

SWITCHBACK BRIEFING

Action needed to protect prison-leavers and the public during Covid-19

January 2021

BACKGROUND

40,000

people have so far been released from prison into the **pandemic**.¹

27%

were released **homeless** or to unknown circumstances.²

Thousands of prison-leavers have been released into the pandemic homeless, with just £46 and nowhere to go. This is risking public health and reoffending during the crisis.

Evidence from Switchback's work with young prison-leavers during Covid-19 shows an even higher rate of homelessness (65%) in London, with many also released without a **bank account, ID** or **phone** to contact essential services or family.

Young prison-leavers in London during Covid-19:³

65% released **homeless**

46% released with **no bank account**

25% released with **no ID**

20% released with **no phone**

People released homeless are **56%** more likely to reoffend.⁴ Meanwhile, reoffending now accounts for **80%** of all convictions and cautions.⁵ Releasing people into the pandemic without the means to stay safe themselves is risking:

- further transmission of the virus
- additional reoffending and pressure on public spending
- a further waste of human potential.

Switchback's evidence is clear that skilled, supportive relationships are the key to real change for prison-leavers: only **8%** of Switchback Trainees reoffend compared to 46% nationally. Yet there can be little hope of building positive relationships when so many prison-leavers are left **without the basic essentials for survival**.

Amid a new lockdown, we believe urgent action is needed to protect prison-leavers and the public. Based on Switchback's frontline insight and evidence, this briefing highlights three priority areas:



Guarantee **accommodation** on release



Provide **basic smartphones** at the gate



Raise the **£46 Discharge Grant**

ACTION 1: GUARANTEE ACCOMMODATION ON RELEASE

65%

of prison-leavers supported by Switchback were released **homeless** into the pandemic.

56%

Prison-leavers are 56% more likely to **reoffend** when released homeless.⁶



“The reason I got sent to jail was not having money and being homeless. Releasing me into the exact same situation doesn’t make any sense.”

Patrick, 21, Switchback Trainee

Homelessness causes poverty, reoffending and despair.

Despite the welcome introduction of a temporary accommodation scheme, which placed some people into hotels, MoJ data shows nearly a **third** (27%) of prisoners were released homeless or to unknown circumstances during the pandemic.

In London the rate is even higher, with **two thirds** (65%) of young men supported by Switchback during the pandemic released homeless, up from 42% in the previous year. Research shows that homelessness increases the risk of reoffending by 56%.⁷

Overstretched charities like Switchback are having to plug gaps left by the prison and probation service: Switchback is not a housing service, and yet we had to support two thirds of our Trainees to address urgent housing needs in 2020.

“Being on the streets is only going to lead you to doing things you don't want to do, just to put yourself under a roof.”

Brian, 26, Switchback Trainee

Recent government action on housing for prison-leavers does not yet meet the scale of the challenge, with thousands still being released into the pandemic with just £46 and nowhere to go.

URGENT ACTION NEEDED:

Extend the **temporary accommodation scheme** until the end of 2021.

Publish a **cross-departmental accommodation strategy** outlining a plan to guarantee stable housing for every prison-leaver.

ACTION 2: PROVIDE BASIC SMARTPHONES AT THE GATE

20%

of young prison-leavers in London are released without a **phone**.⁸



“I was taken to the gates by a group of officers and let out the door with three bags, no phone and no way to contact anyone. Not having a plan caused anxiety.”

Switchback Trainee

Covid-19 restrictions mean without a communication lifeline, prison-leavers can't stay safe or move forward. For people leaving prison during a public health crisis, a basic smartphone isn't a luxury – it's a necessity to comply with licence conditions and access vital services like Universal Credit and the NHS.

Yet Switchback is seeing rising numbers of prison-leavers released without a phone or internet access. With just £46 in their pocket (see Action 3), people are too often left with a choice between buying food, travel or a phone.

As a result, in 2020 Switchback had to provide basic smartphones to a fifth of our Trainees who didn't have a phone, out of our hardship funds. This is not sustainable.

“Getting a phone from Switchback made a huge difference to me. It meant I could call my family, I could connect with people and I could look up whatever I needed.”

Switchback Trainee

Amid all the hurdles facing prison-leavers, it shouldn't be the simple lack of a phone that results in a reoffence. Growth in the market means basic smartphones can be provided to vulnerable people at low cost, such as through corporate partnerships.

The MoJ has accepted the need for video technology in prisons because: “It's a fact that offenders with strong family ties are less likely to reoffend”.⁹ This principle should extend to release, particularly when society is locked down. While probation offers phones to some prison-leavers, these lack the internet and availability remains low.

URGENT ACTION NEEDED:

MoJ should (via probation) provide **basic smartphones** for all prison-leavers who need one ASAP upon release, including a 1-month data pack. Corporate partnerships with tech businesses should be explored to keep costs low.

ACTION 3: RAISE THE £46 DISCHARGE GRANT

£46

The amount prison-leavers receive at the gate – unchanged since **1996**.

46%

of men supported by Switchback are released with **no bank account**.



“When I was released I had to spend £18 on a cab to get to probation on time. Then I bought some food and it was gone. It took me 7 weeks to get any more money because I was trying to sort a bank account, which you need for Universal Credit.”

Joel, 26, Switchback Trainee

People need enough money to get started on release, particularly with no pre-release support available. Yet the £46 Discharge Grant provided to prison-leavers has not changed in **25 years**. Often it barely lasts days and drives people towards hardship and reoffending, unable to purchase essentials like food, face masks or hand sanitiser.

While access to Universal Credit has improved thanks to DWP’s new dedicated phone line, prison-leavers without the required phone or bank account still face a wait of several weeks or more without any money.

To plug the gap, Switchback has to provide supermarket vouchers and travelcards from our hardship funds. Without these lifelines, many Switchback Trainees would be unable to afford food or be able to reach appointments. But we can only reach so many people.

In 2020 the government recognised that a lack of pre-release support in prisons necessitated a higher 'subsistence grant' of £80 for people released early.¹⁰ Raising the Discharge Grant to £80, plus shopping vouchers and a 1-week travelcard, would ensure all prison-leavers can stay safe and start building a stable life away from crime. The use of vouchers would also ensure that spending is contained on the right things.

URGENT ACTION NEEDED:

Replace the outdated Discharge Grant with a new **Release Pack** combining £80 plus shopping vouchers & a 1-week travelcard.¹¹

Mandate probation to ensure all prison-leavers secure a **bank account, ID** and **Universal Credit appointment** before release.

ABOUT SWITCHBACK

Switchback is an award-winning charity enabling young Londoners to find a way out of the justice system and build a stable, rewarding life. We share what we've learned to inspire change across the justice system and beyond.

Through intensive 1-to-1 support on both sides of the prison gate alongside real work training after release, we support prison-leavers aged 18-30 to change their relationship with society. Only 8% of Switchback Trainees reoffend compared to 46% nationally, while over 50% of Trainees move into long-term employment.

During the pandemic Switchback has rapidly reconfigured its service, and in the past year we have worked with more young prison-leavers than ever before.

Find out more at www.switchback.org.uk or follow us [@switchback_ldn](https://twitter.com/switchback_ldn)

Get in touch:

For more information please contact **Sam Boyd, Director of Impact & External Affairs** on sam@switchback.org.uk or 07495 022 437.

Sources

¹ Latest MoJ [Releases \(quarterly\) data](#). Based on quarterly rate of 13,290 people released in Q2 2020 (latest available data)

² MoJ, Written Answers (UIN61689, UIN76656, UIN81740). Out of 23,942 releases between 23 March and 31 July 2020 (latest available data), 6,520 were released homeless or to 'unknown circumstances'.

³ All Switchback data in this briefing: 18-30 year old male prison-leavers supported by Switchback in London, 2020

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/aug/12/two-thirds-of-homeless-ex-prisoners-reoffend-within-a-year>

⁵ Robert Buckland, letter to Nacro re Accommodation for Prison-leavers and the CSR, Nov 2020

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/aug/12/two-thirds-of-homeless-ex-prisoners-reoffend-within-a-year>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/aug/12/two-thirds-of-homeless-ex-prisoners-reoffend-within-a-year>

⁸ 18-30 year old male prison-leavers supported by Switchback in London, 2020

⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2021/01/18/prisoners-strong-family-ties-less-likely-reoffend/>

¹⁰ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-06-03/54056>

¹¹ Read Switchback's full proposal: <https://switchback.org.uk/switchback-briefing-replacing-the-46-discharge-grant/>