

Volunteering for All? A Qualitative Study of Women Ex-offenders' Experiences of Volunteering

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Abstract

There has been a focus on increasing levels of participation in volunteering in recent years but volunteering opportunities for offenders and ex-offenders have been neglected, despite the fact that it is argued that volunteering can help reduce re-offending. The objective was to discover whether women who had volunteered found it to be a positive and beneficial experience. The research examined the wider issues around volunteering and by doing so sought to draw up a good practice guide. A further aim was to raise awareness of the specific issues for women ex-offenders.

Findings

There was a distinct lack of research into the effects and impact volunteering has upon ex-offenders' lives, and particularly women ex-offenders.

The women interviewed for this study had all benefitted from volunteering in different ways and to different levels.

Only the women who had served longer sentences had volunteered whilst in prison but all had found it to be beneficial in helping them develop self-confidence, work related skills, feeling normal and becoming familiar with the outside world once again.

Support, where it had been present from staff within the prison, had been valued. However, it was felt by some of the women that there wasn't enough done to promote volunteering within the prison environment. Often women are only encouraged to undertake voluntary work towards the end of their sentences.

All of the women involved in this research who weren't already in employment, aimed to gain employment in the future and were using or had used volunteering to gain experience and increase their chances of gaining employment in the future. All the women reported gaining self-confidence from volunteering and felt more positive about their futures. Volunteering had helped them gain a sense of identity and, in some cases, forge a new identity for themselves.

Recommendations

- Organisations which would like to use ex-offenders as volunteers should use projects specifically set up to work with this group.
- The government should revise the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974). It is out of date and hugely damaging to ex-offenders who do want to put their past behind them and move forward with their lives. A case by case system which allowed for a review of an ex-offenders progress would seem to be fairer.
- Organisations should take a case by case approach to individuals who apply to volunteer and who have criminal convictions.
- The government should initiate a large scale piece of research into the impacts of volunteering for female offenders/ ex-offenders.
- Organisations should hold regular support / supervision sessions with their volunteers.
- The government should lead by example by promoting the involvement of ex-offenders in public sector agencies. If employment is one of the most effective ways of keeping people out of prison, do something to enable people to stay out of prison.
- Organisations should try to understand how difficult an experience it is, especially for women, to disclose convictions. If possible recruiters should not ask for information about convictions interview.
- A coherent strategy within prisons is needed to develop volunteering for offenders. This should include training for prison staff.
- Organisations should individualise volunteering placements.