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**Where does the prison
system go from here?**

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Father of a serving prisoner

George Pearce is the father of a serving prisoner. He is interviewed by Christopher Stacey, Head of Projects and Services at UNLOCK, the National Association of Reformed Offenders.

George Pearce is the father of a serving prisoner. His son is serving a 30 year prison sentence for murder. He was convicted under the joint enterprise law. George himself served time in prison in late 1960's. He has been married for over 30 years and has a number of children and grandchildren. Having served in the Armed Forces and working as a bus driver, he is now retired. He visits his son, with his son's young daughter, at least once a month, despite the distance.

CS: From your perspective, what are the effects of the fact that we are locking up increasing numbers of people in prison? What are the consequences for you of prisons being full?

GP: Well, at the moment he's not going to move. But, it is a big problem. Through his conviction I lost my job because of people talking about it. It still goes on now — when I go out, people talk. I know they're saying it, but they don't say it to me. They keep locking people up, but I'm beginning to wonder whether it's to appease the victims of the crime or for the media, because they spend money on putting people in prison, which puts a burden on the taxpayer, and it's a knock-on effect on society and the family. It's an extra expense I could have done without, that my family could have done without. My granddaughter was a toddler when my son first got locked up, and now she's nearly a teenager. We'll be going to see him in a couple of week's time and she looks forward to seeing him, but we don't like all the travelling. We leave at 7.30 in a morning and won't get back until 10 at night. If the system weren't so full, then they could move people about more freely.

CS: Politicians often use the term 'Broken Society' Do you think this describes the world you or your relative come from?

GP: He didn't come from a broken home. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was a head chef, living with his partner, had a baby, and everything was going fine. He lost his job because he refused to work Christmas Day, so was out of work. He got into drugs, which is pretty much common practice nowadays. He ended up owing money, and instead of coming to me, he got into some trouble.

CS: Do you think prisons can help with social problems like unemployment, drug use and family breakdown?

GP: The only social problem my son had was he was using drugs a lot. Obviously, going into prison has cleaned him. He now knows that that was wrong. He has managed to get help in prison. He's learnt to channel his energies into exercise, and he's not interested in drugs anymore. That's one thing to have come out of it. It got him off drugs and away from that part of society.

CS: Does imprisonment make it easier or harder for prisoners to make positive changes to your life?

GP: No, not really. I don't really know what he would be doing now. As they say, things happen. He has a long time before he comes out. He doesn't have a guaranteed release date anyway. He may not be out until he's 60. He's resigned to the fact he'll never get out, as he won't admit guilt. Prison sentences for that long a time cannot do anything. Long-term prisoners need to be with one another, because it's unfair for them to mix. I've got to be honest — they don't care about prison officers. I know it's wicked, but they don't give a monkeys. Some become violent towards staff. If you're in for a few years, you lose a remission, but if you're doing 20 years, you can't lose remission. Really, it's a waste of time putting them in for that length of time, and then trying to rehabilitate somebody.

CS: The Government wants to achieve what it is calling a 'rehabilitation revolution'. From your point of view, what are the areas where more could be done to help prisoners go straight on release?

GP: For short term prisoners, you can teach them a trade — plumbing, carpentry, and try and find them a job whilst they are inside. When I worked for a bus company, there were loads of other areas at a meeting and a representative of a different area said that they employed four prisoners from Ford prison. The wages they earned were paid into their bank, but they were only allowed so much in the prison. If you fast-forward, prisons are expensive, and if that system still works at Ford, if a prisoner earns £250 a week, £50 could go into their prison account, £50 could go into a savings account for release and £150 could go back into the community — that way, they're helping the community and helping themselves. I cannot see, if there were enough people to do it, how that wouldn't work. Then, it wouldn't cost as much to run prisons, and they wouldn't be in the prison all week, so it drops the budgets down.

CS: What kind of work or training do you think could be introduced to prisons?

GP: My son works for the prison kitchens. He started at the bottom, but as he knows what he's doing, he was telling the head chef how to do the job, so they gave him a trial doing the staff dinners. When he first started, they were 4-5 a day — now, they're doing 18 a day — they love him. The company that run it, Aramark, because they do separate prisons, have asked him to sit the NVQ Assessors Course, they would pay for it, so that he could become an Assessor. He's going to try and see if he can do it. If he only had a few years to do, he could do that and would be able to walk out with an NVQ, and go get a job in a technical college. He could also help the prison in doing what they do.

CS: Would you welcome the opportunity for your relative to 'pay something back' to the community for your crimes, either financially, through some kind of unpaid work, or by meeting their victim?

GP: Yes. It gives them a target, and he could think that he has actually achieved something, or work towards something. At the moment, not a lot of them give a monkeys. There are prisoners who don't want to help themselves, and they're just not interested, but at the other end of the spectrum there are the people who want to change and know they could do something and put back into society. At the end of the day, society has locked them up so they could pay a little bit of a debt back to society. I don't believe that the victim or the victim's family should be able to see the person who committed the offence. In my situation, if it was reversed, I wouldn't want to see the person as I'd just want revenge. I think a lot of people would do the same. I wouldn't want justice I'd want revenge. There a lot of people around who want the same.

CS: How has the experience of prisoners shifted in recent years?

GP: It's changed thousands of percent since 40-odd years ago. Wormwood Scrubs prison — you used to have a wing full of lifers, banged up 23 hours a day. The prison officers were frightened of them — they were doing 40 years, so couldn't hurt them. It's all changed. I've noticed it myself. My son has a lifer officer and she said he was a model prisoner, and didn't even think he needed to be in prison.

CS: 'How have services for prisoners families changed in recent years? How do you think they could be improved?'

GP: The visiting has changed a lot — it's got worse. Now, when my son was in a different prison, we left home, pulled up, booked in, and the sniffer dog came around. I've seen the dogs in prisons and I've seen what they do — they indicate by circling then sitting and looking up at you. They said 'you've been indicated, you're not having a visit' — I said 'do you know how far I've just come?' and he said 'I don't care, can't give a closed visit, there aren't no facilities. You ain't seeing your son'. My first thought was 'should I hit him now, or later' and I said 'this ain't over' and walked off. Now, I contacted the Governor — didn't even get a reply. I contacted my MP, and got a reply, and went to his surgery. The reason my visit had got cancelled was because I'd had the nerve to complain before — my son confirmed this, because I'd wrote to the Governor prior about a previous visit, where it took us 45 minutes to get in to see our son then we only got 20 minutes. My son had told me to leave it, as he said they would take it out on him. From prison to prison, the way they treat you on a visit varies hugely. The way they treat people is bad — they treat me as a criminal, and I'm not.

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CS: What are the aspects of being the relative of a prisoner that people outside are least aware of?

GP: Nobody can really know how people feel. Only a few people really know about what happened to my son. Our family back us 100 per cent, but when I go into my local town, people are always talking. I know what they're doing — they're talking about my son. Loads of people do it. It has eased off a lot. It got a lot of press coverage at the time. It was the heaviest sentence that anybody had ever got in our local town. Because of the nature of the crime, it was splattered all over the papers. The company I was working for at the time were very good. Things have eased since then as it was several years ago. My other son went out one night and got his head kicked in because of his brother. Mud sticks unfortunately. I keep thinking of going to the papers to correct things but I don't want to drag it all up again — I'll try and do something through the proper channels. I have lost my son, but I can't grieve, because he hasn't actually died.

CS: An increasing number of prisons are potentially to be managed by private companies in the near future and there will be potentially wider opportunities for the voluntary and charitable sector. What are the benefits and risks of these changes for you?

GP: Private prisons should be used more. They say there isn't any difference between the two but there is. With private prisons, they're allowed to wear their own clothes, and the prison officers are polite. I know at some public prisons they are not polite at all to prisoners. What I would love to see is if they run all prisons the same, G4S could run them all for me, but you'd want somebody to sit down to say how they needed to run, across the board they should all be run the same. In the prison where my son is now, he can't have anything brought in, but he can buy them from M&S Direct or Argos, and they pay through the nose. In a previous prison, we could get him a couple of t-shirts and so swaps. In a third prison he was at you couldn't do that but you could take a CD player. All visitor regimes are different — now, if we go to visit him, we have to email him and he has to book it in the prison, all because you don't need a VO. In Elmley, he used to send out VO's and we'd fill them in. They could, if they got the right people together, put together a set of rules for prisons, it's feasible that they could all be run the same.

It's good that charities get involved too. In some prisons, the visitor centres are run by charities or volunteers, and that would work in 90 per cent of prisons if you had somebody to run the canteen where any money they make go back into the prisons, whereas now private companies like Aramark get it all. Charity organisations should get involved a lot more with the visitor's side and helping prisoners.

CS: What do you think are the biggest problems in the prison system?

GP: Overcrowding and foreign national prisoners. There are tensions between different

national and religious groups and this also causes problems running the prisons. As for overcrowding, my son is entitled to a cell on his own, and luckily he has one at the moment, but sometimes there are two or three to a cell. If you've got two Protestants, a Catholic and a Muslim you're going to have a problem. I think it's purely because of the population.

CS: What are the things that get in the way of prisons being more like you would want them to be?

GP: The sheer weight in terms of numbers and the crimes they are getting put in for. It's about time the police, CPS and others sat down and understand that we can't keep putting people in unless we either build more prisons and get some of those in at the moment out. I think it's the biggest drain on budget — it's so expensive to keep somebody in prison — and the people they're keeping aren't putting anything back in.

CS: If you could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of the prison service, what would it be?

GP: Get more work in prisons, and get everybody singing from the same hymn sheet. If all prisons were run the same, it would allow the prisoner to know what's happening, it would allow the prisoners family to know what is happening. When they keep

moving people about, people haven't got a clue what's going on. It isn't fair on the family. Because they're all different in their visiting regimes, it makes it so confusing for families. They even constantly move the goalposts within the prison, never mind between different prisons.

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