

# The Promising Synergy Between Social Enterprise, Risk–Need–Responsivity and the Desistance Paradigm

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**Summary:** This article advocates that social enterprise can play an important role in lowering reoffending rates by addressing employment barriers for those with criminal convictions. It also posits that previous discourse in this area has lacked sufficient focus on how the social enterprise model can address wider and more complex criminogenic risk factors linked to criminal behaviour. The authors postulate that the social enterprise model can play a multifaceted role within a Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) and Desistance paradigm, combatting stigma and prejudice, promoting self-efficacy and lowering reoffending by harnessing broad psychosocial supports. While identifying key themes and factors that have contributed to the success of social enterprises that employ those with criminal convictions, the authors focus on two social enterprises operated by the Cornmarket Project in Co. Wexford. They highlight the importance of measuring outcomes when employing the social enterprise model, and describe a system used in the Cornmarket Project to measure client outcomes across a range of ten psychosocial domains. Finally, the authors explore future directions and potential opportunities for strengthening the capacity of the model to enhance desistance. Sounding a note of caution, they stress that there are still significant challenges in funding, policy support, and the need for more rigorous evaluation of social enterprise programmes. The authors conclude that, in addition to employment, the social enterprise model has the potential to offer a broader range of supports in strengthening desistance.

**Keywords:** Desistance, social enterprise, Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR), reoffending, psychosocial, self-efficacy, stigma, rehabilitation, criminogenic, outcomes, evidence-based.

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## Introduction

This article stems from the work of the Cornmarket Project in utilising the social enterprise model to create employment and progression routes for those with criminal convictions. The project is part of Wexford Local Development, one of 48 local development companies in Ireland, and is a community-based treatment and rehabilitation project established in 1999. It offers support services to those with criminal convictions, former prisoners and those in recovery from addiction. The mission statement of the project is 'To reduce substance misuse, criminality and social exclusion in County Wexford by providing a range of best practice evidence based programmes'.

The project is located in the southeast corner of Ireland and operates from four geographic locations across Co. Wexford: Wexford Town, Gorey, Enniscorthy and New Ross. The project's thirteen discrete programmes and services are delivered by a team of 32 people and range from low-threshold practical supports for clients who are homeless and sleeping rough – such as showers, laundry facilities, hot-food provision and advocacy services – through to accredited training programmes, progression routes and employment opportunities.

In 2022, the project supported 224 people who had come into contact with the criminal justice system, 182 of whom were Probation Service clients. The project operates two social enterprises, which are part of a larger continuum of supports designed to ensure that client criminogenic need factors are competently addressed during their period with the project.

Risk, need and responsivity principles are associated with reductions in reoffending, particularly for delivery in community settings (Bonta and Andrews, 2012). To this end, the work of the Cornmarket Project has been underpinned by the RNR and Desistance models since it was established in 1999 (Delaney and Weir, 2004). Both of these paradigms stress the importance of assessing factors that have contributed to a person's criminal behaviour, emphasising the significance of subsequently matching interventions to needs.

## **Beyond employment: Psychosocial empowerment through social enterprise**

In managing the integration of people with criminal records into the community, a pressing challenge is job creation, and the social enterprise model has proven to be a promising solution in this field. This model not only presents an effective way to reduce reoffending by providing meaningful

employment (Holzer *et al.*, 2003), but also offers a variety of psychosocial benefits. Research has consistently shown a strong correlation between employment and reoffending rates. Holzer *et al.* (2003) found that people with a criminal record who gain stable employment are less likely to reoffend. However, the stigma associated with a criminal record often presents a formidable barrier to employment. The social enterprise model has shown promise in addressing this challenge by creating businesses that specifically aim to employ and support people coming from a background of criminality (Cafferty *et al.*, 2016).

Social enterprises, broadly defined, are businesses that work primarily to improve the lives of people. Their core objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact (Government of Ireland, 2019). As such, they have the potential to provide a sustainable means of employment for those with criminal convictions, while also contributing positively to society. Examples include bakeries, coffee shops and other service-oriented businesses that hire people with criminal histories, teach them valuable job skills and provide a supportive work environment (Graffam *et al.*, 2008).

### ***Psychosocial benefits***

Beyond the clear economic advantages, social enterprises can also deliver significant psychosocial benefits for those with criminal convictions. The act of participating in meaningful work has been shown to improve self-esteem and promote a sense of belonging, while the supportive environment often provided by social enterprises can help people to cope with the psychological stresses of reintegration (Duwe and Clark, 2017). Furthermore, social enterprises often operate with an explicit focus on social responsibility, which can help people with criminal convictions to shift their self-identification from ‘offender’ to ‘contributor’ (Battilana and Lee, 2014). This shift in identity is a crucial factor in successful reintegration and can further reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

### ***The power of skills training***

Beyond providing employment, social enterprises are uniquely positioned to offer targeted skills training to those coming from a background of criminality. These training programmes can equip people with industry-specific skills, enhance their employability in the long term, and further reduce the risk of reoffending. Such training is particularly valuable given that many people

with convictions have low levels of formal education and job skills. By focusing on vocational training, social enterprises can fill this gap and help people coming from a background of criminality to become competitive job candidates in a variety of industries.

### ***The role of support services***

In addition to job creation and skills training, many social enterprises provide support services to those with criminal convictions, such as housing assistance, addiction support and mental health services (Duwe and Clark, 2017). These services address some of the root causes of criminal behaviour, further enhancing the effectiveness of the social enterprise model in reducing reoffending. Moreover, by addressing these complex needs, social enterprises contribute to the overall wellbeing of those with criminal histories, fostering their successful reintegration into society and enhancing their quality of life.

### ***Building community connections***

Social enterprises can play a crucial role in helping people with convictions to forge positive community connections. By providing a supportive environment where they work alongside community members, social enterprises can help to break down stigma and build bridges of understanding. These social connections not only aid in reintegration but also contribute to their overall psychosocial health (Macaulay *et al.*, 2018).

### ***Role of non-profits and community-based organisations***

Non-profit community-based organisations also play a critical role in this field. Many successful social enterprises are run by non-profits operating in the civil society sector, which leverage their resources and networks to support the mission of the organisation (Battilana and Lee, 2014). Non-profits can provide essential support services, including mentorship, life-skills training, and case management, to aid the reintegration process further.

By providing employment, skills training, support services, and community connections, social enterprises not only help to reduce reoffending but also contribute to the psychosocial wellbeing of people coming from a background of criminality.

## **Unpacking the social enterprise model: A focus on risk, needs, and responsivity**

The Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews and Bonta, 2010) is commonly utilised by organisations working with people who have criminal convictions. The Cornmarket Project employs this approach to match offenders with the most appropriate programme. It accomplishes this by providing a continuum of services and programmes tailored to the unique needs of each person. This continuum includes one-to-one counselling, drop-in low-threshold and outreach services, drugs rehab community-employment schemes, stabilisation groups, methadone clinic support service, restorative justice, a food poverty service, a homelessness day service, a women’s substance misuse service, a trauma-informed care programme and two social enterprises – EPIC and Kafe Konnect. The RNR model emphasises three principles: assessing a person’s risk of reoffending, identifying their criminogenic needs, and tailoring interventions to their learning style and motivation.

### ***Risk principle***

The risk principle posits that interventions should be matched to a person’s risk of reoffending, with higher-risk people receiving more intensive support. Research has demonstrated that adhering to the risk principle reduces reoffending rates (Lowenkamp *et al.*, 2006). Work and social integration programmes, such as social enterprises, can play a vital role in this process, as they address factors such as unemployment and social isolation, which have been identified as key predictors of reoffending.

### ***Needs principle***

The needs principle emphasises the importance of addressing criminogenic needs, such as antisocial attitudes, substance misuse and poor social support networks, which are directly related to criminal behaviour. Social enterprises can help to address these needs by providing employment, training, and opportunities to develop positive social connections (King, 2013).

### ***Responsivity principle***

The responsivity principle suggests that interventions should be tailored to the person’s learning style, motivation and personal circumstances. Social enterprises that adhere to the responsivity principle consider participants’ personal and cultural backgrounds and offer flexible, individualised support.

In the UK, probation services have adopted the RNR model, using it to inform interventions such as the Offender Assessment System (OASys) and the Integrated Offender Management (IOM) approach. These interventions focus on providing those with criminal records with employment opportunities and support in areas such as housing, education, and mental health, which are critical for promoting desistance and social integration (McNeill, 2012).

In Ireland, the Probation Service makes use of the RNR model to guide its work with those with criminal convictions. The Community Return Scheme, for example, provides early-release opportunities to prisoners who engage in unpaid community work, which can facilitate their reintegration into society (McNally and Brennan, 2015).

Adhering to the principles of risk, needs, and responsivity, social enterprise programmes can help to address the factors contributing to criminal behaviour and support those with convictions in their journey towards desistance.

## **Exploring the role of social enterprises in the process of desistance**

Desistance, the process through which people reduce or cease offending behaviour, is a critical aspect of criminal justice policy and practice. By providing employment opportunities, skills training, and support for social integration, social enterprises can help those with convictions to reintegrate into society and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

### ***Social enterprise and desistance***

Social enterprises can contribute to desistance by addressing several key factors associated with reoffending, such as unemployment, social isolation and lack of access to support services (Department of Justice, 2020). By offering not only employment opportunities but also skills training and socialisation, social enterprises help those coming from a background of criminality to develop human capital, which is essential for securing stable, long-term employment. Social enterprises can create supportive environments that foster positive social connections, promote prosocial attitudes and enhance self-efficacy, all of which have been linked to desistance (Maruna, 2001).

### ***Social enterprise strengthening desistance: Some illustrative cases***

In the UK, several social enterprises have been established to support those with criminal convictions in their journey towards desistance. The Clink Charity

operates a chain of training restaurants within prisons, offering inmates the opportunity to gain hospitality qualifications and work experience. Evaluations of the Clink Charity have shown that participants are less likely to reoffend than those who do not participate in the programme (Clink Charity, 2019).

Working Chance helps women to find jobs and reintegrate into society after leaving the criminal justice system. It works with employers to promote fair hiring practices and offers a range of services to its candidates, including CV advice, interview coaching, and ongoing in-work support.

In Ireland, Cairde Enterprises in Limerick is a commercial social enterprise producing a range of furniture products and offering those over the age of 23, with criminal convictions, a real and meaningful work environment, through full-time employment and work experience programmes. The goal of Cairde Enterprises is to prepare people for progressing into mainstream employment and to help change positively the attitudes of potential employers and communities towards those coming from a background of criminality who want to turn their lives around.

Another social enterprise in Ireland, and a recipient of Probation Service Kick Start funding for social enterprises, is Frontline Bikes. This is a local bike shop, based in Dublin, reusing, renovating and upcycling old bikes. It also trains and upskills those in the community who have struggled with addiction. Frontline Bikes is made up of two key services – Frontline Upcycling and Training Unit, and Frontline Bikes. These two services are symbiotic in nature and aim to provide a skill set to those affected by problematic substance misuse, or those with experience of the criminal justice system.

By providing employment opportunities, skills training and support for social integration, social enterprises can address key factors associated with reoffending and promote lasting change.

## **Addressing criminogenic need: Case studies from social enterprises**

Criminogenic need factors, such as unemployment, substance misuse and lack of social support, are dynamic risk factors that can influence a person's likelihood of reoffending. Addressing these factors is essential for promoting desistance and successful reintegration into society (Ward and Maruna, 2007). Social enterprises have emerged as a promising approach to addressing such criminogenic need factors.

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### ***Social enterprise and criminogenic need factors***

Social enterprises can address criminogenic need factors by providing targeted interventions and support services that promote desistance and foster successful reintegration. In addition to employment opportunities, social enterprises can offer skills training, provide treatment and support services for substance misuse and facilitate access to social networks and support systems that promote prosocial attitudes and behaviours (Farrall and Calverley, 2005). By addressing these dynamic risk factors, social enterprises can contribute to reducing reoffending and improve outcomes for people with criminal histories.

In the UK, social enterprises are playing a crucial role in addressing criminogenic need factors. One notable enterprise is the Skill Mill, which aims to challenge the negative perception associated with having a criminal record, the lack of opportunities in the past and society's unfavourable attitudes towards young people who have committed criminal offences. Many young people with criminal histories struggle to access education, training or employment opportunities, which are essential for their personal progress. The Skill Mill helps to overcome these obstacles by providing valuable work skills, knowledge and, most importantly, confidence. Over the past nine years, The Skill Mill has successfully employed 362 young people, and out of that number, only 27 have reoffended (The Skill Mill, 2023).

Social enterprise in Ireland has emerged as a promising approach to tackle reoffending by addressing criminogenic needs, promoting desistance, and facilitating work and social integration. An example is PACE (Promoting Access, Community and Employment). PACE is funded by the Probation Service and works with people who have been involved in the criminal justice system, including those with prior convictions, to help them reintegrate into society and find meaningful employment. PACE provides a variety of services, such as education and training, job-placement assistance and support in accessing housing and social welfare.

PACE also operates The Mug Shot social enterprise, a popular coffee and catering business providing high-quality FairChain coffee, cold drinks, sandwiches and snacks since 2018. Designed, owned and managed by PACE, its mission is to create sustainable jobs for people who have experienced prison or probation and now find it hard to secure employment.

Social enterprises can play a critical role not only in addressing unemployment, but also in relation to dynamic risk factors, such as substance



misuse, lack of social support and developing self-efficacy, thereby promoting desistance and successful reintegration into society for people with criminal histories.

## **Empowering people: Self-efficacy and the social enterprise model**

People with a background of addiction and criminality often face significant barriers to their reintegration into society, including stigma, discrimination, and lack of access to employment and support services (Pager, 2003). Self-efficacy – the belief in one’s ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish tasks – is essential for fostering successful reintegration and reducing the likelihood of reoffending. Social enterprises have emerged as a promising approach to promoting self-efficacy for those coming from a background of addiction and criminality.

### ***Social enterprise and self-efficacy***

Social enterprises can promote self-efficacy by providing targeted interventions and support services that enhance a person’s skills, confidence and access to resources. For example, social enterprises can facilitate access to social networks and support systems and can help to strengthen prosocial attitudes and behaviours (Farrall and Maruna, 2004). By addressing these barriers and fostering self-efficacy, social enterprises can contribute to reducing reoffending and improved outcomes for people with a background of addiction and criminality.

In the UK, several social enterprises seek to promote self-efficacy among people with addiction-related issues. The Forward Trust, a social enterprise focused on providing support for those with a criminal history and addiction issues, offers employment opportunities, skills training and access to recovery services (Forward Trust, 1991). Evaluations of the Forward Trust’s programmes have shown that participants experience improvements in self-efficacy, which are associated with reduced reoffending and increased likelihood of securing long-term employment.

The social enterprise model has been successfully employed in Ireland to promote self-efficacy and reduce the risk of criminality among marginalised groups. The Bridge Project is a community-based organisation and social enterprise that provides training and employment opportunities for those with previous criminal convictions. The Bridge Project has been working since 1991 to reduce the reoffending rates of those with criminal histories in the

greater Dublin region. It envisages a future where all those with an offending history are afforded opportunities to develop their full potential, reintegrate with families and society, and attain employment. The Bridge Project aspires to achieve this vision by working collaboratively with people and partner agencies to unlock potential and effect positive change. Bridge strives to create safer communities by developing and supporting the implementation of innovative, evidence-based responses and practices that reduce reoffending.

Social enterprises can play a critical role in enhancing self-efficacy by providing targeted interventions and support services, thereby fostering successful reintegration and reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

### **Experiences from the field, including two social enterprises operating in the Cornmarket Project**

Reoffending – the propensity of ex-offenders to reoffend – is a challenge everywhere. Lowering reoffending rates can enhance the quality of life for the people concerned and their communities, and can also yield substantial socio-economic advantages. The rising recognition of social enterprises' innovative potential in curbing reoffending is noteworthy.

#### ***Social enterprise as a means to tackle reoffending***

In the UK and Ireland, numerous social enterprises have emerged to address reoffending, with promising results. In Scotland, the Freedom Bakery, a Glasgow-based social enterprise, trains and employs people with previous criminal convictions, in the art of artisan baking. The bakery was originally set up within HMP Low Moss and has been lauded for its efforts to reduce reoffending rates by developing participant self-efficacy by providing meaningful employment and skills training.

In Ireland, the Cornmarket Project provides compelling examples. Kafe Konnect, a social enterprise in Wexford Town, is part of the continuum of programmes offered by the Cornmarket Project and serves as an example of how such initiatives can provide job training and employment in the hospitality sector for people with a criminal past. Established with support from the Probation Service's Kick Start Fund, Kafe Konnect employs eight people who have struggled to enter the job market because of criminal records or past addiction-related issues. It aids those people in making lasting life changes, distancing themselves from criminal activities and substance misuse, and regaining stability. Kafe Konnect offers tangible work experience

and training in various hospitality roles, including as chefs, pastry chefs, baristas, wait staff, cashiers, kitchen support, and in café management.

Another initiative based in the Cornmarket Project is the EPIC (Enhancing Progress, Inspiring Change) social enterprise. This programme offers training and employment to an additional eight people with criminal backgrounds, focusing on skills in printing, design, logistics, IT systems, stock control, management and other transferable work-related abilities. Since its inception in 2020, EPIC has successfully provided training and job opportunities and has assisted seven clients to transition into mainstream employment.

As a component of a broader spectrum of services and programmes, these social enterprises make a considerable contribution to enhancing employment and bolstering desistance among people with criminal records. By facilitating skill development, work experience and access to resources and networks, they are tackling the significant obstacles people with criminal histories encounter in seeking employment. The impact of social enterprises in aiding the transition of people with criminal records into conventional employment is visible in the work of Kafe Konnect and EPIC.

## **Outcome measurement in the social enterprise model: Why it matters**

There remains a need for rigorous outcome measurement in social enterprises to evaluate effectiveness and inform evidence-based policy and practice.

Outcome measurement is crucial for several reasons:

1. *Assessing effectiveness*: Outcome measurement enables social enterprises and other stakeholders to evaluate the success of their interventions in reducing reoffending and improving the wellbeing of those coming from a background of criminality. Evaluating the effectiveness of interventions is essential for justifying continued investment and support from funders, policymakers, and the public.
2. *Identifying best practices*: By measuring outcomes, social enterprises can identify best practices and determine which interventions are most effective in reducing reoffending and promoting successful reintegration. This information can be used to refine and improve programmes, leading to better outcomes for those with prior criminal convictions and society as a whole.
3. *Facilitating comparisons*: Outcome measurement allows for comparisons between different social enterprises and interventions,

providing valuable insights into the factors that contribute to successful reintegration and desistance from crime. Comparisons can also stimulate innovation and promote the dissemination of effective practices across the sector.

4. *Accountability and transparency*: Measuring outcomes helps to ensure that social enterprises are accountable for their actions and transparent about their achievements and challenges. This is crucial for building trust and credibility among stakeholders, including funders, policy-makers and the communities they serve.

When evaluating the effectiveness of social enterprises in reducing reoffending, several key outcomes should be considered:

1. *Reoffending rates*: A primary outcome of interest is the reoffending rate, or the proportion of those with histories of criminality who reoffend within a specified period. The Change Outcome and Impact Measuring (COAIM) system (Delaney and Weir, 2011) used in the Cornmarket Project measures client involvement in criminality over time.
2. *Employment outcomes*: Employment is a critical factor in promoting successful reintegration and reducing reoffending. Social enterprises, using instruments such as the COAIM system, can measure employment outcomes, such as job-placement rates and job retention, to assess their impact on the economic wellbeing and stability of those with prior convictions.
3. *Psychological outcomes*: Interventions aimed at reducing reoffending should also consider psychological outcomes, such as self-efficacy, motivation and prosocial attitudes. These outcomes can be assessed using the COAIM system in the Cornmarket Project.
4. *Social outcomes*: Social outcomes, such as social support, social capital and community integration, are crucial for promoting desistance from crime and successful reintegration (Farrall and Maruna, 2004). The Cornmarket Project uses the COAIM system to measure these outcomes for participants on its two social enterprises.

The Cornmarket Project employs the COAIM system for effective outcome measurement. This system integrates evidence-based approaches, namely the Stages of Change, Motivational Interviewing, and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Within the COAIM system, the Stages of Change model serves as the framework for tracking client progress. Motivational Interviewing

offers the techniques and strategies for encouraging positive behavioural changes. Lastly, Functional Analysis from CBT provides the structure for the necessary metrics for assessment, evaluation and outcome measurement.

However, no single assessment or outcome measurement system is universally accepted as the best (Penna, 2011). While acknowledging the need for thorough and accurate information, research literature on this topic suggests that comprehensiveness needs to be balanced by brevity to ensure routine application and compliance (Madan, 2007). The COAIM system therefore provides staff with a solid framework that supports their work with clients engaged on its two social enterprises, in a planned and directive manner. The use of this approach optimises the potential for positive change, while ensuring effective mapping and measurement of outcomes.

Properly implemented, the approach creates the circumstances whereby the client develops the self-efficacy necessary to take responsibility for the continuation of their own positive change process, i.e. the ability to sustain positive self-management. The table below presents a snapshot of results for 182 Probation Service clients attending the Cornmarket Project in 2022.

<i>Ten Target Areas of COAIM System</i>	<i>Positive Change</i>	<i>Stable/ No Change</i>	<i>Negative Change</i>
Involvement in criminality	88%	8%	4%
Accommodation	34%	51%	15%
Pro-social activities	61%	36%	3%
Anger and emotion management	57%	38%	5%
Attitudes and cognitive style	80%	17%	3%
Drug and alcohol misuse	85%	11%	4%
Lifestyle and associates	59%	33%	8%
Relationships and family issues	56%	39%	5%
Training and employability	79%	11%	10%
Financial issues and debt	59%	27%	14%
Score relating to client change and attainment of overall goal: <i>'To live a productive life, free from criminality and substance misuse.'</i>	67%	26%	7%

When a client begins their journey with the Cornmarket Project, a comprehensive analysis of their situation and issues is conducted across ten specific areas, as and when necessary. To carry out this analysis, the staff member utilises ten distinct scoring guides from the COAIM system, each corresponding to a different target area.

This analysis maps and scores the client's initial issues and establishes a baseline for measuring future changes. The COAIM system is revisited periodically during the client's engagement with the project and, finally, on their exit from the programme. The initial analysis also aids in the creation of a collaborative client change plan, and any future adjustments deemed necessary by both staff and client are made based on subsequent analyses.

Thorough evaluation is crucial in maintaining ongoing support and investment, identifying effective practices, facilitating benchmark comparisons and ensuring accountability and transparency.

## **Desistance from criminality: Anticipating the future impact of social enterprises**

As social enterprises continue to evolve and expand their activity, it is crucial to consider the future directions and potential opportunities for further enhancing their impact on desistance.

### ***Innovations and opportunities***

1. *Technology and digital solutions*: The rapid growth of digital technologies offers new opportunities for social enterprises to develop innovative solutions for promoting desistance (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). For example, digital platforms can facilitate connections between those with criminal backgrounds, employers and support services, while virtual reality and online learning tools can enhance skills development and access to education. Harnessing technology will be essential for social enterprises to maximise their impact on desistance in an increasingly digital world.
2. *Collaboration and partnership*: The future of the social enterprise model in promoting desistance will likely involve greater collaboration and partnership between social enterprises, government agencies, criminal justice institutions and other stakeholders (Fox and Albertson, 2011). These partnerships can facilitate the sharing of resources, expertise and best practices, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of

interventions and improving outcomes for those with criminal convictions.

3. *Expansion of target groups*: Social enterprises in the criminal justice arena have primarily focused on working with adults with criminal histories. There is potential to expand their reach to other groups, such as young people with criminal records, at-risk clients, and families of those with criminal histories. By broadening their target groups, social enterprises can have a more significant impact on reducing criminality and promoting desistance across diverse populations.

### **Challenges and policy implications**

1. *Scaling and sustainability*: As social enterprises continue to grow, one of the primary challenges will be achieving scale and sustainability. This will require developing innovative funding models, such as social impact bonds or blended finance, to attract investment and support from a range of stakeholders. Policymakers can support the scaling and sustainability of social enterprises by providing targeted funding, capacity-building support and enabling policy frameworks.
2. *Evaluating impact and building evidence*: Rigorous outcome measurement and evaluation are essential for demonstrating the impact of social enterprises on desistance and informing evidence-based policy and practice. Policymakers should invest in research and evaluation capacity, develop standardised outcome-measurement tools and promote the sharing of data and best practices across the sector.
3. *Reducing stigma and discrimination*: Social enterprises must continue to address the stigma and discrimination faced by those with criminal convictions, which remain significant barriers to employment and reintegration. This will require ongoing advocacy, public education campaigns, and the development of policies and practices that promote equal opportunities and social inclusion for people with criminal histories.

The *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland (2019–2022)* was a watershed moment for social enterprise. Ireland has a rich, proud and diverse experience of social economy and social enterprise, yet the policy framework developed comparatively later than in some other EU member states. Since its launch in 2019, the policy has helped to shape the social enterprise sector in Ireland

significantly, including through targeted measures and improved coherence across government policy (Forde, 2023).

Much has changed in the criminal justice arena since the launch of that original policy. The Department of Justice strategy on social enterprise (2020) demonstrates forward thinking and an openness to 'think differently' about the responsibilities and role that the Department and its agencies can play in supporting people with convictions into employment, to make real and sustainable change for themselves, their families and the communities within which they live (Department of Justice, 2020). In the ongoing quest to enhance the reintegration process for people with criminal convictions, the social enterprise model has emerged as a promising strategy. It not only generates employment opportunities but also tackles the underlying factors of reoffending and fosters psychosocial wellbeing.

*Working to Change* (2021) is a social enterprise supported by government funding. It runs a specific website that supports the implementation of the *Working to Change – Social Enterprise and Employment Strategy 2021–2023*. Its aim is to expand job opportunities for people with criminal records, building on pre-existing support systems.

*Working to Change* focuses on creating meaningful work opportunities and removing obstacles that hinder individual transformation. It is dedicated to providing fair and accessible job paths for those with criminal records, while maintaining community safety. *Working to Change* also aims to confront and tackle the systemic barriers that can arise when developing social enterprises for people with a criminal past. Most importantly, it is committed to finding and implementing solutions to overcome these barriers (*Working to Change*, 2021).

When it comes to negotiating such barriers, social enterprises face several challenges. Funding is a primary issue; despite their social value, these enterprises often struggle to secure sustainable financial resources. Limited government funding and competition for private grants can result in instability, threatening the longevity and impact of these initiatives. Secondly, policy support is crucial, as regulatory frameworks can either facilitate or hinder social enterprise activities. Policies that encourage collaboration between social enterprises, private sector and public bodies, while also promoting the hiring of people with a criminal past, could substantially enhance these efforts.

Lastly, there is a need for more rigorous evaluation methods. Many social enterprises lack the resources or expertise to conduct comprehensive



assessments, limiting their ability to demonstrate effectiveness, learn from best practices and continue to improve. Overcoming these challenges would enable social enterprises better to support reintegration and reduce reoffending among people with criminal convictions.

## **Conclusion**

Future advances in promoting desistance from criminality through social enterprises will be influenced by technological innovations, collaborative partnerships and the expansion of target demographics. To progress, it will also be necessary to address key challenges such as scalability, sustainability, evaluation and stigma reduction. A concerted effort by policymakers, practitioners and researchers is crucial to harness these opportunities, address these challenges and maximise social enterprises' impact on promoting desistance and successful reintegration.

Despite existing hurdles, the social enterprise model's potential to provide job opportunities and psychosocial benefits to those with criminal records is clear. By leveraging this model, backed by supportive policies and corporate collaborations, we can make significant progress towards successfully reintegrating those who have often been overlooked by society.

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