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Submission for Parliamentary Enquiry into Justice Reinvestment
...by CLA on behalf of a family from Western Australia

Our son has been in and out of West Australian prisons for 15 years, since he was 20 years old. He is in prison now, in 2013. We, his parents, are both members of large functional families and have both had careers in education.

Our son M, is the youngest of four children by 11 years. Although there was no significant change in child rearing practices, there was a vast difference between M and his siblings in behavioural outcomes. One early difference was the nature of his birth due to his anterior position. After a long and unyielding labour, he suffered facial injuries (not lasting), a forceps delivery and blue finger tips were noted on his birth records. He was a toe-runner and an impulsive toddler and unlike his siblings, he did not show a preference for reading for himself at age 7 as the others did, although he learnt to read without difficulty and enjoyed the same nightly ritual of stories and songs at bed time.

His behaviour showed worrying signs when he was quite young and well before drug abuse became a factor. This was despite the fact that, on the surface, he was good looking and of average to well above (block design) intelligence and could be loving and personable. We took him to psychologists who could find no reason for his anti-social behaviour. Father and son bonding sessions were suggested, and this advice was taken. He became almost a dual personality, one being the street kid.

We have tried to influence prison psychiatric services to probe these underlying difficulties without success (see letters attached). As you can see, the prison management attitude is that if prisoners cannot diagnose their own problems and ask for help, then it is assumed that they don't need psychiatric help...when the very fact of being a recidivist indicates a dire need for psychological intervention.

Our son has spent approximately 10 years in prison and has been released four times. He has little to show for these years. He is now 35 years old. Although he gained mature age entry to university when he was about 24, he has no qualifications relevant to society outside the prison where he is presently involved in running Narcotics Anonymous (NA) courses and prison inductions, which occupies about three days a week. Prison has not worked as a deterrent for him so far. The question as to why this is so is perhaps best answered by prisoners themselves.

On the basis of our experience, we would make the following suggestions:

1. Prisons need to undertake a more thorough psychiatric diagnosis on a prisoner's entry, with modern research being taken into account, and therapy on the basis of findings.

2. Education or job training should be compulsory for every prisoner, and the provision of same be compulsory for every prison. There are presently many attitudinal impediments on the part of both prisoners and prison staff to take up the educational opportunities that are available in theory.

3. The time frames for prison education should reflect school, TAFE and university time frames, with allowances for therapy sessions, so as to mirror normal, outside life where possible.

4. We suggest that all prisoners be properly equipped for resuming community life on their release from prison. This should take into account that they are suffering a degree of culture shock as we would if we suddenly emerged, blinking into the light, after a three-year stay in hospital. Like anyone else, they need a wallet, some cash, a bank card linked to social security, a social security card, a voucher for new clothes, Medicare card, a cashed up public transport ticket, a job qualification and accommodation. Provision – or lack of provision – of these necessities should be made known to families before the release date so that they know what steps they must take to avoid the present possibility of their loved one being released on to the street with no visible means of support.

These suggested reforms could be financed by shorter but more intensively focused sentences. The real punishment for any prisoner takes place in the first year. After that, human beings adapt to prison, and become institutionalised.

– *Names withheld by CLA at request of submitters*

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