

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

July 2011 No 196

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

January 2011 No 193



Where does the prison
system go from here?

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Prisoner in a local prison

John Richards is a convicted prisoner, currently serving a sentence at HMP Pentonville. He is interviewed by Ray Taylor, who is a prison officer at HMP Pentonville.

John Richards is a prisoner at HMP Pentonville Prison, serving a four-year sentence. He has recently embarked on an Open University course of study which he intends to continue on release from custody, leading to a first degree qualification. Among many activities, he is a wing representative, a listener, chapel orderly, and is employed as a cleaner.

RT: 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?

JR: Putting more and more people in prison isn't working. That's the bottom line. To imprison someone for a minor offence, with a sentence of 12 months or less, where they haven't done the crime of the century, means that you are just adding to the overcrowding. I once spent some time in Belmarsh and you have guys there who are in for driving offences being treated like Cat A prisoners. This is just madness. I spoke to someone in the chapel here at Pentonville the other day and asked him how long he was in for and he said 'three weeks'. What's the point of that? Prison should be reserved for serious and violent offenders.

RT: Politicians often use the term 'Broken Society' Do you think this describes the world you come from?

JR: I don't know about 'broken society' but I do think that prisons should help more with problems like housing. I spoke to someone the other day who will soon be released after a nine-month sentence. His licence conditions are numerous but, as he says, 'how can I stick to them without a roof over my head?' People need more help with housing. They need a roof over their heads. It would help prisoners greatly if they knew they would get out with somewhere to live. Most people want a place of their own. They don't want to end up sleeping on other people's floors. If you knew you were going out to sheltered accommodation, it would be a start in the right direction.

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

JR: Unemployment is a big problem. With employment, the buck stops with you but, when you come into prison, the opportunities are not there to

better yourself. From a personal point of view, I am quite impressed with the education courses on offer, here at Pentonville. I am on an Open University course and was quite impressed that I was able to get the funding for that. Years ago it would not have been done. As far as family life is concerned, I think they do quite a bit to support us. They give us extra 'family day' visits which is a good start. It's a lot better than it used to be but how far do you go? After all, prison is meant to be a punishment. Other than that, I think that the police and schools could make a better contribution to educating children about what it's like coming to prison.

RT: Does imprisonment make it easier or harder for you to make positive changes to your life?

JR: With a lot of time to think about where you've gone wrong, you can make positive changes. You have time to reflect and, if you have had problems with drugs, for instance, it's a perfect time to make those changes. On this basis, I would say that it is easier to make positive changes to your life.

RT: 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?

JR: I do believe it is possible. If they helped more with employment and training — something worthwhile like a trade — then that's the right direction. It's all about work. If they could do something worthwhile while in prison, earn a decent sum of money, and have that money deposited in an account for when they are released, then this money could maybe be used to get a roof over your head, or further training. People are coming out on the street with no employment prospects and no money to spend. It's a bad start and they end up going straight back into crime because they need the money. If you have a criminal record, you are up against it anyway. In Pentonville, we have training run by an outside hire company. As I understand it, they may offer a job to trainees after they have been released. This kind of thing has got to be a big help.

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

JR: Some people have been criminals all their life. To go out there and not get into that same routine is

a hard thing to do. But if they were able to do worthwhile courses, to learn a proper trade, they would stand a much better chance on the outside. I know a lot of prisons do this but there needs to be more of this kind of thing made available. Coming out of prison with a skill like bricklaying, for example, is a good thing to do. It's bound to help.

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

JR: Depending on what the crime was, a meeting with your victim — if you are truly sorry — would give them the chance to see you in a different light and perhaps give closure to whatever crime was committed.

RT: How has the prisoner experience shifted in recent years?

JR: I have seen a lot of changes over the years since my first time in prison in 1988. In those days, we didn't have TVs, kettles or even sanitation in our cells, let alone access to phones. We had none of this. All we had was a radio for company and plenty of letter writing. The food, in particular, is a huge improvement. Now you get a decent solid meal on your plate and plenty of choice. A lot of people still complain about the food but twenty years ago, all you got on your plate was slops.

The NHS coming in has also made a big improvement. You get a very good service all round. Some things could still be improved, such as specialist services like dentistry but, on the whole, health care is excellent.

Other positives include the greater use of prisoner reps, listeners, equality reps and anti-bullying work by prisoners working with the establishment as a whole. And of course, the drug-related support services such as CARATS are immensely valuable and beneficial.

Training and education has been improved a great deal too, but I feel that there is a lot more that can be achieved. More could be done that is work-related, for example the Clink restaurant at HMP Highdown, recently featured on BBC TV. This is a good example of how training prisoners for a valuable work skill can help stop them reoffending on the outside.

RT: How have prison-staff and staff-prisoner relationships changed in recent years? How do you think they could be improved?

JR: The prison experience is not just a question of TVs and kettles. Everything now has moved forward. We have come a long way since those bad old days. The most important change of all, in my view, is how much better the staff and prisoner relationship is. It's a lot more relaxed and friendly. You can stop and have a chat with an officer. In some cases you may even be on first-name terms. It has got to be better. It can't be a bad thing if you feel

comfortable coming to an officer to talk. With the public-spending cutbacks, I feel that it's going to get worse before it can get better and this could have a negative effect on prisons as a whole. I am particularly concerned about the potential for deterioration of the staff-inmate relationship. I would hate to see us going back to the days when you're spending more time locked up in your cell. This is bound to have a negative effect and we could end up going back to the bad old them-and-us relationship between staff and prisoners.

RT: What are the aspects of being in prison that people outside are least aware of?

JR: Regardless of what people think, the fact remains that prisoners are still locked away from where we want to

be. That's a punishment. Away from loved ones and places we would rather be, being told when to eat, exercise, and just about everything else that people take for granted. In time, you become institutionalised.

RT: 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?

JR: To be honest, I have no experience of privately-run prisons and so I have nothing to base an opinion on. I have heard that living conditions in some private prisons are very good but cannot speak for myself.

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

The most important change of all, in my view, is how much better the staff and prisoner relationship is. It's a lot more relaxed and friendly. You can stop and have a chat with an officer. In some cases you may even be on first-name terms. It has got to be better.

JR: The biggest problem has always been drugs. And it's got much worse, with the widespread use of heroin being a particular problem. Heroin used to be frowned upon by prisoners but now it is accepted by many as a way of life.

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

JR: I would say this is mostly a question of available resources. I would like to see more education and training, more time out of cell doing constructive things. But these all cost money and, in the current economic climate, I can't see where the money to do these things will come from.

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

JR: If I could introduce one change in the prison system it would be to pay top money to people who want to use their time to educate themselves. Currently, they are the worst paid. Where's the incentive if you are paying people more to clean the landings than you are for them to learn how to read and write or to learn a new work skill? Some blokes come in with no qualifications. When they see their name on a certificate it makes a huge difference to them. It helps them to have pride in their work and to start believing in themselves. They want to carry on and do more and more to improve their chances. And once you get going with education, the next step should be work placement.



Prison Service Library & Information Services

PSC Newbold Revel

Delivers a quality Library and Information Service to staff working in HM Prisons. Provides access to Prison Service related information to other organisations in the criminal justice system.

For further information:

Tel: 01788 804119

Fax: 01788 804114

Email: catherine.fell@hmps.gsi.gov.uk