

Prison: a view from inside

A prisoner reflects on how his preconceptions about criminal justice have changed since entering the prison gates.

It is remarkable how little the public know of the reality of prisons or the effect they have on inmates. Despite record numbers in prison, folk seem content to remain ignorant. Life inside doesn't affect them, so why should they be interested?

The public demands action to tackle crime on the street – they want a visible impact. It's convenient to think that criminals go to prison, they don't come from prison. Reconviction rates being so high proves this belief is false.

People are beginning to understand the need to prevent crime and the importance of the links between schooling, parenting, drug strategies, constructive youth activities etc. Schemes facilitating reform of offenders show clear effects on recidivism, but are at best scattered. Society recognises its part in 'permitting' triggers to criminality, but does not seem to accept responsibility to bring about real change. Does this mean we are prepared to act on prevention, but not bother with cure?

If prison is considered the only option, it should be viewed as a 'second chance': a means to tackle offending behaviour, resolve personal problems, develop individuals and practice personal responsibility – tools for lawful civilian life. If a person's 'one-off mistake' deems retribution necessary, a constructive punishment should be expected, allowing repair to the social fabric without unnecessarily removing responsibility and damaging an innocent family.

These are some of my beliefs; they have changed dramatically in recent years. As a person who crossed the line from being a law abiding, well educated, hard working professional to a long-term prisoner, I have experienced the realities of imprisonment. This experience is my only qualification to write. The more I experience, the sadder I feel that such a powerful system fails to tackle long-term issues and misses the opportunity to be a constructive force. As Douglas Hurd once put it prison is 'an expensive way of making bad people worse'.

Before coming to prison I shared popular preconceptions of prisoners. Since experiencing prison, I challenge these, offering an insight from inside. I accept I make sweeping generalisations and I don't profess to have all the answers – the issues are immense and complex. These are personal views; but it seems a further offence not share them, given the opportunity.

As an 'average' civilian without a criminal record, I had no first hand experience of prisons. I didn't know anybody who'd been to prison, I wasn't expecting to be here and didn't link prisons with knock-on effects on crime. Such minimal

experiences of criminality meant preconceptions formed from sensationalised media projections and 'folk stories'. Stereotypes registered, and beliefs were formed.

First I state a pre-conception, then offer my views on each.

1. All criminals and prisoners are the same...

All criminals have made mistakes. Beyond this inmates entering the system are as diverse as people outside. They have differing needs, hopes, personalities, ages, talents, nationalities, educations, family, social and professional backgrounds. All distinctions are lost upon entering prison when all reach an equal, base level. Over time prison grinds inmates down diminishing previously positive aspects of their lives.

2. Crime is a clear choice. A person blatantly, knowingly chooses to break the law...

Whilst often true and mostly linked with drug use, a surprisingly significant number did not appreciate the scale of their actions or wrongly responded to circumstances. Not realising the potentially serious consequences of actions, criminality was not a conscious or clear choice. Realising the severity of actions, going to court or a threat of prison would be a life-long lesson for many first time offenders.

3. Criminals have the same alternative options as everyone else, but choose an easy option...

Criminals have the same aspirations as everyone else – all of society is subjected to the powerful marketing of a consumer society, conditioned to perceive material possession as symbolic of 'success', identity and status. Everyone hopes for part of the 'Posh & Becks' dream. The strong-minded, self-esteemed and educated gradually realise the fallacy of the dream.

Those who choose criminality don't generally hold all these qualities entering adult life. If your youthful environment has not encouraged such assets, legitimate alternatives are reduced. Frustration at lack of 'success' and drugs cloud judgement. Violence and destructive behaviour follow frustration at the apparently 'unfair' situation. Once a criminal, alternatives reduce further and the spiral continues.

4. Prison is a last resort...

Although a publicly promoted view, in many cases it is a first resort. I've repeatedly met inmates with no previous convictions, judged as no threat to the public or likely to re-offend, who received long

sentences. If retribution is needed why can this not require positive payback? Considering long-term negative effects, respected alternatives to prison should exist. Prison could be a last resort, if an offender fails to respond to trust.

5. Prison is an effective deterrent...

I believe prison is a highly effective deterrent to anyone consciously weighing up actions against prison, especially a first time offender. Many do not realise the risk until too late, so deterrent isn't a consideration. Once experienced, fear of prison reduces as mystery is removed. Within days most, and within months all, will have decided whether they will reoffend. Problems should be addressed or repair to the social fabric made, which may not require incarceration.

Conversely, prolonged prison makes future criminality more viable – detachment from social groups, institutionalisation, eroding of self-esteem all impact the already reduced alternatives of an ex-con.

6. Prison satisfies a victim of crime...

A victim's desire for retribution is a natural response. Someone should 'pay' for what they have done, this seems right. Exacting retribution should balance long term social implications. Prison punishes by taking liberty, subjecting you to a repressive environment and devastates a family. Generally there is no expectation that an offender should or could do anything to repair the social fabric, except to suffer and remain incapacitated. Prison does not permit or encourage, let alone demand people to 'give back'.

Wouldn't a victim get more satisfaction from knowing at least something good has come from an offence? A crime cannot be undone, but surely if something positive can arise it should. It needn't be a soft option; positive actions can be punishing and lengthy. It's a tragic waste that sentences are not more constructive – offenders would choose worthwhile over futile activities, they could learn skills and society would benefit.

7. Prison rehabilitates and reforms criminals...

Prison is a place where both people needing (drugs) rehab and those supplying drugs to the vulnerable are sent. The combination seems doomed to fail, and it does. Drugs are widely available in prisons and heroin addiction is exploding (creating more long term addicts), partly as it's less detectable than cannabis in prison urine tests.

Beyond the punishment of prison, true reform depends on helping resolve personal problems, providing useful skills/training for real jobs and support beyond the gate. Prisons seem to tackle basic literacy, but vocational training is minimal. Reform poses a significant challenge and is no quick-fix or vote winner, but considering long-term costs it is surely viable. Dumping offenders outside with everything lost and nothing but a criminal record to offer employers only perpetuates crime.

8. Prisoners are a danger to the public and need to be locked away...

Prison tends to be associated with 'monsters' portrayed in media; in reality these cases are a tiny minority. The huge majority are normal guys from disadvantaged backgrounds and people who have made mistakes.

The violent few make it a dangerous place for all. Like a dodgy club or estate, you don't have to go far to find trouble

and it can find you. Boredom, frustration and stress increase likelihood. Non-violent offenders exposed to threats become more aggressive. Prison breeds violence in this way, carrying it into society.

9. Prisoners are uncaring and selfish...

Prison can be a more caring place than society as a whole. Meeting inmates could be compared to work colleagues. You get to know each other steadily and accept people as they are. I think the noticeable difference is when someone is having troubles. There is time and a will to help, often not the case in the busy world outside.

'The Listeners' scheme is an example – inmates voluntarily train with the Samaritans and agree to be woken in the middle of the night, if necessary to go and listen to a 'stranger' elsewhere in the prison. Inmate to inmate literacy teaching is another.

10. Prison officers are military types who get a kick from locking people up...

There are all kinds of individuals doing the job. The majority of officers do a good job, are civil, caring and helpful, doing what they can with the resources available. I believe many share the frustrations that so much more could be done and offered, but it never seems to happen, so futility rules.

11. Prison gardens are well kept...

True.

12. Prison is a 'university of crime'...

I believe there is no better place to learn about crime and become more aggressive.

Positive things do occur in prison for individuals, some from constructive pilot schemes, but positive activities are certainly not widespread. Inmates don't generally complain about their sentences, they are accepting along with the apparent futility of so much of prison life. Community based sentences and long-term approaches may have little political capital and reactionary media only encourage politicians, but prison is now used as a quick-fix 'solution' to so many problems, its purpose seems confused.

It seems very strange that such a powerful and costly exercise is undertaken without providing direction of purpose, accountability or stating expectations of what should be achieved. In the way that a doctor understands prescriptions, I feel a judge should fully understand the likely impact of a sentence, explain its necessity and clearly state what is expected of each individual. Personal responsibility for serving a sentence inside or outside a prison should be given and demanded. Surely personal responsibility is what it's all about.

The writer is serving a 5.5 year sentence in a UK prison.