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

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Prisoner in a local prison

Sanjar Jamolov is a serving prisoner at HMP Wormwood Scrubs. He is interviewed by Dr. Rachel Bell who is a senior officer at HMYOI Feltham.

Sanjar Jamolov has been a prisoner at HMP Wormwood Scrubs since 2010. Before coming to prison he worked as a painter in London.

RB: From your perspective what are the causes of the fact that we are locking up increasing numbers of people in prison?

SJ: That's a very hard question and very good question as well. It depends how we are looking at it. I would say if the life was better outside and everybody got enough money to look after themselves they won't do any robberies, they won't do any stupid things and there would be less people in prison. It's the quality of the life: if you give them enough then they won't be here.

But from another view everybody does mistakes. We can stop them: instead of putting them in prison to give them punishment we can give them different punishments. We can give them free works to do like community works. And in the same time they can learn as well: we can give them opportunities to start to learn something. Then we will save on the money: electricity, rent, food, you know.

RB: Politicians often use the term 'broken society'. Do you think this describes the world you come from?

SJ: Yeah. Families have always got the problems to look after children, pay taxes, and from there starts the problems. If they can afford to pay they won't be in the trouble.

And at the same time as well everybody likes drinking and abusing drugs. Most people outside don't think for the future. But that's not the issue. We have to help them to stand up on their feet, pay for the mortgages or electricity. Then they won't feel any problems. Once they don't feel any problems there won't be any troubles.

RB: Do you think prisons can help with social problems like unemployment and family breakdown?

SJ: With drugs they can help. They can explain like I do to teach my kid: it's not good to take drugs, you are going to be in trouble, your health will be in trouble.

Also, if you cooperate with the government to get jobs we could organise something for prisoners. In fact we have workshops. And they are not bad to be honest with you. They are very good. But it will be more good if you can do electrician courses, building courses, plumbing courses. That is an opportunity to learn something and get qualifications and start working.

And I had a job in the prison kitchen as a chef. And that might help me get a job in future.

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

SJ: It is hard to go back to life outside. It will be harder for me going back because I lost a lot. My family and my kids might turn away from me. As the judge called me a criminal they might call me the same. So I don't want to be in trouble. I don't want to do anything criminal and come back to prison. Because after that if I go out it will be very, very hard to go back to same life. I already lost my job. I'm not sure if I'm going to get the same job back or not. So it will be harder than before.

But also there are some things that prison can make easier. For example if somebody doesn't have any place to live they will organise for you to get a place.

RB: 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 that to happen?

SJ: First of all I think they have to cooperate with prisoners. If you cooperate with prisoners, ask them what is the necessary things for prisoners to rehabilitate, or if they need learn something before they go out, even ask them if they need help to manage to look after themselves mentally or psychologically.

You can take 40 or 50 people and ask them 'what do you think?' and everybody will have a different opinion, obviously. But let them have a view what is the opinion from the prisoner side. Not always just what the government says.

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

SJ: It could be construction courses, electrician courses, plumbing courses, carpentry courses or even health and safety courses. And we could teach the foreigner prisoners how to behave themselves in UK, to learn the UK law, what is the life in the UK: St Patrick's day, St George's day and all that. Why not? They want to be British citizens. That's a kind of help as well, and they can do it here.

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

SJ: Yes. But we are paying already for crime. Whoever does a crime is paying in a prison: they are receiving already the punishment in a prison. If you want some more money back they have to have a good job to pay the money back. You should not squeeze them as much as possible. It is a good idea to pay something back but instead of being here, let's work outside, earn money, and give you the money. Why not?

And Benedict the Pope, the person tried to kill him and the Pope went to prison and he saw him, he talked to him. That's a very good idea, why not? Apologising. Not only apologising and asking for forgiveness but having free speech with him as well. Maybe it was a misunderstanding, communication problem or drug abuse problem which forced you to be in the crime. From the victim's side as well: so many victims are abusing drugs or position or so many things and then they blame somebody else.

RB: How could prisoner-staff and staff-prisoner relationships be improved?

SJ: With more respect I think. They don't have to treat the prisoners as criminals. We are criminals but at the same time if you call us prisoners as well as being in prison it is painful. Instead of treating them with respect, saying: 'you are still a criminal, you have to listen to me, you have to follow my rules'.

We are not asking them to do anything for us, to bring anything for us. We are just asking them to help us if we've got a problem like contact numbers and canteen problems. If they respect their job and us it will be much easier.

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

SJ: Not many people outside know about prison. Whoever has been here knows, but not the people outside. Alright everybody might have small conversations with family members or friends: 'We got canteen in the prison', we got this, we got that.' But full imagination other people don't have unless they see it.

And people outside don't know what a 'red band'² job is until you explain it and show them and explain that a red band must go around the prison and work, and that he has to wear a green jacket. So many people they don't know.

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

SJ: I don't agree with giving jobs to private companies. But more charities in prison would be good, very good. Why not? But from my point of view I can do charity work as well: I am a painter. I could take ten people and teach them how to do it. Charity could provide us with the materials. And that would be kind of pay back as well. I could show that I'm really sorry, I'd do that. And I will do definitely a good job!

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

SJ: Oh, I can't answer that! The biggest problems... there are no big problems I don't think. There are small problems which can become big if we cover our eyes. But right now there isn't anything. There are problems which could become big problems if we don't fix them within one or two years time.

For example: respect. It looks small but it is a big problem as well if you are behind the bars and nobody is helping you to put your phone number in your phone book, or letters are missing, or you never receive your money sent in, or if you order canteen and it doesn't come, or if there is something missing. Then you have to chase, tell them [officers] 'please can you phone the canteen?' And then your money is not in your account, you don't have it to spend. That is a

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1. 'Canteen' is the prison shop.

2. A job in which a prisoner has a trusted position with greater freedom of movement in the establishment.

big problem. You lose a week: your time, your nerves. That is a big problem. Behind the doors it is big. But from the other side there isn't any big problems.

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

SJ: I call myself a normal man, not bad. I'm not bad because my parents, they taught me how to behave myself, to have respect for people, respect everyone. Everybody can do bad things but it is difficult to do good things. If you are good, simple, honest, you won't have any problems.

But the problem is how people are brought up, their mentality, and how they treat people. We have to teach them. With our help, with our politicians' help, with our government, with our prison staff — we have to help them. Not only with our idea of prison and believing that they deserve to be here and should pay the punishment. Instead we have to talk to them, see what they need. Instead of being behind their door, we have to teach them how to behave

themselves. Everybody must do thinking programs. Even shoplifters should have to learn thinking programmes.

Yes it would be good to teach people how to think, how to communicate, how to relate to other people. Maybe nobody taught them. Maybe they didn't have a mother to teach them. Maybe they didn't go to school or learn. Maybe they were only drinking, drug using, stealing. I know people that have 25 convictions — I can't imagine how it's possible to get that much convictions! Twenty-five ... it's impossible!

RB: And if you could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of the prison service what would it be?

SJ: The dental service should be improved as the waiting time is currently 6-8 weeks. On release day, people should be helped so they don't live on the streets and commit crime again. They need accommodation and a job. If they had that there would be less crime.

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