



Learning from experience:

Personal narratives from the criminal justice system

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Justice should be compassionate, forgiving and healing – restorative, not retributive. We want to change attitudes and encourage the criminal justice system to move towards this vision of justice.

“Learning from Experience”

When someone is given a prison or community sentence, it affects not only them but also their family and friends, the victim, and the professionals involved. Too often the effect is damaging.

Crime, Community and Justice Group’s *Learning from Experience* project aims to collect as many stories as possible from people who have been affected in this way.

Personal narratives

We have received stories from 12 Area Meetings in England and Scotland so far. Many are from people who have served or are serving prison or community sentences.

We are looking now particularly for more stories from the families of people who have been sentenced.

How you can be involved

You don’t have to be involved with the criminal justice system: you may have a friend, relation, colleague who has been affected. You may have a story of your own.

If you know of someone, please ask them if they would be willing to tell their story. Simple guidelines are available to help collect the stories in a form that protects their story-teller’s anonymity.

What we are already learning

Although it is too early to begin to draw any conclusions, themes are emerging and the stories are already exemplifying issues which we know to be significant.

One recurring theme is the importance of personal support from an individual: professional, volunteer, another offender, friend, Quaker. Another is the continuing effect on people’s lives long after a sentence has been completed.

Influencing sentencing policy

The government has made a commitment to reduce the prison population and review current sentencing policy. They plan to publish a Green Paper in the autumn for consultation.

This will be an excellent first opportunity for us to use the personal narratives when we express Quaker views to government.

So, please, keep collecting and sending in the stories.

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Some of the stories are overleaf.

Here a just a few of the personal stories sent to us.

“Help came from friends – and a good cell-mate”

A parent receives a letter from their son saying he is in prison. He has been arrested and held on bail for 10 months, and felt unable to tell anyone. He was alone and un-supported in court when tried and sentenced. Although the letter gives his solicitor's number there's only an answer-phone and his family have no idea what prison he is in or what the sentence is. Later he tells them he was lucky to have “a good cell-mate who got me through the night.” Help and information about what's happening to their son comes, not from the criminal justice system, but from friends with direct personal knowledge of it.

The prison sentence was for 6 months but the effects lasted much longer. He lost his job, although the offence was unrelated to the kind of work he did. On release, he applied for lots of jobs but whenever he had to admit to a conviction he withdrew. Even with lots of support from family and friends, it took over a year for him to get another job, and a further year to find a home of his own.

Indeterminate sentences: “How long is the tunnel?”

This man was given a life sentence for murder. He does not know when his sentence in prison will end. He has had more Probation Officers than he has spent years in prison. Every change of Probation Officer means he has to re-tell his history, each time having to re-live the experience and the mental anguish of what he did. “I am always told to move on from the past but I'm not allowed to. It would be good to know how long the tunnel is so that I can see the light.”

And this man was given a life sentence for murder, with a tariff (minimum period) of four years. He has already served 10 years and says that he lost the will to live at one point. He has been in a dozen prisons. “I haven't a clue how it works on the outside. My home has been a prison since I was 17”.

Straight from court to cell

After a year out on bail, waiting for the case to come to court, this man was given a four year sentence, of which two years were served – in three different prisons. His family, including father, wife and children were in court when sentence was passed, and watched him being taken away without any opportunity to say goodbye.

Restorative justice in all but name

A local lad earned some money cleaning cars and doing other odd jobs for neighbours. Eventually his fingerprints identified him as the culprit in some burglaries and he was sent to court. The judge asked for a psychiatric report and as a result the lad was placed into foster care and then at residential school where he “learned to read, at last”. The Youth Offender Team maintained contact between him and one of the neighbours he had robbed, carrying messages between them. He sent her a card saying he was sorry and in a much better state, and she wrote back saying she forgave him.

The combination of a liberally minded approach from the court, good co-ordination and planning from all the agencies, the sensitivity of the Youth Offender Team offering restorative justice in all but name, and the compassion of the person harmed by his offence, seem to have made a positive difference to this young life.