**DISCHARGED PRISONERS' AID SOCIETIES**

Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies (DPAS) have been the longest standing and most visible of all voluntary and philanthropic organisations in England that provided local help for people leaving prison. Charitable 'societies' of all forms had their origins in the early 18th century as a philanthropic zeal swept the Western world. Such societies included the Temperance movement working to encourage people to abstain from alcohol, missionary movements to 'save' children from poverty and moralising movements to rescue 'fallen women'. Aid Societies involved themselves specifically in penal affairs, particularly the aftercare of prisoners leaving prison. Their proliferation towards the end of the 18th century coincided with a penal reform inspired by the activities of John Howard. In the absence of any formal help for people released from any type of prison, these Aid Societies continued to be active in providing voluntary, charitable help for prisoners throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century. They continued providing voluntary help even after the Probation Service was established with the 1907 Probation Act (Mair and Burke, 2012). Britain was not the only country to have DPAS - France, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Russia and United States all had similar endeavours (Carey and Walker, 2002). Due to the disparate and religious nature of their organisation, few records remain of the work of Aid Societies; hence, with exceptions for example Turner and Johnston (2016), research on their activities is scarce.

DPAS was an umbrella term for a national but disparate set of different small societies that provided a range of services for people leaving prison. Their chief aim was to find employment and temporary lodgings for a discharged prisoner, or, if he or she had what was considered to be a respectable home, to send the ex-prisoner to his or her home. In cases where there were no relatives and the person concerned consented, the DPAS could organise emigration for the discharged prisoner. Some DPAS worked with prisoners whilst still incarcerated in planning their life after prison and others literally stood outside the prison gates to help people on release (known as 'prison gate missions'). Occasionally a DPAS would provide temporary accommodation for people on release but this was usually for men only. Hence even more rare was the DPAS accommodation for women. The North and South Staffordshire DPAS combined forces in 1878 to set up and run a refuge for women leaving Stafford gaol, entitled the Staffordshire County Industrial Home For Discharged Female Ex-Prisoners and Friendless Women (Turner, 2012). It is possible that this particular refuge was unique.

The work of the DPAS was recognised in 1862 by the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Act. This Act enabled individual Aid Societies to be attached to individual prisons. It also brought a chaotic system of financial aid for discharged prisoners. This Act also enabled magistrates to certify Aid Societies connected to individual prisons which then allowed those societies to receive a small amount of government money per prisoner to help with re-settlement (McConville, 1994). Most of these DPAS took the government funding, although some refused all state funding to remain independent, for example the Gloucestershire Society and the York Castle Society. By 1895 the Gladstone Committee reported that each prison had two or three DPAS attached to it (Gladstone Committee, 1895).

Despite their protestations of benevolent purposes, the DPAS were not always well received: other philanthropic organisations working to help prisoners felt their competition overbearing; prisoners baulked at their moralising; and the Prison Commission thought them in need of fundamental reform (McConville, 1994). Such concerns led to the DPAS being scrutinised by the Gladstone Committee in 1895 (Gladstone Committee, 1895). *A Report to Her Majesty's Commissioners of Prisons on the Operations of Discharged Prisoners Aid Societies*, ordered subsequent to the Gladstone Committee and delivered in 1897, advocated a centralised system of control and for the disparate Societies to co-operate more with each other (McConville, 1994). Over the following few decades an unpleasant clash ensued between the Prison Commissioner, Ruggles-Brise (Commissioner between 1895 and 1921) and the DPAS, who fought against reform and centralised control (McConville, 1994; Carey and Walker, 2002).

Finally, reform and centralisation did take place. The Central Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society (Incorporated) was formed in December 1924; subsequently renamed the National Association of Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies (NADPAS) in 1935. In 1963 a report on *The Organisation of Aftercare by the Advisory Council on the Treatment of Offenders* suggested that prison welfare and aftercare should be entrusted to the Probation Service (Carey and Walker, 2002). However, the report also acknowledged that the voluntary sector still had a role to play in service provision and in 1966 the NADPAS changed its name to the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO). NACRO has since developed into the biggest [criminal justice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_justice)-related charity in England and Wales.

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**See also: Gladstone Committee; Penal Reform; Philanthropic Institutions; Police Court Missionaries; Probation [History of]; Temperance Movements**

**Readings**

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