

Criminals or citizens?

Prisoner councils and rehabilitation

Enver Solomon summarises a recent report on how prisoner councils encourage offenders to take on the responsibilities of citizenship.

Far too many of the 75,000 prisoners in our jails spend their sentence passively serving time not having to take responsibility for their day to day activities. Regimes are highly structured and prisoners have minimal control over their lives. They are treated as passive recipients of decisions made by management that they have no stake in. And any responsibilities that they might have had to their families, friends and communities are taken away. In effect their citizenship and the norms of behaviour that are part of it are suspended. Prisoners are viewed as offenders and criminals not as citizens.

Given that all but a handful of people in prison will return to society it is short sighted not to use imprisonment as a means of encouraging and promoting citizenship. Prisons are not just coercive institutions, they are also communities in themselves where the values of citizenship are equally important.

As John Pitts (Pitts, 2000) pointed out in an article in CJM four years ago, citizenship “encompasses an active engagement

frustrations prisoners face in trying to meet basic needs for hygiene, diet, physical comfort, and meaningful activities can increase resentment and undermine good staff prisoner relationships.

The study found that the presence of a prisoner council benefited communication between management and prisoners and also acted as a safety valve for potential tensions, ensuring the smooth running of an establishment. But a critical benefit was the positive impact that the consultative process has on prisoners’ rehabilitation and resettlement prospects.

From interviews conducted with staff and prisoners it was clear that engaging in dialogue with prisoners can bring out the best in them. Expecting prisoner representatives to serve their peers by drawing attention to problems and defending their interests encourages a far greater sense of responsibility than is possible when prisoners merely look for personal gains. One prison Governor said:

“There is a purpose behind it [the council]. That is, it is an

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with, and a concern for, the well-being of one’s self, one’s peers, one’s family and one’s neighbours and an effective voice in the institutions which bear upon their lives”.

The Prison Service does not have a strategy to give prisoners a voice in the running of establishments, but nonetheless, in some prisons steps have been taken to enable prisoners to provide feedback and to influence regimes. In recent years, a number of prisons have independently recognised the value of prisoner involvement in the running of regimes. Prisoners have been allowed to take part in forums, committees or councils that enable them to have some kind of say in prison life. But a lack of encouragement from Prison Service headquarters has meant that prisoner involvement has emerged sporadically and unevenly and very little is known about the functioning of prisoner representative groups.

A study published earlier this year by the Prison Reform Trust *Having Their Say: The Work of Prisoner Councils*, found that there were consultative committees in nearly thirty prisons, usually meeting once a month, with elected wing representatives from across the jail discussing a wide range of issues with prison management. It was most common for councils to focus on the less contentious issues, such as the range of goods available in the prison canteen or the food on offer at meal times but they were rarely able to influence major policy matters such as drugs or prison discipline. Although issues like canteen goods and food are not as contentious as drug treatment, neither are they trivial matters: the day to day

attempt to create a pro-social environment. It is a way of showing anti-social people that there is a better way of making decisions and influencing events.” (Solomon and Edgar, 2004)

For prisoners there was a real sense of achievement when councils were able to effect change. The majority said that it helped them feel better about themselves. As one prisoner commented, *“It is good for your self-esteem. You might make a prisoner smile; that makes a difference”*.

Involvement in councils is also a way of promoting active citizenship. Taking responsibility and having a say play a critical role in the rehabilitation of prisoners, in preparing them to return to society, by giving them the skills to relate to other members of their community without having to resort to conflict. It is important to acknowledge that prisoners continue to be citizens despite their incarceration, but to enable them to act as citizens they need to be given the opportunity to have a real voice through councils. There are question marks, however, over the extent to which councils do actually allow prisoners to influence policy and practice.

The report found that it was a positive virtue of council meetings that they constituted a safe environment in which sometimes highly contentious matters could be raised, argued about, and addressed, if not always resolved. Councils were effective as a means of improving communication between management and prisoners. In every prison, management benefited from the council by having a chance to sound out prisoners about policies. Management also benefited from having



Citizenship class, HMP Wormwood Scrubs

a formal system to bring inmates' concerns to light. In short, the value of dialogue between management and prisoners cannot be overstated.

But if councils are to embrace the benefits of prisoners making a contribution, promoting responsibility, and exercising citizenship, they need to offer much more than this. Councils could have real and significant capacity to change prison policy and encourage prisoners to be more active in the jail community. Ultimately, prisoners should be viewed as informed participants as they are in Canada. The principle of 'informed participation' is enshrined in legislation and is inherent in the way the correctional services in Canada manage offenders throughout the criminal justice system. Prisoners are expected to be active participants in the management of their sentence, through transparent sentence planning and involvement in inmate committees in every prison. Similarly in Denmark, to promote the values of citizenship, prisoners' right to co-determination is recognized in law. In each prison elected spokespersons meet regularly to discuss a range of matters and then hold regular discussions with management to determine prison policy.

Councils in England and Wales are not grounded on any fundamental principles. The starting point for a new perspective on prisoner involvement in running prisons must be to respect prisoners as informed participants in the prison community. Prison management and government needs to

acknowledge that prisoners are not there simply to have things done to them – to be punished, treated or rehabilitated. Prisoners need to be seen in a new light, as citizens and individuals who have a right to make choices. Having a say about the conditions in which they are held and the policies that regulate their lives is an indispensable part of fostering personal responsibility and citizenship so that prisoners are able to successfully resettle back into society. ■

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References

- Pitts, J. (2000) *Young People, Crime, and Citizenship*, Criminal Justice Matters, no. 41, Autumn 2000.
- Solomon, E. and Edgar, K. (2004) *Having Their Say – The work of prisoner councils*, London: Prison Reform Trust.