

Entry for the 500 word comment/article on the topic of...

How Do You Reform Prisons?

With experience of prisons as a volunteer, an officer, and 'lifer wife' I truly believe we can only reform prisons through education.

Educating officers in what their role is really about; incarcerating those who have committed crime yes, but also helping them become better parents, siblings and partners – basically better citizens. Officers should understand that in many cases the people in their care need re-parenting which starts with the officers themselves being better role models. The days of the ex-army 'swat' booted officer should be long gone and officers should be firm but fair, engaging with their charges as equal human beings - showing respect creates respect. The MoJ needs to make a firm and lasting decision as to whether it is punitive or reformative because the inconsistency is damaging.

The general public definitely need to be educated as to what prison life is really like – not Corrie's prison where families can visit at an hour's notice or the red top newspaper vision of 'lags' sitting in food filled cells playing x-box! Maybe, just as Jury Service is a requirement for every citizen, prison visiting should also be, so that people can see the media created 'them' and 'us' is a myth and that truly 'bad' people are in the minority. If those on the outside of the prison system could understand the realities, that trying to help and reform prisoners is a positive thing for society, they may engage with the process, become open to mentoring, employing, and inviting ex-prisoners into their communities.

Most important is the education of prisoners. How can anyone believe that education should not be at the heart of any rehabilitation process? You can put a person through anger management, victim awareness, drug and alcohol courses but what they also need is something to aspire to. Instead of prisoners being labelled rapists, drug dealers, petty criminals they should be labelled trainee accountants, administrators, chefs or baristas. The Prison Service faces financial cuts year on year yet they fail to educate and train a potential workforce of 88,134 (Government figures 05/08/2016) which could release staff for other projects and increase out of cell time. Men and women who could gain not only a qualification, but self-esteem, a sense of pride and a work ethic that would enable them to provide for themselves and their families on release. The IT industry is worried that Brexit will lead further to staff shortages yet access to IT training in prisons is extremely limited and Prison ICT Academies few and far between. A large proportion of jobs now involve some kind of IT use from standard office related packages to updating websites and social media yet prisoners are excluded from training and using digital media.

Maybe reforming prisons needs to start with educating those at the top that the end goal is releasing a better human being, one whose main goal in life is never to return to prison and to give that person the tools to meet their goal.

500 words