

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

January 2015 No 217



# Open prisons:

## An ex-prisoner perspective

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**SD: Which open prison did you go to, how long you were there, and what was your experience of the prison?**

**AA:** I started off in a category B prison, Pentonville I was there for eight or nine months, then went to a category C for a month or so before I ended up going to a category D prison. I went to a resettlement unit in HMP Rochester. This was in the late 1990s.

In terms of the regime, there was a month lock down so they assessed you. During that time you had to stay inside, then after that, as long as everything was fine and you weren't a risk you started to go out. I went out and worked in the community five days a week as a volunteer at a centre for adults with learning difficulties or physical disabilities. I was leaving the prison at eight or nine in the morning until four or five in the afternoon. It was a contrast to what I was used to, even in the C category prison I was shut within four walls. Psychologically it was a massive difference. For the first hour I went out, it was all a bit weird because I hadn't been out of closed doors for nine months. Even though it was only nine months, it was still quite weird seeing traffic again for the first time and crossing the road with cars coming speeding along. For a few minutes it was really a surreal experience.

You get a greater level of freedom in an open prison. For any prisoner, it is preparing you for coming back into the community. When you go to an open prison you might have a year or more of your sentence so you do need that adjustment time, you do need to have something in the middle, between being in a closed prison and then coming straight out.

**SD: Do you think there should be more spaces within open prisons, beyond the current 5 per cent or so of the prison population?**

**AA:** Definitely. I understand that there's always an element of risk but then I always think that if you don't take any risk then, we are going to get more authoritarian, punish people longer and we are going to make people worse. You need to give people that space to readjust to life back in the community.

**SD: Do you think part of that process includes being in a more relaxed atmosphere? Did you get on better with other prisoners, and with staff?**

**AA:** Definitely. You haven't got that tension. At the resettlement unit I was in, the staff called you by your first

name whereas obviously in the B cat and the C cat they called you by your prison number or your surname. That informality relaxes things. You're going out into the community, so things are totally different. You wear your own clothes and you have a lot more independence and a lot more responsibility.

In a B cat, everything is done for you really — they open your doors, they shut your doors, they open the gate, they take you down to dinner, they open the gate for education — whereas with an open prison, you get much more freedom, so you take responsibility and are independent. For me, it wasn't that long, a year and a half in total, but for someone that has been inside for 10 years, they lose a lot of that independence so it's really important to get back onto that road to reintegration.

**SD: And so allow you to 'reskill' yourself, so to speak?**

**AA:** Yes in some ways. I could imagine that for people who have been in longer than me that would be right. Why do people go back to prison? In some cases because they can't handle life outside, so you do need to prepare them for life outside. Especially people that have done long sentences.

**SD: Undoing some of the damage that has been done?**

**AA:** Exactly. Prison is not a nice place. Everything is taken away from you — your identity, your relationships. Whether people deserve to be there or not is a different question. The point is about the function of prisons, what is the point? They strip away a lot from people, and then our expectation is that they are going to come out rehabilitated. But they are the most vulnerable people and you have damaged them even more. Surely you should have somewhere in the middle or at the end of that process where people can readjust and try and reintegrate into society

**SD: I would now like to turn attention to your experiences of studying in higher education. I believe you started an access course while you were in prison.**

**SD: Was the prison administration supportive in your ambitions?**

**AA:** It was, definitely. I remember a few staff who were really supportive. They helped me with the application, the funding and a couple of them had kids

1. The authors would like to thank Ashmina Rahman, undergraduate student at University of Westminster, and research assistant for British Convict criminology, for transcribing the interview.

that were going to universities, so we'd talk about it and what they were doing and what universities they were going to. I'd never have got that at a closed prison. An open prison has a different sort of environment, more positive. The staff were generally always positive, trying to help you reintegrate and help you to shift from being involved in crime to getting a job. In the last few months, it was part of the regime that you actually go out and work and earn money. On a Friday I was coming down to White City to do the access course, then Monday to Thursday I was coming up to Holloway and working in a dress factory. I was earning money from that and that was going into an account, so that when I came out at the end they'd give me my cheque for whatever amount had been saved up. Of course a lot of people come out without any money and they get a discharge grant, they haven't got a job and they get some booze or drugs, whereas with the savings from work, you have got a few grand and it's a bit of a start, something to help you through. Some people actually stayed on at the jobs that they were employed in that last three months. That is so positive, so beneficial.

There is always going to be an element of risk in anything you do. In my experience of being at that open prison for nine months, there were maybe three people that messed up in different ways, by getting drunk or whatever. Alright, they couldn't cope, but no one else was getting involved in any sort of deviant behaviour or crime. I knew everyone there, and they were all getting their heads down and doing positive stuff.

At the open prisons they were having things like family days and you could see your family on a town visit or home leave, so you were rewarded for your behaviour which makes sense to me.

**SD: Were you able to take books back to the prison to study in the evening or at the weekend?**

**AA:** Yes. I had loads of books there. It was totally different than in Pentonville. There all my books had to come through the education department. In the open prison it was different. If I needed to bring in books there was never a problem. They search your bags when you come back from a home leave, but in general, it is all very relaxed, less formal and less restrictive. It makes you think actually, if you live in an environment where everyone's checking you and there is a lot of surveillance, that is not good for you psychologically, so it's not going to motivate you to want to change your life.

**SD: So, however supportive a prison education department might be in acquiring books, you still**

**think it is important for a prisoner going out to study to be responsible, and be trusted, to bring back study materials.**

**AA:** It's a big obstacle in the desistance process. When I was in an open prison there were a lot of people that had kids and were married, I was married as well and had a kid. So we were thinking do I really want to be doing this or do I actually want to be doing the right thing and providing for my family? You've got to give them some space and freedom and you've got to have some faith and trust in people. That is what open prison does, it is a way of saying we trust you but if you take the piss you'll be right back where you started in a B cat. It's really important for people to take that responsibility and if they mess up they're going to ruin it for their families as well.

**SD: I would like to conclude the interview with a discussion of your experience of day and home release, in particular how important they were to you, and whether the amount of release you were granted was sufficient.**

**AA:** I would say I wanted more, who wouldn't say they wanted more home release? At the end of the day, I think they had it about right. They're so important for maintaining relationships. Everyone looked forward to their home releases and day releases, they are instrumental in that process of reintegration. If someone is in Pentonville for five years and then they come straight out and they're living back with their partner and their kids, that's a recipe for disaster as far as I'm concerned. You need that time to re-establish those links but also just getting used to being with people again like your partner, to that intimacy that you haven't had.

**SD: As you know, in spring this year there were a number of major media stories regarding lifers who had absconded from open prisons, one of whom was later allowed further home release. The Ministry of Justice has since proposed to change the processes and to require prisoners to wear electronic tags while on temporary release.**

**AA:** We live in this risk society. You need to give people freedom. What has happened to trust? If people don't think they are trusted, they are going to have the opposite reaction. Who wants to go home to be with their kids their partner and have to have a tag on? It's more about social control and adversity to risk. There's always going to be someone that messes up, but why should 99 per cent of people that are actually doing alright suffer for the 1 per cent that are messing it up?

The staff were generally always positive, trying to help you reintegrate and help you to shift from being involved in crime to getting a job.