

Reclaiming justice – a national network of collective action

Charlotte Weinberg explains what the recently launched Reclaim Justice Network is all about and why she is involved

The *Oxford Mini School Dictionary* is a resource we at Safe Ground give to students on our prison-based Family Man and Fathers Inside programmes.

In it, 'justice' is simply defined as 'fair treatment'. So, it might seem that we want our children to grow up understanding the notion of 'justice' as just that – fair treatment.

That would be great.

I am the Executive Director of Safe Ground, a voluntary sector organisation responsible for some innovative, well established and effective relationships programmes delivered in community settings and in prisons. My role requires and enables me to work constructively and efficiently in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, the National Offender Management Service, Probation and all other strands of the criminal justice system. I hold a privileged position as a leader in the voluntary sector, active in a wide number of policy groups across a diverse range of issues relating to social and criminal justice. I am also aware that the current cultural and political attitude in the UK (and much broader, in terms of industrialised capitalism), is often incompatible with improved outcomes for people in prison, victims of crime or wider society. My personal belief is that social justice requires and demands the engagement of civil society (us, the citizens) in the design and delivery of effective, efficient and evolving justice practices. That is why I was

excited to be part of designing the Reclaim Justice Network in 2012.

Far from contradicting my day job or my role as a criminal justice practitioner, the Reclaim Justice Network (RJN) complements the work we do with both prison officers and young and adult men in prison; and our wider remit of 'developing expression and empathy and promoting social justice'. As an organisation interested in improving life chances and contributing to reduced reoffending, Safe Ground is indeed committed to the 'downsizing of the criminal justice system'.

What is the Reclaim Justice Network?

The Reclaim Justice Network is a coalition of individuals and organisations concerned with shifting away from the solely punitive emphasis of the criminal justice system and towards a more holistic approach that begins by considering what constitutes 'harmful' and 'non' (or at least 'less') harmful activities. The RJN is concerned with how to prevent and to address the multiple harms in our communities.

The RJN does not claim to have 'answers' to the myriad questions that arise from the idea of recalibrating the criminal justice system. We are very clear about the issues we identify with the current system and its impacts across a diverse range of communities and individual lives. We want to have the difficult conversation that follows the suggestion 'What could we do differently?'

In very practical terms, the RJN is creating a framework for supporting,

encouraging and promoting groups of people all around the country, to come together and critically engage with the questions at the heart of justice- what is it, what is its purpose, how is it best served, in whose interests, at what costs and to what ends?

A question that needs asking

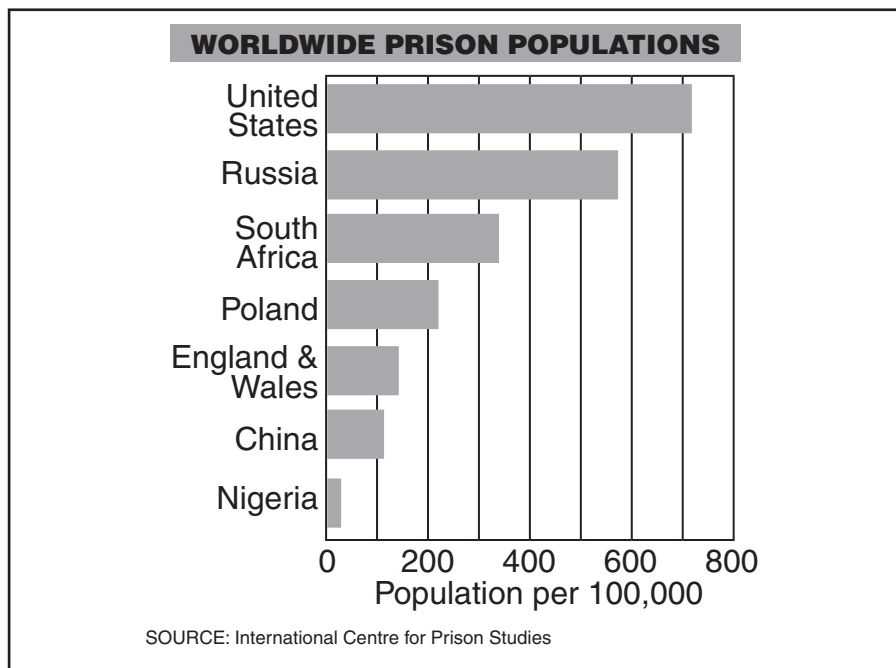
This is an important moment to be asking these questions. We are currently in a season when official statistics show a decreased crime rate (although fraud and serious, organised crime such as internet scams, lending schemes, identity theft have all increased: 'Crime is down 9 per cent... but fraud soars as thieves move to the web – There was a 27 per cent increase in fraud offences last year' (Doyle, 2013). England and Wales have the highest per capita prison population in Western Europe – 143 people per 100,000 (see ICPS table on next page). We have a welfare state on the brink of collapse and a political structure vulnerable to public opinion and individual agendas.

The RJN intends to galvanise local groups to organise and create spaces to think about current criminal justice issues and other pressing social harms. At the moment, the RJN is a steering group and a website- the former offers some structures and initial governance and organising principles; the latter gives access to resources, information, upcoming events and articles of interest. The next step is the emergence and activity of local and regional hubs. There is a wide network of organisations able to offer logistic support in the way of meeting spaces and printing for documents; and the network is being given administrative support by the Centre for Crime and Justice until the end of 2014, which means that we can ensure a coherent approach to gathering and sharing the findings, outputs and ideas of the network.

Dealing with systemic harms

We hope to generate alternatives to some of the current systemic harms. Let's explore a scenario here.

A young woman (let's call her Sandra) is charged with committing a



violent act upon a stranger. Sandra has been drinking since 4 p.m. when she left her grandma's funeral. She was brought up by her grandma, gave up college to look after her and cared for her until she died. Now, Sandra has learned she may have to leave the house she has lived in for 20 years because the council have said it is too big for her as a single person. Sandra has yet to view any other suitable properties and is concerned she may not qualify for a one bedroom flat as she is a single, unemployed person, not in education or training.

Sandra is arrested at the scene of the crime and taken to the station in handcuffs. Her friends can't come with her as they have to get home to their own children after their night out. Sandra is alone, afraid and upset. Sandra has a brother who was arrested and beaten up by the police and is very suspicious of all authority.

In the van on the way to the station, Sandra is sick. The police officer present is kind and understanding with Sandra, but at the station, she is stripped of all her possessions and jewellery, including the earrings her grandma asked her to wear for her, and called a 'silly girl' by the duty officer at the desk. Sandra responds angrily and, Sandra feels, the attitude of the officers change towards her and they are much less 'friendly'.

In the morning, Sandra is bailed to report to court in six weeks' time. Having a pending criminal charge for a violent offence will affect Sandra's employment opportunities and her chances of returning to college. She may be sentenced to custody as the injuries to the man she hurt are serious. Sandra is told he may lose the sight in one eye and she is devastated. She had no intention of causing harm. She is distraught about her unexplained and uncharacteristic violent outburst and asks if she can write to her victim to apologise.

Sandra is told her victim doesn't want to hear from her and will be giving testimony in the case against her.

In the period before her trial, Sandra has an argument with her mum; her remaining family members refuse to come to court or to help her in any way with her concerns about her future.

Sandra meets her barrister for the first time just as they enter the courtroom. Her solicitor told her she should plead guilty and hope for the best. Sandra has no idea what to expect, how a trial works or how to present herself. She is upset, on edge, nervous and conscious of her own outrage at the whole process.

She is found guilty of GBH (grievous bodily harm) and sentenced to one year in prison.

The RJN wants to create the spaces and opportunities for all sorts of people to consider stories like Sandra's. The RJN does not deny that violent attacks and assaults are serious harms that should be recognised and addressed – what we hope to highlight is that we don't have to compound or increase the harm already done.

Much harm is unforeseen, unpredictable and unexpected. Harm is caused both by people who have been harmed and experience very complex life situations, as well as by people with great privilege and social acceptability. How do we think about being proactive and responsive in non-harmful ways? Is it possible to react to people in ways that can ameliorate harms rather than reinforce and replay them? Just to think about it is difficult. To do it is a real challenge to us all but does engage us and focus on the question, 'What kind of society do we want to live in and how can we work with the diversity of our answers to create something beneficial to all, not just locally but globally?'

That's a tall order but I know a lot of people are up for it – and many of them have already joined the Reclaim Justice Network. ■

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Reference

Doyle, J. (2012), 'Crime is down 9%...but fraud soars as thieves move to the web', *The Daily Mail*, 19 July.

To find out more about the Reclaim Justice Network, visit: <http://downsizingcriminaljustice.wordpress.com/>