

Every sentence a life sentence?

Our subject for our July lunchtime forum in Tewkesbury was: ‘legal discrimination: is it fair?’ Two ex-prisoners told of the discrimination they faced on release, including facts and figures as well as personal experiences.

Discrimination includes finding a job, getting insurance, mortgage difficulties. Families of ex-offenders continue to be punished for the crimes of their relations; eg. a wife may not be allowed to keep a mortgage. All people are asking is to be treated fairly: their debt to society has been paid so why won't society let go? Would you not want your friend, son, daughter, husband, or wife to be treated fairly? This is all that is being asked.

If they admit to having a criminal record when seeking work, they do not get an interview. If they decide to lie in order to feed their family, they lose the job if discovered. They live with constant worry that this will slip out. One of our speakers spoke movingly of this, and of how a prison sentence is a permanent stain on a person, likening it to a tattoo, which cannot be removed. She wished more ex-offenders would speak out, together we can surely make a difference.

Lack of employment leads to re-offending which costs tax payers £11 billion per year; 9.2 million people in the UK have a criminal record, more than the population of Greater London. In one American state, when it was made illegal for employers to insist on knowing if an applicant had a criminal record, reoffending dropped dramatically from 58% in 2004 to 5.7% in 2008.

A representative from Gloucestershire police in the audience told us of the work done by the police's ‘Avenger Task Force’, working with young people thought likely to offend: going into schools to warn students that a prison sentence can be a life sentence.

Another ex-offender in the audience told of the work he is doing to try to make the public and young people aware of this situation. The press and politicians should not be so quick to judge and go for sound-bites.

All this discrimination is legal: but is it fair?