

CRI0007

Good Afternoon

Many of the men I came into contact with, during my time working at HMP Pentonville (a Male cat B), experienced life-changing events during their formative years. These experiences are usually so dramatic and have such an impact, that the sufferers often erect immense defences or coping strategies to deal with the emotional impact that occurs in the wake of the event.

These strategies are invariably negative and involve; self abuse (with drugs, or instances of self-harm), violence, anti-social behaviour - shoplifting, criminal damage, and gang related acts ect. Their attitude is seen as youthful exuberance when they are teenagers; however, they are incarcerated and develop engrained criminal attitudes as they grow older and these same character traits become regarded as serious criminal acts.

These men were no longer children: unfortunately the devices that they utilise to engender in themselves a feeling of security, cause them to respond in a juvenile fashion. Their defence mechanisms become part of their 'cognitive responses.' This is a similar conditioning to a psychologists explanation that an A, B, C (Act, Belief, Consequence) thought process occurs in respect to acts that are regarded as compulsive: these cognitive pathways (learned responses) 'compel' people to act in a pre-programmed fashion.

Custodial environments are entirely unsuitable for the detention of inmates such as those discussed above, and for those with mental health issues. Unfortunately due to political decisions made in the 1980-90s our prisons are now full of such people as large Mental Health Institutions and other care facilities were closed to them, and 'care in the community' became the norm.

We need to recognised that we have generations of socially maladjusted citizens living in a hand to mouth state that 'encourages' criminality as "what people cannot earn, (and how can you earn with no employment) they will steal"

There is an air of xenophobia spreading amongst many in custody at the present time and, may I suggest, the reasons for it are part of an issue much larger than immigrants or immigration: it is a failure of the systems extant in the UK.

- Many of the criminal fraternity left compulsory education in their early teens and do not have the basic education that will enable them to undertake sustainable employment.
- If they work they perform the lowest skilled labouring work which is, due to mass immigration, being performed at cheaper rates by East European labour.
- The indigenous citizens believe they have a 'right' to a certain standard of living, and if they cannot obtain work in the unskilled areas of their choice prefer to sign-on and take state benefits (their rights).
- We need to create a system that demonstrates clearly that: education, training and skills-building enable people to take on, financially and mentally, rewarding jobs that take them out of competition with the newly arrived workforce with whom they are always going to be in direct competition for jobs. (This year the Poles, next year the Bulgarians or Rumanians ad infinitum.)

We have a criminal justice system that is hell bent on extending the sentences of the perpetrators of crime: but then the custodial establishments of the country do not have the resources to deal with the rehabilitation needs created.

Why are any candidates for custodial sentences going to choose a law abiding path over one of crime? The money to be made and the lifestyles gained are very attractive, prison is comfortable and as Norman Stanley Fletcher was informed "He regarded imprisonment as an occupational hazard!" We need to make prison as unattractive as possible, and ensure that crimes are punished with confiscations and punitive fines - that are paid – this will show youth that crime does not pay – because the current system does not: it merely defends the Human Rights of career criminals at the expense of mainstream society. Inmates get TVs, Play stations, recreation, food, and security: many of the victims of these offenders would be willing to surrender their 'freedom' for such peace of mind

Teaching an offender to read and write are admirable targets, however I know of a man who was taught to read and write (4 years ago) but received no resettlement input, and is now back in prison serving life for murder: reading and writing are a tool, social understanding and the ability to exist as a functioning member of society are what the majority of offenders have forgotten – we must address these issues if we are to reduce recidivism.

I believe that a major stumbling block for any developments or agencies that engage offenders is the 'silo mentality' that exists in British society. Everyone likes to feel that they exist as an 'average' person; be that an average football supporter, an average millionaire, an average prisoner/offender, or an average policy maker. We surround ourselves with like minded people, because this reinforcement of our own personal opinions and perceptions is reassuring. The problem is that this 'silo' thinking results in a break down in communications between the policy makers and the people who the policies are intended to impact upon. Ergo, the policies do not work because one group does not know what the other; wants, hopes or expects. 'Tame' ex-offenders are recycled as the 'voice of the offending community' but in many cases these men, often hard men and violent armed robbers from the 60/70s, have no inkling of the issues facing 21st century criminals; youth gangs/crime, drugs, postcode violence, addiction, debt, amongst a whole gamut, and their opinions are all but redundant in many instances.

I am afraid that many, many millions are wasted on training and targeting specific offender groups. This attitude is divisive and responsible for another foray into the 'silo' mentality as 'this' group of offenders are seen as more deserving of assistance than another. We cannot force the offending community into a mainstream provision/place, when, by their very nature as offenders they have proved beyond doubt that they are not 'main stream'.

OBPs (Offender Behaviour Programmes) run, in prisons, by psychologists who are assisted by instructional officers 'cherry pick' an educationally more capable cohort for programmes such as 'Think First'. The people who need these sorts of programmes are the offenders with the lower educational levels, but because they are 'challenging' an easier to work with group are 'allowed' to partake in courses. Another example of a 'silo' mentality: are those who need the courses able to access them?

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