

Integrating ex-offenders into the Australian construction industry

This is the third in a series of regular fact sheets about recent 'social value' research undertaken into the Australian construction industry. Full research papers are listed at the bottom of the page and available on request. Please feel free to circulate this fact sheet.

This research set out to explore the barriers to integration of ex-offenders into the construction industry in Australia.

Why the study

- When the research was done, the recidivism rate in Australia continued to increase and in 2019 43% of ex-offenders released from detention reoffended within 12 months and this was 64% for juvenile offenders.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up about 3% of the total Australian population, but 28% of the adult prison population.
- Unemployment has been strongly linked to the risk of recidivism and research shows that incarceration further damages prisoners' opportunities for employment after release.
- The construction industry represents a major source of employment for ex-offenders.
- There is a severe shortage of labour in construction and infrastructure and ex-offenders are a potentially valuable source of labour.
- Some social procurement policies target ex-offenders as a specific employment group. Indigenous procurement policies inevitably involve the employment of ex-offenders because of the above statistics.
- Despite evidence that many organisations have positive experiences with ex-offenders, most employers do not consider employing an ex-offender, regardless of the offence or sentence received.
- Increasing use of background checks by many employers automatically eliminates them from any shortlisting exercise.
- This research addressed the lack of international evidence around the challenges and opportunities in employing ex-offenders within the construction industry supply chain.

What we did

We undertook two separate research projects:

Project one:

- We undertook an on-line survey was conducted of subcontractors across the construction supply chain in Australia.
- The survey asked respondents who had hired ex-offenders and also those who had not hired ex-offenders but were willing to do so a series of questions around roles where they would employ or not employ ex-offenders in and their motivations for doing so.
- A total of 176 sub-contracting business samples in Australia were invited to participate, and 116 responses were received. Of these responses, 22 were incomplete; hence deleted from subsequent analysis giving a total response rate of 94 (53.4%).

Project two:

- In the second research project, we analysed a case study of a successful UK project which involved organizations from a range of sectors (non-profit, charity, private business, prisons, government, funders, education) collaborating over a period of one year to develop and implement 11 pilot projects to explore new ways of supporting ex-offenders into construction employment.

More information:

Martin Loosemore, Francesco Daniele & Benson T. H. Lim (2019): Integrating ex-offenders into the Australian construction industry, Construction Management and Economics, DOI: [10.1080/01446193.2019.1674449](https://doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2019.1674449)

[M. Loosemore, J. Bridgeman & R. Keast \(2020\): Reintegrating ex-offenders into work through construction: a case study of cross-sector collaboration in social procurement, Building Research & Information, DOI: 10.1080/09613218.2019.1699772](https://doi.org/10.1080/09613218.2019.1699772)

What we found

- Attitudes towards the employment of ex-offenders in construction are significantly more positive than in other industries.
- 30.9% of sub-contractors had hired ex-offenders previously; 30.9% of sub-contractors had not hired ex-offenders previously but were willing to do so; and 38.3% of sub-contractors had not hired ex-offenders and were not willing to do so.
- 69.1% of sub-contractors do not use criminal record checks to inform hiring decisions compared to 25.5% who do and 5.3% who were unsure. Background checks are less common than in other industries.
- Different trades and different sized firms have different attitudes towards the employment of ex-offenders and need different support structures to encourage them to do so. Electricians, concreters, plumbers, and 'other' subcontractors with annual turnovers of more than \$20 million, were most open to hiring ex-offenders despite regularly conducting criminal background checks.
- Employers were most at ease in employing ex-offenders convicted of drug possession charges. Tolerance in the sample to blue collar crimes such as robbery and theft is relatively high – especially in the group with the greatest experience of employing ex-offenders. Construction is also more receptive to serious offences like robbery and theft than other industries.
- The key drivers for employing ex-offenders are labour shortages, potential positive work-ethic and the requirements of client/contracts (social procurement policy). Diversity targets were not a driver.
- There are many perceived barriers to employment for ex-offenders. These often do not align with reality. However, they include: concerns around re-offending; lack of reliability; low trust; perceived behavioural problems; substance abuse; mental instability; lack of skills.
- Higher risk trades (especially structural trades) perceived these barriers to be higher.
- Those employers who have employed ex-offenders have much more positive perceptions, especially if the experience has been good.

What this means

Recommendations for policy makers and businesses in the construction industry who wish to better harness the potential skills of ex-offenders include:

- There is a significant opportunity for government policy-makers to use construction social procurement to provide employment and training opportunities for ex-offenders and thereby reduce recidivism rates.
- Cross-sector collaboration with organisations from the justice system, not-for-profit sectors, government sectors and community sectors is a potentially powerful mechanism by which the construction industry can meet its new social procurement responsibilities in relation to ex-offenders and by extension, in relation to other disadvantaged cohorts targeted by social procurement policies where ex-offending is an issue.
- Cross-sector collaboration is not easy. Having the right partners, having common, realistic and clear goals, having a common empathy for the beneficiaries and a willingness to communicate openly and share resources, risks and opportunities and lessons of successes and failures are especially important to enable effective cross-sector collaboration to occur.
- Our findings point to importance of giving ex-offenders voice, responding flexibly to their diverse needs, educating employers about those needs, providing access to meaningful and sustainable jobs and making them central to the collaborative process (a person-centred approach).
- Our findings also highlight the importance of a common vision of success and how to measure it, as a key enabler of collaboration.
- There is a significant risk of failure without supporting programs to reduce negative perceptions of ex-offenders, to build supply chain capacity and support systems to employ these people.
- Negative stigmas about ex-offenders as employees can be reduced using practical interventions such as supply chain education programmes and capacity-building programmes which provide both resources and wrap-around support services to enable the successful and sustainable integration of these people into the construction industry.
- These support strategies will need to be targeted because some types of ex-offenders are perceived to be more employable than others and some types of firms and trades need more support than others.

More information:

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- Initiatives which provide managed experience of ex-offenders at a small scale coupled with case studies of companies which have successfully employed ex-offenders might be powerful ways to change attitudes in the industry.
- It is best to target those trades that are more receptive (the lower safety risks trades) and use them as champions to drive change in the less receptive trades.
- Education programs for employers should highlight: the potential benefits which ex-offenders can bring to a workforce through case studies of success; the challenges which ex-offenders face in finding and retaining employment; techniques to recognise and harness the many benefits which ex-offenders can bring to the workplace; the impact of negative stereotypes, stigmatisation and discrimination in the workplace.
- It is critical to equip ex-offenders with the skills and knowledge to secure and maintain employment and to navigate complex employment systems, procedures, laws and regulations. This is best done within the prison system in collaboration with the construction supply chain.
- Significant support structures need to be put in place to help ex-offenders integrate successfully into the workforce and prevent them re-entering old destructive networks.
- Employers also need significant support and education to enable this to happen.

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