

Inside out

It was during yet another stint inside while awaiting trial that repeat offender Derek Jones got his big idea: what about a special email service connecting prisoners to friends and family? Mark Williams finds out the full story

Some 90,000 ex-offenders are released from English and Welsh prisons each year and about 65 per cent re-offend within 24 months, which costs the UK taxpayer about £12bn a year.

Apart from wanting to change your ways, the key to 'going straight' is to find a job, of course. Those who do so are as much as **50 per cent less likely to reoffend** [<http://www.blueskydevelopment.co.uk/about/key-statistics.asp>](http://www.blueskydevelopment.co.uk/about/key-statistics.asp).

Few ex-offenders choose to start their own business, but 41-year-old Derek Jones is one such exception. He grew up in Bath in the 1970s. "I've fond memories of my childhood. Although I was a black kid growing up in a white adopted family, I didn't have any issues about that," he says.

Petty theft

"I was hanging around with the wrong crowd and it began with minor stuff – petty theft, bottles of pop, etc. I first got into trouble with the police when I was 11 and up until the age of 21, I must have been in custody 15 times. My adopted parents had no idea what I was getting up to, but that changed when the police got involved."

Laziness was a big part of it, confesses Derek. "I wanted everything to come easy – I didn't want to work for it. I wanted to do something else with my life, but I thought that was out of reach."

Soon, Derek graduated to car theft and burglary. "Bath's a small place really, not many black people either, so soon people knew what I was getting up to – and that included the police." The first couple of times he got caught, Derek said he felt shame, but soon he was out committing more crime to "get money to buy things and have a good time".

Custodial sentences

Derek was on remand for many months during his youth. "I went away a few times to youth offender units and got sent to a detention centre, too, which I didn't mind, if I'm honest. I couldn't see things through the eyes of the people I was stealing from. I didn't care.

"Later, I ended up in prison. I got 18 months for burglary and later served four months for driving while disqualified. I wasn't scared while inside, although there are some seriously nasty people in there. I'd done a lot of boxing while growing up, so I could look after myself. Thing is, if you want to waste your life, prison's the right place for you."

While Derek was on remand for six months in 2003 and himself experiencing problems communicating with friends and family, he had his Eureka moment. “Email. Simple. I knew demand would be huge. There would be no cost to prisons or prisoners; the sender outside would pay.

“All I needed to do was some research and find a way to turn it into a viable business. At the time I was doing a teaching course, but I mentioned my idea to the teacher and she allowed me to go to the library to read books about starting a business. ”

Derek’s case (alleged burglary) was thrown out for lack of evidence. “I was 36 and standing on the steps of Winchester Crown Court with no money, but at least I had my idea. I was determined to stay out of trouble.”

Going straight

After making it back to the West Country, support was hard to come by. “Some people just couldn’t quite understand my idea, while others said it couldn’t be turned into a business. They were wrong.”

Derek went to see [Business Link in Bristol << http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/home?site=106>>](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/home?site=106) and over four months did various start-up courses and put together a business plan. He was given a £2,000 grant by [Bristol Enterprise Development Fund << http://www.bedf.co.uk/>>](http://www.bedf.co.uk/) as well as support from Bristol-based enterprise agency [BRAVE << http://www.brave.org.uk/>>](http://www.brave.org.uk/). “As well as encouragement and advice, BRAVE gave me a mentor called Mike Groves, who was very helpful. We used to meet once a month.”

It took Derek two years to get his business – [Email a Prisoner < http://www.emailaprisoner.com/>](http://www.emailaprisoner.com/) – off the ground. Launched in 2007, he has since sold his email service to more than 100 prisons of all categories. “It’s taken time, but once I’ve been able to get my message across to the right people, response has been brilliant. I got my first trial at Guy’s Marsh Prison in Dorset in 2008, proved the concept and won the business, but getting other prisons on board was difficult at first.”

New start

Derek says he hasn’t personally encountered any prejudice because of his past. “I’m open about it: I broke the law, many times, but I was punished and I’ve changed my ways. As far as the business goes, being an ex-offender helps.

“I’ve fully left crime behind now, because I wanted to change my life and I’ve something else to focus on now. Staying out of trouble also involves staying away from people I once knew and places I used to hang around.”

Derek's business now has four people on the payroll. "I'm proud of that *and* the fact 50,000-plus people have used the service. We're just about to welcome on board our first Northern Ireland prison and I plan to roll out my idea in markets all around the world. My idea has massive potential."

- *Find out more about how Email a Prisoner helps prisoners by creating lines of communication with the outside world* << <http://www.emailprisoner.com/about.cfm>>>

Do you have a story to tell?

We're looking for small business owners with an inspiring or unusual story. Please [contact us](#) if you or someone you know would make a strong profile for other business owners to read.