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Chapter Author(s): Paula Harriott

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No Justice Without Us: Respecting Lived Experience of the Criminal Justice System

Paula Harriott

2 February 2021

The evidence that Covid-19 disproportionately affects certain communities and those long identified as suffering health inequalities comes as no surprise.

At the same time, the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 have forced deep personal and organisational reflections. These injustices compel an acknowledgement of our deep-seated prejudices and the reasons why we ignore the causes of such thinking and our apathy in responding.

The Black Lives Matter movement has illuminated a striking fact that for some is hard to accept: until a movement of those with lived experience organises, protests, advocates and snatches off the metaphorical blindfolds we choose to wear, we carry on either unaffected or lacking sufficient drive, insight and

conviction to truly change. The blindfolds of power and privilege act to protect so many of us from witnessing the reality of the economic, political and social systems which do not embed inclusivity but rather perpetuate separation and difference.

Leadership from those with lived experience is capable of creating movements for change, creating space to self-educate and educate others, to organise, to develop narratives that not only challenge and disrupt, but act as a guide to the future. Lived experience leaders can be visionary changemakers. It was after all, women who challenged patriarchy and set out a programme of women's rights, people of colour who won civil rights, and LGBTQ+ activists who won rights for their communities. Direct lived experience creates passion and dedication to persist in an endeavour that is unrivalled, for in such work the personal is political and no longer abstract.

It is direct lived experience of the criminal justice system that propelled me into the work I do in prisoner engagement, prisoner involvement and prisoner leadership. That lived experience has taught me about power and privilege and what it feels like to be banished, to be publicly shamed and to have your rights as a citizen revoked without compassion. Power to command a naked strip search is power manifested. It taught me about the senselessness of painful retribution as a mechanism for healing and restoration. I witnessed the full impact of judgement, the full force of the requirement to accept total individual culpability without reference to mitigation nor an acknowledgement of even a hint of societal responsibility. I saw and directly experienced the public invisibility of prisoners; merely used cynically as political footballs in the game of harsher sentencing often trumpeted by every major political party.

The public's lack of questioning of the age-old outdated notion of prison as punishment, means that there has been no outcry that since March 2020 most prisoners have spent around 23 hours a day locked in a cell with no visits from family and children, no work, no education, no rehabilitation interventions and limited access to healthcare. Long-term solitary confinement of such duration has direct impact on mental well-being and is likened to torture. Covid-19 is making even more visible the implications of the way that society thinks – or fails to think – about criminal justice.

We seek to reduce crime in this country through ever increasing sentencing that fails to affect the causes of crime. Now, more than ever, is the time for those with lived experience – without the metaphorical blindfolds – who see clearly where solutions lie, to speak out and to be heard, and to be supported to lead the work to reframe notions of justice in our post-Covid world.

This is why the Prison Reform Trust set up its free to join Prisoner Policy Network¹ (PPN) of serving prisoners, former prisoners, family members and supporting organisations in 2019. This network creates a framework for prisoners to have a say in both the work of the PRT, guiding its advocacy work, but also more widely in the sector. The network identifies and seeks to support prisoner leaders, equipping them to take their rightful place in the sector and in civil society. The lived experience and leadership of current and former prisoners is critical both in participation in the day-to-day running of prisons as much as in the broader criminal justice movement.

¹ <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projectsresearch/Prisonerpolicynetwork>

The PPN has published a series of reports reflecting prisoner experience and prisoner views on policy and service design.² Recently it supported the design and delivery of the first ever leadership programme for people with lived experience of the criminal justice system supported by the Centre for Knowledge Equity³ and the Clore Social Fellowship.⁴ With support from the Convict Criminology Movement, network members are working with academics to publish co-authored research and publishing in their own right. The movement is supporting prisoners to attend and speak at roundtables and events with decision-makers, as well as coming together to form a collective voice to shape new understandings of the nature of the sort of justice we need in our future.

The invisible and ignored behind the prison wall are not non-humans. A mere handful of people spend their entire life behind bars, and the majority return home seeking a better life. It is a travesty for the idea of 'Building Back Better' that so few organisations, whether in civil society, public or private sectors, reach out purposefully to include the wisdom of those with the lived experience of imprisonment to rebuild in a way that realises social justice. The Prisoner Policy Network has. Others need to take that step.

Paula Harriott is Head of Prisoner Involvement at the Prison Reform Trust and a former prisoner committed to building prisoner leadership in the public and policy debate about criminal justice. She leads the Prisoner Policy Network at the Prison Reform Trust.

² <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/Coronavirus/CAPPTIVE>

³ <https://knowledgeequity.org>

⁴ <https://cloresocialleadership.org.uk>