programmes and ultimately their effectiveness.

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES

The complexity of the experiences of ethnic minority and Muslim ex-offenders upon release from prison demand ‘culturally aware solutions.’ Such solutions must show awareness and knowledge of the problems faced, and recognise the need for specific, tailored programmes to reduce recidivism. They must be holistic, approaching the individual as a whole and recognising the wide variety of cultural, structural, and individual factors that impact a person’s experiences upon leaving custody [118]. In absence of such considerations, rehabilitation programmes will be ineffective in supporting individuals to reform.

The need to build trust with rehabilitation services

Understanding the factors associated with reoffending works to help prevent reoffending. For example, ethnic minority young offenders are likely to need advocacy to access education and training support, which reflects awareness that this group typically has particularly difficult experiences with social institutions and thus may approach them with scepticism or a lack of trust [119]. These interventions need to actively support individuals, to offer hope, build resilience, engage confidently post-release life, and rebuild trust in their ability to reintegrate into society. These solutions must address the problems that these ex-offenders face. For example, Arooj’s Survey of 115 Ethnic minority and Muslim ex-offenders found that 90% said there was a need for a Befriending and Mentoring support service upon leaving prison, and 62% of respondents said that this service would make them less likely to reoffend [120].

Our interviewees spoke of the need for public organisations to build genuine trust with ex-offenders [121]. Organisations need to “be real [with a] caring element” [122]. Kasim observed “they don’t realise when we go to see them, we’ve still got feelings, we’ve got emotions” [123]. The importance of a genuine rapport between support workers and ex-offenders was named as the most important aspect of support by over a third (37.5%) of our survey respondents [124]. Kasim suggested that this may be most effective if the support was being provided by those with lived experience of the Criminal Justice System. The provision of long-term support that provides a non-judgmental point of support for ex-offenders is vital [125]. Many grassroots organisations provide a valuable support structure for helping ex-offenders face barriers to their rehabilitation. It is vital that these organisations are funded sufficiently for them to be able to not only continue their work but to expand it to meet the needs of a growing Muslim prison population.

Furthermore, this report highlights the importance of wider British Muslim communities and institutions in encouraging the reintegration of ex-offenders into their localities but that ambiguity of their current role. Organisations need to work within the wider Muslim community as well as with the individuals and families with direct experience of the CJS. Facilitating their acceptance back into their local community is critical in helping to restore their self-perception and outlook. Family members of ex-offenders need to be offered support and guidance [126].

Providing support for finances and mental health is essential

Rehabilitation programmes must recognise the practical centrality of employment and financial circumstance in reducing reoffending. A Big Issue led consultation with multiple rehabilitation focused charities found that a reduction in the length of time ex-offenders must disclose convictions, tailored employment support and a multi-organisational approach to housing would all significantly help ex-offenders employment rates [127]. Financial struggles and periods of destitution are a significant impetus to reoffending. Consequently, it is vitally important that ex-offenders have accommodation set up before they leave custody [128]. Similarly, ex-offenders require timely access to benefits and employment, as well as support when applying for these upon release [129]. Preparation for life after prison should begin before release [130].

Similarly, the high rates of mental health difficulties among ex-offenders must be addressed. Our interviews underlined the need for counselling access soon after release [131]. However, Kasim suggested that there was a need for alternative therapies and counselling that ex-offenders may find more accessible such as an adult version of play therapy. He suggested counselling through activities that would be accessible for those who “don’t want speak to people.”

Scotland’s success story

In contrast to UK’s generally high reoffending rates, Scotland’s rates have recently reached a nineteen year low through an emphasis on community payback, rather than prison for petty crimes, and the use of schemes like the Violence Reduction Unit which emphasise quality employment, mentoring and twenty-four seven support [132]. Ultimately, it is necessary to recognise that desistance is a process that happens over the long-term and cannot be supported by solely focusing on reoffending but requires created a non-offending identity and fosters self-belief, a process which is helped by employment, mental health support and a string social support network [133]. Positive activities, culturally relevant support and family relationships are essential [134]. Individuals from ex-offenders’ communities should be involved in planning rehabilitation programmes and building good community support as relationships with communities can be vital in the desistance process but if these relationships are negative then feelings of shame or isolation can hinder the process [135].

REFORMING IDENTITY AND MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH

Prison is a totalising environment, with deliberately constructed sights, sounds, and rhythms to a day. Over longer sentences, this entirely changes an individual's identity, and accordingly, their behavioural patterns. When this compounds with the lack of appropriate rehabilitation programmes, complex family relationships and adverse employment prospects, ex-offenders are left with a monumental – and often insurmountable – struggle for self-reformation.

Identity and behavioural patterns change dramatically

The literature suggests that imprisonment affects an individual's identity in a way that hinders rehabilitation upon release. Some of the most significant barriers (alongside difficulties with employment and restarting family relationships) include difficulties caused by memories of prison and in adjusting to a neighbourhood environment from an institutional one [136]. This shift, particularly for those who were imprisoned for longer periods of time, involves changing how one thinks, acts and perceives themselves. Ultimately, “imprisonment itself restricts young men’s ability to exercise any creative energy in relation to their desired non offending identity” [137]. Difficulties in constructing a new, positive, post-incarceration identity can be compounded by the prejudice and discrimination experienced by ethnic minority and Muslim ex-offenders [138]. Aabid, Junaid and Kasim spoke of the complete change of a person that occurs in prison. Consequently, an individual must navigate the external world as a completely different person post-release. Aabid explained “I’ve changed my beliefs, I’ve changed my behaviour, I’ve changed my attitude, my thinking, everything. Completely a different person” [139]. For Kasim, this came with a dramatic lack of confidence, further reflecting the need for social and formal support.

Similarly, ex-offenders can struggle to adjust behaviour upon release. In one study of Pakistani Muslim Ex-Offenders, which followed 9 participants in-depth, one participant recalls being unable to leave his bedroom in the morning following release until a family member let him out, emphasising the massive adjustment needed following release [140]. Succinctly, “time spent in prison is a time of de-individualization and the institutionalisation of the personality” [141]. Consequently, readjustment requires support, both from understanding family members, and from specialised services that recognise the complexities of an individual’s experiences. Similarly, sensitive and tailored mental health support is essential for those released from prison [142].

Time management and mental health suffer post-release

Our interviews also found that ex-offenders often struggled with managing their own time of themselves upon release [143]. Aabid found that time seemed to go much more quickly upon release, leaving him always feeling like it was lacking: “I found out that I didn’t have enough time. The days were going by quick, the weeks, the months” [144]. Conversely, other respondents reported struggling with excessive free time and not knowing what to do with their time. Unsurprisingly, given these adjustments and the difficulties of incarceration, our interviewees stressed the importance of mental health support upon release [145]. Our organisations observed that a lack of self-belief upon release is a particular challenge [146]. Ex-offenders can struggle to believe they are strong enough to change and make a difference in society. It is harder still to maintain this self-belief when experiencing knock-backs in the desistance journey. As many as 70% of prisoners have had a form of mental illness at some point [147]. The rates of mental health problems among those who have left the prison system is much higher than among the general population [148]. Poor mental health, isolation and a lack of sense of purpose or belonging all contribute to reoffending and need to be considered alongside the structural barriers to rehabilitation [149].



The role of religion in reducing reoffending

Cultural and religious preferences should also be considered during resettlement. Religion can be a hugely positive and supportive influence while in prison, and upon release, providing purpose, routine, and ritual [150]. Returning to a religious community allows individuals to focus on ideas of morality and engage in regular, meaningful religious acts, as part of a community of others doing the same or individually. This can focus attention and emotion, give a sense of familiarity and belonging through group membership, all of which can reduce anxiety [151]. Religion also allows ex-offenders to reframe their self-perceived identity, as narratives and rituals of atonement and forgiveness allow a separation with the past and a focus on redemption [152]. Ultimately, religion can allow individuals to make sense of difficult experiences [153].

Islam allows for redemption and forgiveness in a way that stands in stark contrast with the perceived punitive nature of the CSJ. Simultaneously, it can provide hope for a different future through the concept of sincere repentance [155]. Calverley's study of 34 British Bangladeshi Muslims ex-offenders found that Islam provided a "hook for change". This could be a focus of rehabilitation, supported by religious friends who could recognise efforts to change [156]. A separate study of 19 British Muslim ex-offenders by Qasim and Webster found that many of the Muslim men they interviewed who were struggling with rehabilitation were also missing the rituals of prayer, work, and marriage [157]. Religion often provides Muslims with an impetus not to reoffend through concepts of morality, which could be a helpful tool in tackling reoffending among young Muslim inmates. However, while Muslim prison chaplains offer significant support in prison, this support is less readily available on release with the Muslim prison chaplain's association mainly relying on signposting to community chaplains. Consequently, the notion of 'culturally aware solutions' should involve more than simply taking culture or faith into account, but also recognise the significant and impactful roles these could have in aiding rehabilitation. For example, representatives from faith groups ought to have a role in rehabilitation procedures, to ensure their suitability and consequently increase trust in them. Failing to recognise and harness the potential of religion to contribute positively to the lives of young Muslims, is a missed opportunity on the part of authorities [158].

Both Aabid and Junaid found Islam helpful during their experience with the Criminal Justice System. Junaid found that prayer provided him with comfort while inside prison and subsequently prayed every day, despite the inadequacies of the prison environment for prayer. Aabid found that Islam was particularly helpful as he adjusted to life after release as it encouraged him to appreciate what he had and to recognise every day as valuable. Two of the organisations we spoke to emphasise the potentially invaluable role that Imam's could have in the experience of ex-offenders [159]. The first noted that Imams could be important figures in ex-offenders' rehabilitation journeys, if effective in their support and understanding of their communities' problems.

WORK BEING DONE BY CHARITIES ORGANISATIONS, AND CHAPLAINS WORKING WITH BRITISH MUSLIMS

There are many organisations, charities and individuals already making a vital difference to the lives of ex-offenders through dedicated work and it is important that this is recognised. For our research we were able to identify and contact over 100 bodies doing such work in the U.K alone. In Clinks survey of 132 organisations working with ex-offenders in the UK, 17 stated that their work targeted ethnic minority individuals [160]. These organisations are also leading the way in lived experience involvement with 97% organisations involving people with lived experience in the design or delivery of services [161].

A breadth of grassroots organisations

Organisations working with ex-offenders worked in a wide variety of areas. Organisations such as The Feltham Community Chaplaincy, Arooj, Essex Cultural and Youth Society and Muslim Aid work using mentor and befriending schemes, something that was repeatedly highlighted as vital among the ex-offenders we interviewed. The National Zakat Foundation offers much needed financial support to those in need upon release. The Straight Path Resettlement project works supporting the families of ex-offenders as well as ex-offenders in Leicester, again an area of support that was highlighted as important during our research. Clinks' survey of organisations working with ex-offenders recorded their areas of specialist support. The most common of these were: attitudes, thinking and behaviour (57%), emotional support (53%) and Education, training and learning (47%). The least common were lobbying and campaigning (13%), physical health (14%) and providing accommodation/ supported housing (17%) [162]. Interestingly, only 40% provided employment support, 36% provided family support and 42% provided mental health support although in our research employment, social support and mental health support were stated as the three biggest difficulties ex-offenders found upon their release (in that order) [163]. 73% of organisations have projects that work within the community, for ex-offenders with a past conviction and/or under probation and 71% worked with preparing those in remand for release. These are two crucial times for support as highlighted in our research [164]. The concentration of organisations in certain areas roughly matches population distribution [165].

Lack of funding remains a critical constraint to grassroots organisations

However, many of these organisations mentioned the constraints of funding cuts and some had to stop their projects altogether in recent years. Lots of these organisations are charities. Charities that work with ex-offenders rely on public funding more than charities in other areas, as they are less popular among members of the public making donations, and therefore have been disproportionately affected by budget cuts over the last decade [166]. This damaging pattern emerged around ten years ago: in 2011 Clinks details that 95% of organisations working with ex-offenders had, or were expecting, a reduction in income, 77% were using their reserves to service and 55% had made redundancies in that year [167]. The Clinks most recent 'State of the Sector' Report, published in 2021, similarly found that voluntary organisations were underpaid for their contracted work, with only 26% of organisations achieving full cost recovery across all their contracts, and consequently were relying on emergency grant funding during Covid-19 [168]. However, there is widespread concern for what happens when this emergency funding is no longer available. Furthermore, charity organisations reported a poor experience of working alongside statutory services, particularly regarding communication during Covid-19 [169].

The important work of prison chaplains

Another group vital for supporting individuals within the CJS are prison chaplains. Since the first full time Muslim prison chaplains were appointed in 2003, their centrality in the prison experience has increased and there are now around two hundred Muslim chaplains working in prisons in England and Wales [170]. The chaplains work to provide pastoral and faith-based support to those in prisons. Research into the role of Muslim prison chaplains completed at the University of Cardiff found that the skills of these individuals "puts them in a unique position and able to foresee and avoid problems or conflicts before they arise" [171]. However, interestingly this research found a disconnect between prison chaplains and the wider Muslim community. Gilliat-Ray's study of 450 full-time, part-time and volunteer prison chaplains across British prisons observes that that "their expertise in relation to sensitive pastoral issues such as substance abuse, or complex ethical issues in relation to medical matters, does not seem to filter back into Muslim communities very much" [172]. At times prison chaplains are viewed with suspicion by the wider community who may believe the chaplains have become "too liberal" [173].

A similar sentiment was expressed by one of the organisations we interviewed. They highlighted the crucial role already being played by prison Imams but that Muslim ex-offenders weren't experiencing the same support from religious figures once they had left custody. This organisation suggested that their engagement with community mosques by prison Imams could help combat the stigma around ex-offenders [174].

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

There were clear themes that emerged in our research. In terms of barriers to rehabilitation all our respondents spoke at least one of the following three categories: finance, employment and housing; family and community support; and mental health. Each of these categories was mentioned by 75% of the ex-offenders we interviewed. Unsurprisingly, when our respondents discussed the support that should be in place, this largely reflected these three categories, while simultaneously emphasising the need for support to be long term, attentive, and to build a relationship of trust. Furthermore, each of these themes influence each other. Both the ex-offenders with and without a strong support network noted that this influenced their ability to access housing, jobs, and benefits. These processes are complicated and social networks can help in numerous ways, for example: provide temporary accommodation in spare rooms, assist with benefit applications or use their wider network to find employment opportunities. Similarly, mental health struggles could make these already tough processes more difficult.

Organisations that work to support ex-offenders through these processes must recognise the difficulties individuals have had in accessing support and must work to make individuals feel heard and supported in their individual's needs. However, the time and attention that supporting ex-offenders requires, demands that these organisations receive sufficient funding. Overall, we hope that our research can contribute to filling the absence of information around the experience of British Muslim ex-offenders and that by highlighting these voices individuals can receive the support they need.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Financial Recommendations

- Pre-lease workshops for prisoners that provide information of job and benefit applications and life outside prison more generally such as budgeting and food preparation.
- The provision of activities, volunteering and employment programmes targeted at ex-offenders to support with time management, routine and motivation.
- The provision of tax concessions for businesses and organisations employing prison leavers to improve employment prospects, and ultimately reduce re-offending.
- Hardship grants and voucher schemes to help relieve the effects of the cost-of-living crisis and inflation.

Emotional and Practical Support:

- An out of hours support line for those who have been in prison.
- Mentors/ a buddying system to provide social support and combat isolation. A buddy system within the Muslim community would aid reintegration.
- Committed caseworkers that can provide individuals with long-term one of one support through a framework of mutual trust. Many organisations operate with separate teams for before and after release support however this can create a lack of consistency and necessitates building a trust again with a new person.
- Accessible and tailored mental health support that utilises imaginative approaches to counselling and therapy.

Wider support:

- Support groups for family members of British Muslim offenders and ex-offenders.
- Workshops and talks that operate within the Muslim community to raise awareness of experiences of the CJS and rehabilitation.

Programme planning:

- An increase in funding for organisations and charities working with British Muslim ex-offenders.
- The increased involvement of those with lived experience of the CJS in both planning and implementing rehabilitative projects and proposals and as client facing workers offering support and advice.
- A recognition of the role of faith as important in people's rehabilitation journeys.
- Funding and incentives to create networks of organisations to a flowing rehabilitation journey, minimising chances of abrupt drops in support pre and post release.
- More research, such as a comparative study into the experiences of British Muslim ex-offenders both pre- and post-release.

APPENDIX 1 - CALL TO EVIDENCE

Good afternoon,

I hope this message finds you well. We are currently conducting research on British Muslim ex-offenders, understanding their experiences having left the criminal justice system and providing policy recommendations around social reintegration and rehabilitation.

We are asking organisations who work closely with ex-offenders to please support our research by completing the attached call for evidence by 30th June. We are also looking for referrals of any British Muslims who have recently left the criminal justice system/prison to participate in a short interview. We wish to speak to participants about practical strategies that would help communities as they rehabilitate and reintegrate back into society. We would be grateful if you could get in touch with any referrals you may have for this. All participants will receive a £10 gift voucher as a thank you for their time and data will be anonymised.

We invite submissions from practitioners and organisations with relevant expertise who can address the following:

1. What are some of the experiences and challenges faced by British Muslims as they prepare to leave the Criminal Justice System (e.g. arrangement of finances and accommodation)?
2. How can the Criminal Justice System support Muslim ex-offenders in their pre-release phase?
3. What are the key challenges for British Muslim ex-offenders after they leave prison?
4. What factors are associated with reoffending?
5. What help could be offered to help prevent reoffending?
6. How does your organisation assist ex-offenders and are there barriers to providing support?
7. What challenges if any, prevent ex-offenders from accessing support?
8. How can wider British Muslim communities encourage the reintegration of ex-offenders into their localities?

CareStart is a policy, research and charitable organisation that uses its expertise to support wider society with a special focus on ethnic minority and Muslim communities, by taking a culturally sensitive approach to mental health, rehabilitation and social mobility. Our research agenda is based on key evidence-based issues identified by secondary research and community consultations. We publish primary and secondary evidence-based research reports and policy briefings to policymakers and practitioners to help influence meaningful change for grassroots initiatives. For further information see: <https://carestart.co.uk>

APPENDIX 2 - ORAL EVIDENCE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR BRITISH MUSLIM EX-OFFENDERS AND ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH BRITISH MUSLIM EX-OFFENDERS

Current research on Muslim ex-offenders in the UK is limited and still an emerging field of study. Further enquiry is required to understand the needs of British Muslims leaving prison and identify best practices that support their rehabilitation.

This call for evidence seeks to help identify the issues and challenges facing ex-offenders in their pre and post release phase with a view to generating policy recommendations and strategies that assist reintegration into their communities.

The findings of this research will be of use to professionals working within the Criminal Justice System, agencies and grassroots organisations active in the area of ex-offender rehabilitation.

We invite submissions from practitioners and organisations with relevant expertise who can address the following:

1. What are some of the experiences and challenges faced by British Muslims as they prepare to leave the Criminal Justice System (e.g. arrangement of finances and accommodation)?
2. How can the Criminal Justice System support Muslim ex-offenders in their pre-release phase?
3. What are the key challenges for British Muslim ex-offenders after they leave prison?
4. What factors are associated with reoffending?
5. What help could be offered to help prevent reoffending?
6. How does your organisation assist ex-offenders and are there barriers to providing support?
7. What challenges if any, prevent ex-offenders from accessing support?

APPENDIX 3 - WRITTEN SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What is your age group?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your gender identity?
4. What are the main difficulties (e.g., employment, finances, stigma, lack of family support) that you have faced upon release from prison?
5. As a British Muslim ex-offender, what challenges have you faced within the wider community after leaving prison?
6. What support do you wish you had in place before you were released?
7. What support should be offered to help prevent reoffending?
8. What challenges, if any, prevent ex-offenders from accessing support?
9. How can public organisations (charities, probation officers, Government) better support you?

APPENDIX 4

Oral and Written submissions were received during May-August 2022, some of whom did not share evidence but played a vital role in our call for evidence, with special thanks to:

Tariq Usmani, Henley Homes

Shoket Aski, Scotland

The Palm Tree Project

Sabah Gilani OBE, Better Community Business Network (BCBN)

Shaffiq Din, Muslim Chaplain HM Prison and Probation Service

Iqbal Wahhab OBE

Hallam Walker-Smart, Stronger People

Community Care and Wellbeing Service (CCAWS), Wales

All other names of research participants have been anonymised/pseudonymised.

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