At a time when citizens are encouraged to participate in civil society and cooperate for the collective good (Cabinet Office, 2010), I would like consider in this presentation how this can be achieved within prison by encouraging citizenship activities among confined citizens. Much has been written and debated about prisoners as citizens in the context of their right to vote (Behan, 2014; Easton, 2011; Joint Committee on the Draft Voting Eligibility (Prisoners) Bill, 2013) which has somewhat overshadowed other aspects of citizenship. While not diminishing the importance of legal rights for prisoners, this paper will examine other aspects of citizenship, namely how prisoners can participate as citizens in society, despite being physically excluded from their communities.

In considering the process of facilitating civic and political engagement among prisoners, this paper will begin by setting out the arguments in favour of community and prisoner integration. It will contend that the process of re-integration should begin on incarceration, because the level of disconnection while they are inside can influence how well former prisoners will reintegrate when they are outside.
In a modern polity, citizenship is more than just about enjoying the legal right to vote, it is about the opportunities available to participate in, and contribute, to a democratic society. When citizenship is narrowed down to a legalistic concept with rights guaranteed by law and courts, this reduces the agency of the citizen. If legal rights of citizens are privileged, disputes can end up in courts, reducing the power of the citizen and the opportunity to participate in, and influence decisions that affect their lives. The importance of political activity and dialogue is weakened, reducing the role of citizen as a human agent and consequently this undermines the potential of, and possibly the need for, active participation and citizenship (Riordan, 2004).

In prison, laws, rules and regulations predominate. This has led to the examination of prisoners as citizens in the context of their rights and the state’s obligations and duties to them (see Easton, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2008; van Zyl Smit and Snacken, 2009). Others have explored the opportunities for prisoners to participate as citizens and the obligations and duties that accompany their rights (Burnett and Maruna, 2006; Faulkner, 2002 and 2003; Levenson and Farrant, 2002; Pryor, 2002). However, citizenship is about more than just rights, entitlements and obligations; it is about the opportunity to participate in, and contribute to the civic life of a community.

Therefore, I would like to explore a concept which may be tentatively called ‘soft’ citizenship, dealing with the opportunities for prisoners to participate in community and society. I will argue that we should reframe the debate on
prisoners and citizenship and move from exclusively examining it in the context of the social contract (which has been used as a central argument by those who oppose prisoners’ right to vote), towards considering it in the context of the social compact. Instead of examining prisoners and citizenship in a negative framework of how prisoners have broken the social contract, it might be useful and more productive to examine it in a more positive frame of reference embracing the social compact that links society together. This shifts the focus from examining prisoners and citizenship in the context of rights, responsibilities and obligations towards ideas around participation, co-operation, inclusion and potentially, identity transformation.

Those who commit crimes can be viewed as breaking the bonds of community. Imprisonment deepens that disconnection. Reconnecting and positively identifying with community and civil society is an important element in reintegration. Encouraging a citizen identity, which recognizes the importance of participation (Richardson, 1983) in this process might yield a more authentic form of change in prisoners. This would entail confined citizens’ not just desisting from criminal activity and obeying the law, but locating that law in a wider social and political context. Such an approach challenges the imprisoned to become reflective agents for change, rather than just passive law-abiding citizens.

Due to their socio-economic background, educational level, disconnectedness and in many cases, alienation (Behan, 2014; Prison
Reform Trust, 2014; Ruggiero and Ryan, 2013), prisoners generally lack social capital. By linking prisons and more importantly, prisoners to their local communities, this paper will consider the potential to develop social and human capital which is intrinsically linked with citizenship activities. Social capital is a rather ambiguous concept, but essential to the cooperation necessary for engaging citizens. It is built through participation in civic activities and networks of civic engagement which creates more trusting citizens (Putnam, 2000). Developing more positive webs of association amongst prisoners inside and by linking prisoners to their communities outside promotes reintegration with civil society.

This paper will briefly set out the position regarding enfranchisement of prisoners in both the Republic of Ireland the United Kingdom. It will present some empirical evidence about levels of political participation in the former and consider the challenges if the latter decides to enfranchise prisoners. It will then review the opportunities for citizens who wish to participate civically while incarcerated. While recognising the challenges of trying to engender positive civic activity in places of confinement, the paper will then consider how the process of reintegration might begin on incarceration, through communities including their local prisons in collaborative activities. It will build on examples of civic activities that already exist in prisons in the Republic of Ireland, United Kingdom and internationally.

Prison isolates and separates, not only physically from friends, family and trusted companions, but psychologically by creating regimes and discipline
that do not enhance communication and co-operation, essential to active citizenship. By its very nature, the institution limits agency, freedom of choice and movement, and restricts individuals’ involvement in civic society. While engaging in activities traditionally associated with freedom is problematic in prisons some institutions provide opportunities for various levels of purposeful activity, programme participation and civic engagement. Activities that promote civic co-operation within prison, such as prisoner councils (Solomon and Edgar, 2004), Listener Schemes (Levenson and Farrant, 2002) and educational pursuits (Behan, 2008), to those that promote links with communities outside, such as volunteering schemes (Behan, 2014; Burnett and Maruna, 2006), the Paws for Progress programme (Scott, 2013) and Prison Fire Camps (Goodman, 2012) will be considered. These activities demonstrate the potential of harnessing the time, energy and commitment of confined citizens. They also recognise the potential to build human and social capital inside prison.

Wider and deeper engagement by prisoners in civic society has benefits on a number of levels. It recognizes the possibilities through civic engagement for transformation of those who are sent to prison. It also encourages citizens with convictions to adopt a more pro-social attitude, away from criminal activity. A decrease in criminal activity reduces the harm to potential victims, benefits society more generally, and can help build more resilient communities.
This paper will conclude by setting out the need to consider legal and societal impediments to integrating prisoners with communities. In *Reducing Reoffending National Action Plan* (Home Office, 2004), seven Pathways to Reducing Reoffending were outlined: Drugs and Alcohol; Mental and Physical Health; Education, Training and Employment; Accommodation; Finance, Benefit and Debt; Children and Families of Offenders and Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviour. These seven pathways should be re-visited and considered in the context of adding another: Citizenship. This could be developed through promoting citizenship activities by building links between communities and prisons. The legal and societal impediments to participation in community, both inside and outside could be examined in a wider mosaic of citizenship. By locating citizenship as a core Pathway to Reducing Reoffending we could consider how to lessen societal obstacles to reintegration by eradicating the structural barriers that impede participation, especially legal restrictions that prevent prisoners from contributing to their community while inside and hinder their reintegration into society after their release from prison.
References


