



Pathways from prison to employment: recent trends and future needs

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Post custodial employment, reoffending, and recent trends

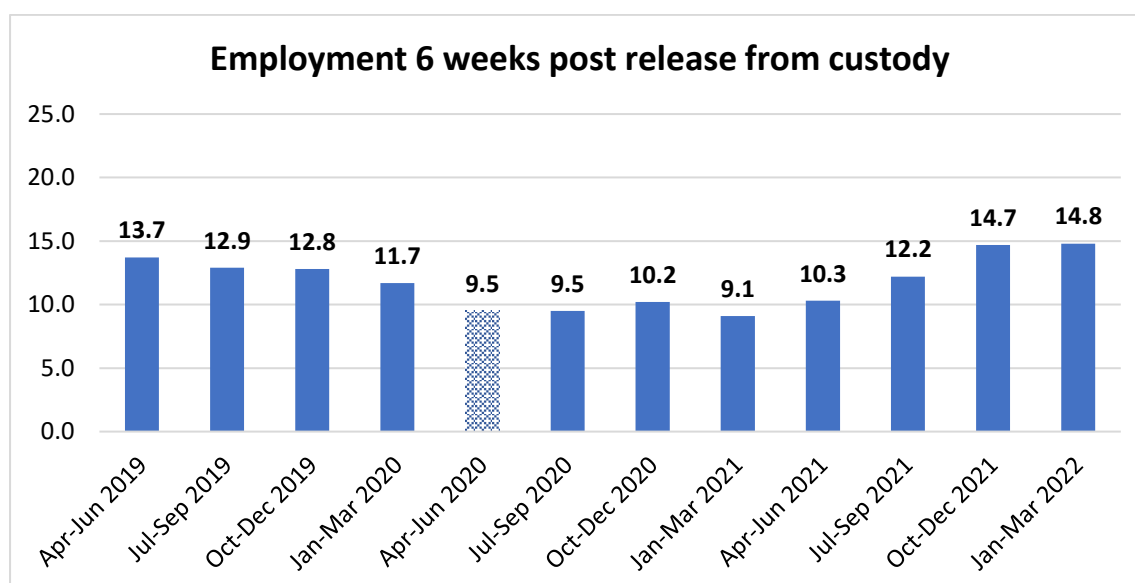
The recent Prisons Strategy White Paper (Ministry of Justice, 2021) sets out the aspiration that most people leaving prison will be in employment within 6 weeks of release. Although complex to untangle, a Ministry of Justice review of existing evidence concluded that, all things being equal, employment post release has a positive impact on reducing reoffending (Ministry of Justice, 2013).

Reviews of the evidence base identify that employment promotes desistance in four ways (Ingeus & Russell Webster, 2021):

- I. Constructive use of time and become economically independent.
- II. Helping individuals to move away from criminal networks and develop social relationships with a wide range of people
- III. Enhancement of self-esteem and a renewed and positive sense of self
- IV. Acts as an important symbol to the individual of their ability to return successfully to a conventional life.

Historically, employment for those leaving prison is both low in an absolute sense and relative to the wider population. While unemployment in England has been around 5% since 2016 (ONS, 2022a), employment at 6 weeks post release from custody has been between 10-15%, and between 15%-25% six months post release.

This [statistical release](#) from the Ministry of Justice in June (Ministry of Justice, 2022a) of this year contained some promising signs about the number of people who are available for work and finding employment after leaving prison in England. It shows a substantial increase in those finding work within 6 weeks post release, from **9.5% in April-June 2020**, at the peak of the pandemic restrictions, to **16% in March 2022, (14.8% between January and March 2022)**. Employment post release in the year prior to the pandemic is higher than the low of 9.5% in mid-2020, but still very low overall, and lower than the most recent figures.



Career Connect, through Achieve North West Connect, deliver support services with partners to men and women on their journey from imprisonment back into the wider community. It is important for us, and other providers of critical services to those leaving custody, to keep track of employment trends and the factors that influence them. We also want to understand what makes a positive impact in supporting pathways to employment post release from custody. We want to both contribute to the evidence and incorporate evidence and learning produced by others into our work.

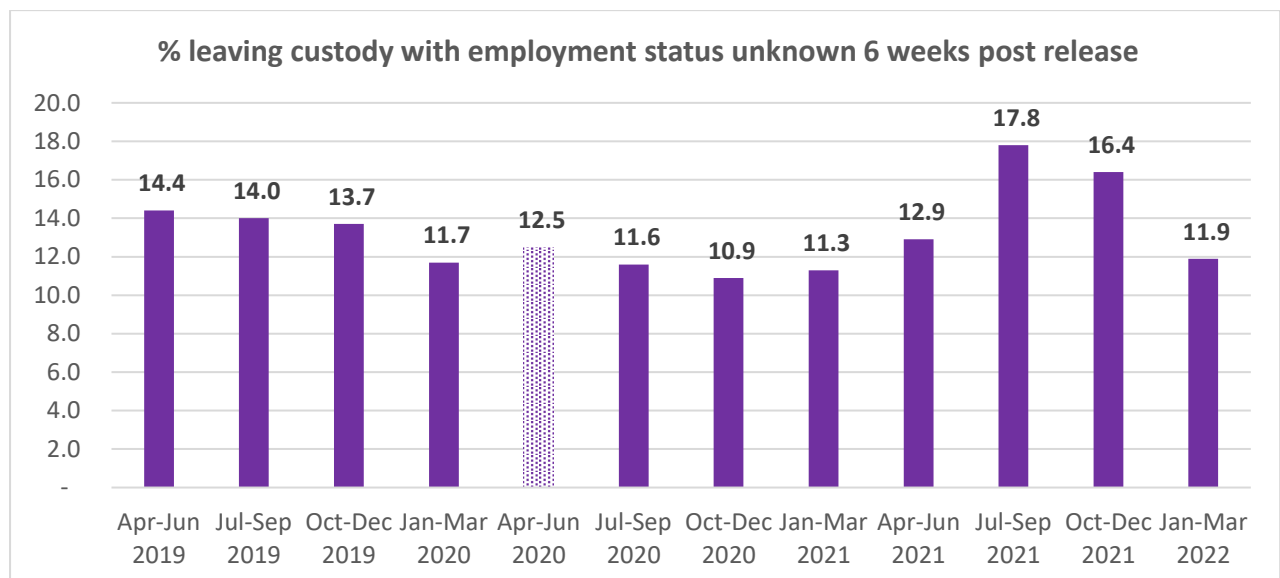
Beyond the headline figures, the MoJ data on employment post release is detailed, and helpfully allows us to look at other factors that may be contributing to recent trends (Ministry of Justice, 2022b). We also found it insightful to look at labour market information from the ONS, particularly recent trends in the number of vacancies in England.

This short paper provides an analysis of recent trends and their implications both for service provision that makes much needed impact, and for evaluations that help us to identify what is working and why.

Are the increases in employment real or a result of improvements in recording practices of employment status post release?

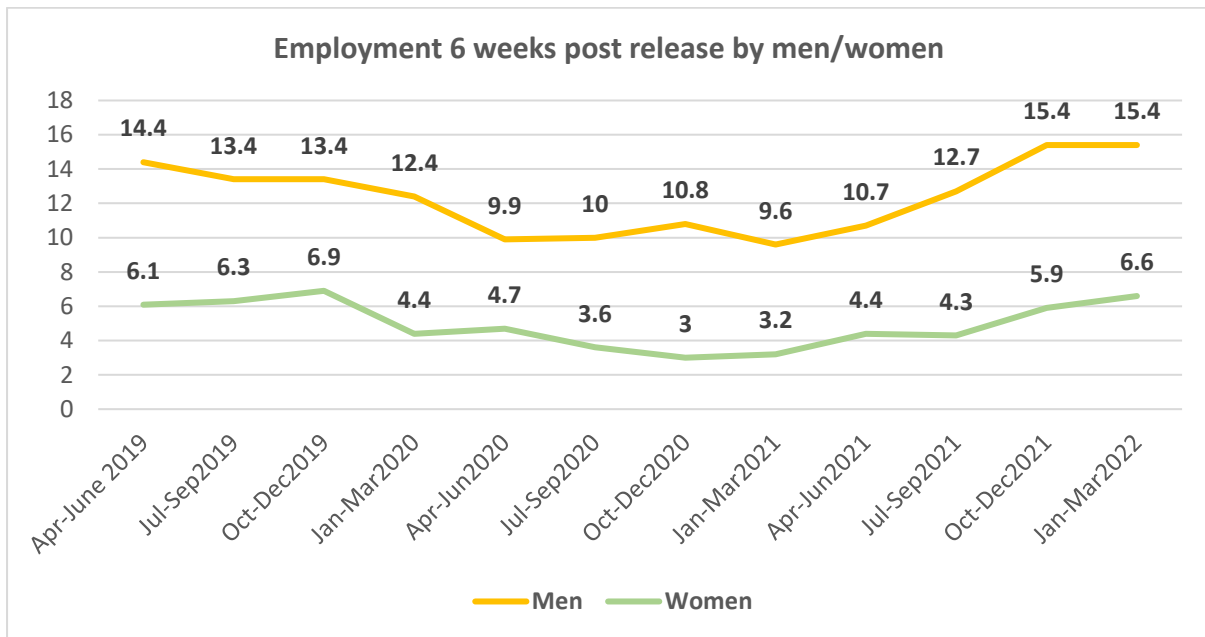
One possible explanation for the apparent increase in employment post release is simply a change in recording practices. There are always some people for whom their status post release – whether employed or unemployed – is unknown. If there has been an increase in the number of people whose status is known, and these people are more likely to be in employment, then the reported figures may increase regardless of any material changes in employment status.

The graph below shows the percentage of those leaving custody whose status was unknown 6 weeks post release, between Apr-Jun 2019 and Jan-Mar 2022, either side of the peak of the pandemic in Apr-Jun 2020. While the numbers have changed over time, they appear unrelated to the changes in post custodial employment. In this sense, the increases in employment do look to be ‘real’, rather than simply a result of changes in the recording of status.

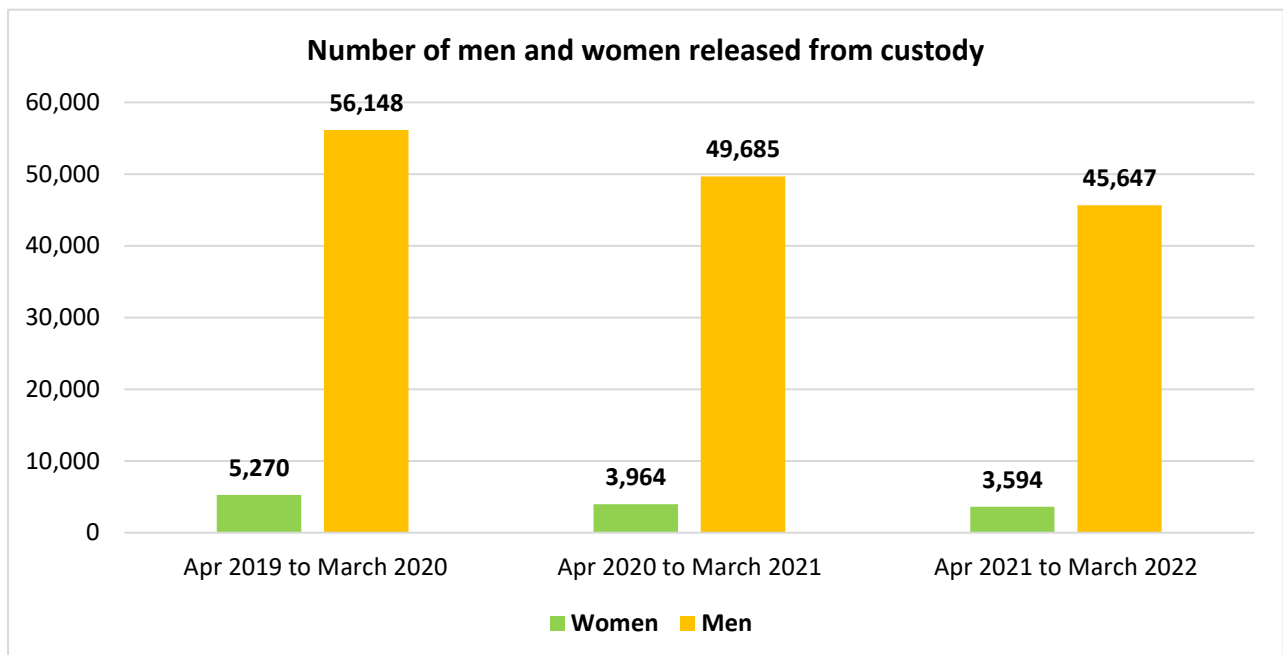


To what extent are differences in employment outcomes for men and women contributing to trends?

MoJ data allows us to compare post-release employment for men and women, and the overall numbers of men and women that are released from custody. The graph below shows that men are consistently more likely than women to be in employment post release.



Because of these substantial differences, an increase in the proportion of men to women being released may therefore increase the overall numbers in employment post release. The graph below shows the overall numbers of men and women being released from prison in the three years 2019/20, 2020/21, and 2021/22.

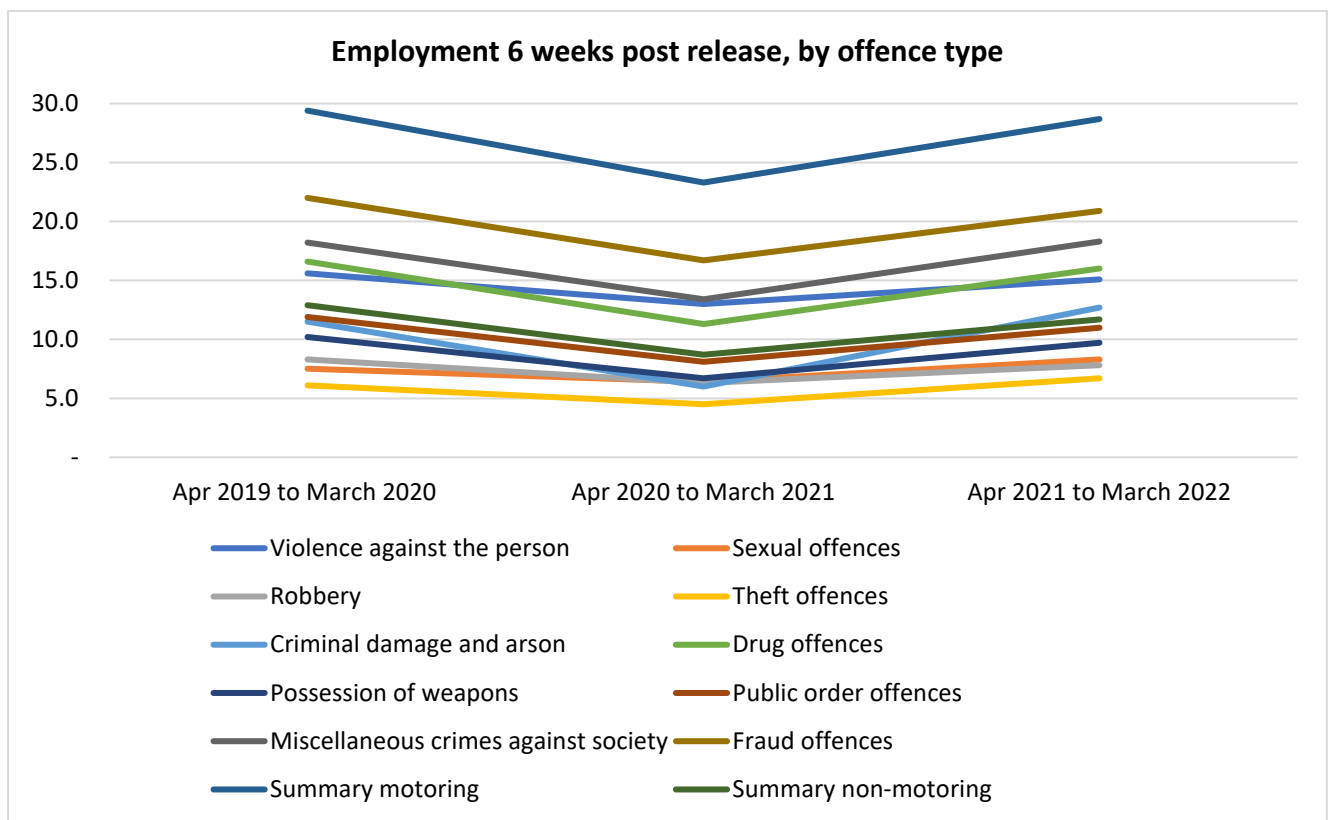


There have been reductions in the overall numbers of men *and* women released. This said, the ratio of men to women has increased a little such that, in April-March 19/20, there were 11 men released for each woman, while in April-March 21/22 this had increased to 12.7. This may have some influence on the post release employment increases but it seems unlikely to be making very much of an impact on the increases in post release employment over this time.

Offence type affects employment outcomes – are there changes in the offence types of those released?

As the graph below shows, there is a substantial variation in post release employment across the different categories of offences for which people were imprisoned for. To take the extremes, those imprisoned for summary motoring offences are 4-5 times more likely to be in employment post-release than those imprisoned for theft offences.

The three offence types with the highest levels of post release employment are (in order of magnitude): 1. Summary motoring offences; 2. Fraud offences; 3. Miscellaneous crimes. The three offences with the lowest levels of post release employment are 1. Theft offences; 2. Sexual offences; 3. Robbery.

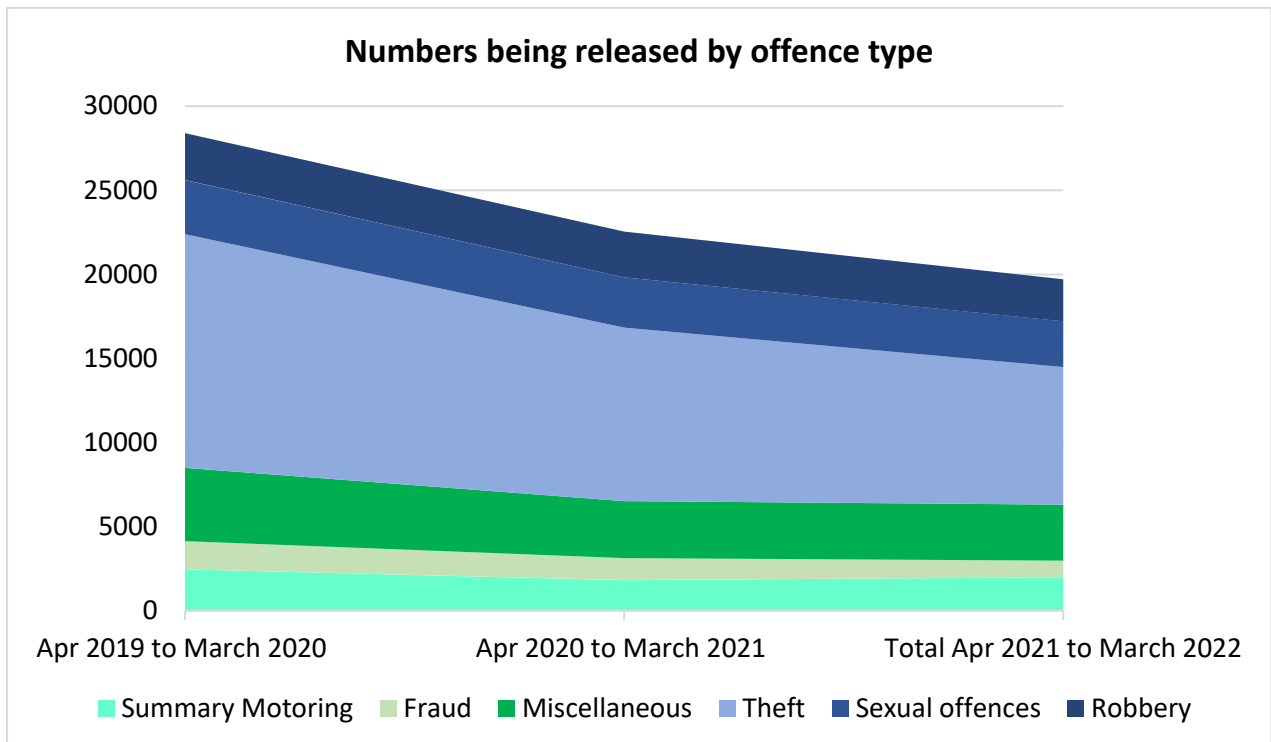


Given this, an explanation for increases in employment might be that a greater proportion of those being released are people with offence types that typically have higher levels of employment post release.

We can see from the graph below that there has been a general reduction of the numbers being released from prison in *all* these offence categories. There has also been a small change in the ratio of those being released with offence types with relatively high levels of post release employment, to those with low levels of employment. To look at this, we grouped the three offence types with the highest levels of post release employment, and the three with the lowest.

In 19/20, for each person released with offence types with relatively high employment, there were 2.34 people released with offence types with relatively low employment. By 21/22, this ratio had reduced to 2.12.

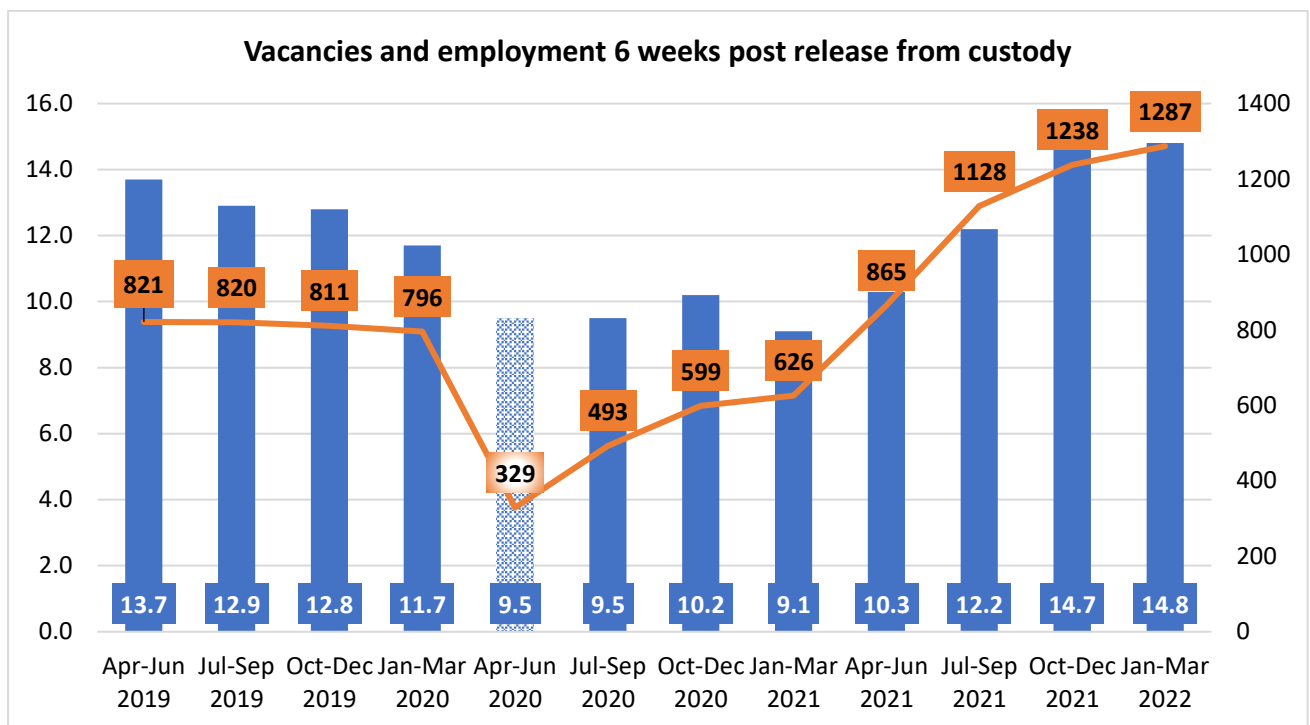
This means that, proportionally, there are slightly more people being released in 21/22 who have a relatively higher employment outcome than were released in 2019/20. These differences are likely having some influence on increases in post release employment but seem insufficient to be accounting for the scale of the increases seen.



Influence of labour market and vacancies: does a rising tide raise all ships?

The final thing we look at is the labour market context into which people are being released from custody, specifically the number of vacancies. The UK economy has been recovering from the various shocks that were brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, stretching from early 2020 through to 2022. Vacancies fell from 821,000 in April-June 2019, to 329,000 in April-June 2020, and then climbed each quarter [to a record 1,287million vacancies in Jan-Mar 2022](#) (ONS, June 2022b).

Bringing together the MoJ data on post-custodial employment, and the ONS data on vacancies, the graph below shows the monthly figures for each over the period March 2021 to April 2022, either side of the peak of covid restrictions. Overlaying this data, we can see that, between these dates, the number of people leaving custody who are finding employment within 6 weeks largely tracks the number of vacancies. There was a 48% rise in vacancies over the 12 months, and a 43% rise in employment within 6 weeks, over this same period.



We then looked at the number of people leaving prison and the ratio to number of vacancies. Comparing low to high points we calculate that:

- In Apr-Jun 2020, there were **21.9 vacancies** for each person released from custody (329,000/15,006).
- In Jan-Mar 2022, there were **105.9 vacancies** per person released from custody (1,287,000/12,153).

Future support needs and evidence of what works

While cautious about concluding causation from correlation, wider labour market context, and the number of vacancies specifically, does look to be the major contributing factor to the increase in employment for those released from prison.

This is positive in that the general favourability of economic conditions for those seeking work are also benefiting those who fare least well, but also means that even these small gains could be easily lost as the numbers of vacancies reduce. Between [May to July 2022](#), the ratio of vacancies for every 100 employee jobs fell to 4.2, the first fall since April to June 2020, and looks likely to decline further throughout the remainder of 2022 and into 2023.

We have not looked here at regional variations in employment and vacancies, or the sectors into which those leaving prison are most commonly working, but these are also areas that need accounting for in understanding trends over time. There are also factors that contribute to and support post custodial employment, including housing on release, interventions to address substance abuse, vocational training, and participation in paid work in prison. (Brunton-Smith & Hopkins, 2014).

The support measures announced in the [Prison Strategy White Paper](#) aimed at strengthening pathways to employment for those leaving prison are to be welcomed and, from the analysis presented above, will be much needed as the post-pandemic surge in vacancies subsides and we likely see a downturn in economic circumstances. Those leaving prison will require targeted support services, both pre and post release, to ensure that progress is made towards the ambition of post-custodial employment being the norm. Even with the increases over the past 12-18 months, we remain a long way from this being the case.

Rigorous evidence of what works in supporting pathways to post-custodial employment are also much needed. Given the role that employment plays in reducing risks of reoffending, greater evidence of what works for who and why, and wider take up of evidenced interventions are required. We urge commissioners, those delivering services, and the research and evidence community to play a part in this.

Our analysis presented here suggests that evaluations will require approaches that take account of the complex range of factors that affect post custodial employment outcomes. Simple pre to post comparisons and correlations can be misleading in conclusions drawn. Experimental and quasi-experimental methods can be a challenge in any environment but building stronger evidence of what works will require such approaches.

References

[Ian Brunton-Smith and Kathryn Hopkins, 2014](#) *The impact of experience in prison on the employment status of longer-sentenced prisoners after release Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*

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[Ministry of Justice, 2013](#) *Analysis of the impact of employment on re-offending following release from custody, using Propensity Score Matching*

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[Office for National Statistics, 2022](#) (a) *Unemployment rate (aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted)*


[Office for National Statistics, 2022](#) (b), *Vacancies and jobs in the UK: June 2022. Estimates of the number of vacancies and jobs for the UK*



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