

Whose community is it anyway?

Finola Farrant describes recent research on young men leaving prison and the communities they come home to.

If you were to ask most people what they think about young people in their communities, the answer might well be that they are troublesome, frightening and anti-social (a term now firmly established in the lexicon of language about youth). We are without doubt at a stage where young people are more likely to be seen as the scourge of an area rather than as an integral part of it.

The Social Exclusion Unit has undertaken a significant amount of work on the concept of communities, cohesion and inclusion and has argued that young people have a right, as equal members of a community, to express their views not only on issues that affect them directly, but on other issues relevant to their communities. The reality is however that young people, although frequently the subject of such discussions, all too often remain outside of them. It is as if in contemporary British

significantly reduced. It encompasses the totality of work with prisoners, their families and significantly others in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations “ (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and Probation 2001).

Although this appears to be a helpful definition, the young men challenged the main assumption on which it is based. The concept of communities affected by the offender did not stand up to close scrutiny. In fact, the young men reported that their local communities fostered criminal behaviour. Their communities provided opportunities for involvement in crime and some type of low level criminality was endemic. Ross, who was 18 years old, said:

“Everyone’s bang at it in my area, even the old people. You got these grannies with their purple rinses, selling off their valiums to the local kids.”

This correlates with recent research on drug selling

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society children and young people should neither be seen nor heard.

The *Out for Good* research project sought to challenge this view. Not only were young people provided with an opportunity to discuss their views about where they lived and the role locality had to play in their behaviour, but it targeted those young people who have probably caused the most concern within their communities: young male offenders.

Based on in-depth interviews with 86 young male prisoners, *Out for Good: The Resettlement Needs of Young Men in Prison* aimed to place the young men’s views at the centre of the research. Interviews were conducted at three stages: on arrival in prison, just prior to release from prison, and post-release. The young men were asked to define what they thought ‘successful resettlement’ meant to them. For the vast majority a life free from crime was the key to successful resettlement.

The concept of resettlement generally rests upon a belief that those who have been removed from society can be returned back to the same community to live socially useful lives. The definition of resettlement provided by the Prisons and Probation Inspectorates is:

“A systematic and evidence-based process by which actions are taken to work with the offender in custody and on release, so that communities are better protected from harm and re-offending is

in communities (May *et al* 2005) which found that many drug sellers came from their local communities and that family and friends benefited from the cheap, stolen goods and money that was made available to them. Offenders, it would seem, seldom parachute into communities and then wreak havoc upon them; instead the local areas in which a young person grows up can be conducive to criminal behaviour.

Nearly 60 per cent of the young men interviewed were aware that a family member had been or was currently in prison. It is therefore unsurprising that a period of imprisonment was considered part of the normal life experience by these young men, their families and the wider communities they came from. This group of prisoners called into question the long-standing concept of deterrence in the criminal justice system. They saw prison as an extension of their social environment and periods in custody were frequently spent with friends from ‘on the road’ and a number of family members. In these communities, imprisonment was part of a relatively typical experience.

Brian, who was 19 years old, said:

“Loads of people I know have been in prison. It’s nothing in my area. I asked all my friends about it and I kind of knew I’d end up here at some point. Now I’ve been here it’s shit though. You can’t see your family, can’t get out when you want to. I’m bored and I just sit in my cell trying not to think about what’s going on on the outside, what my girlfriend’s up

to and that. I'd never say that of course, you got to pretend it's been easy, that it's fine, that you haven't been driven mad stuck in here."

However a normalised sense of imprisonment was not the case for all the young men. A number discussed their shame and embarrassment at being sent to prison. It was not something that they, their families and friends had anticipated would ever happen to them.

The vast majority of the young men discussed how they were frequently bored when they were growing up. Common stories about their lives prior to custody included getting up late, hanging out with mates, getting stoned and drinking. For many boredom was one of the reasons they gave for getting involved in crime.

"I mean there is nothing to do all day long apart from get stoned, there's no way I could stop smoking [cannabis]. I smoke when I'm with my mates, when I'm on my own, first thing in the morning to last thing at night, half the time I just do it 'cos I'm so bored."

Returning to their local areas was nonetheless eagerly anticipated by most of the young men whilst they were in prison. Getting to see family, friends and partners was highly valued, and they viewed these social networks as being supportive and enabling. In a number of cases however, the young men were unable to move freely around their local areas as they were subject to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). These banned them from certain localities and the young men were concerned that a breach might lead them back into prison. One young man, for example, was in the rather anomalous position of being banned from the area in which his family home was situated.

Some of the young men were worried that going back to their local areas would lead to an almost inevitable return to offending, drug use, and violence. They could see little way out of their situation and thought that the only way they could successfully resettle would be to move away from the area they lived in.

In much research there has been a concentration upon individual criminogenic factors rather than on some of the structural issues that also ultimately affect the life experiences, choices and opportunities of a young person. *Out for Good* sought to bridge this gap by asking young men in prison to discuss the various elements that they consider important in their successful resettlement. By doing this it has become apparent that even some of the definitions currently in place in relation to resettlement are misleading.

Services providers also mirror the separation of the individual from their communities. Consideration of how to work with young offenders, whilst they remain in their communities near to their families and friends, is necessary if the damage caused by imprisonment is to be reduced.

Young people do not live in isolation from their local communities, they are integral to them, and, if their potential is harnessed appropriately could help to create vibrant, sustainable, inclusive and positive communities. Despite the work of the Social Exclusion Unit, much Government and media reporting helps to maintain a view of young people as disrespectful, frightening, anti-social and a nuisance. Unsurprisingly, all too often young people are seen as the bane of the community rather than its backbone.

Finola Farrant is the author of Out for Good: The Resettlement Needs of Young Men in Prison, published by the Howard League, www.howardleague.org

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