

# 'I didn't see criminals, I saw potential'

Ruth Corkett on her experience of a placement in a young offenders' institution

At 17 years old, he saw his father being attacked by multiple people outside his home. He did the first thing that came to his mind: picked up a weapon and went to defend him. This one action went on to cost him the next 17 years of his life and earned him a new title – murderer.

This was the story of one of the first young men I worked with when I started my placement in a Young Offenders' Institute. I soon realised it was not unusual for young offenders to receive a sentence longer than they have been alive.

## A new environment

Having studied Criminology and Psychology as an undergrad I was always hoping to find a way to incorporate both subjects into a career. When I started my master's and found out it was possible to do my placement in a prison, I jumped at the opportunity.

After months of waiting for the paperwork, DBS, and prison clearance to be completed, I was able to start. As my first day on placement finally arrived I waited apprehensively as my bag was searched, and I was reminded of all the items that are prohibited in a secure facility. I was collected at the front gate by

my supervisor at the time, a Clinical Psychologist. She escorted me up to the main office and introduced me to the team; Mental Health Nurses, Assistant Psychologists, Clinical Psychologists, Psychiatrist, Art Therapist, and CAMHS practitioners. I was going to need to adjust to the environment: for example, there were three locked gates between our office and the toilet. Thankfully I was issued with keys on my first day.

To begin with, my placement was one day a week. I quickly settled into a routine of attending the art therapy group each morning and in the afternoon doing admin work and scoring different outcome measures. I was given the opportunity to shadow each member of the team, and I was entrusted to be the second member of the team attending these appointments on cases where the young person was registered as 'no lone working', either due to behaviour in the prison or their offence.

I settled into a routine but it took time to get used to the prison; the gates, the officers, learning where the nearest alarm button was, and the sound of the alarm bells indicating a fight or incident was taking place. Another challenge was getting accustomed to the noise of the alarm bells, the fights, and the restraints. The first time I heard the alarm bell I knew what it was, as my team had explained the alarm system, but it was still a shock to hear. Standing in the education building waiting to shadow an appointment with my colleague the alarm went off and what felt like one blink later a storm of officers sprinted into the building. Quickly after, two young people were escorted out under restraint. Over time the noise became a norm, but it was still daunting being caught in the area of a fight, and witnessing the restraints and injuries that occurred to both officers and offenders.

After six months on placements an opportunity arose and I was offered a full-time position, doing both Assistant Psychologist work and admin for the team.

## Starting my own caseload

As I became a full-time employee my duties within the team increased. While I was doing more admin work I also started supporting more groups, and was given my own caseload of young people to work with one-to-one.



The first young man on my caseload was 16 years old and struggling to cope in prison. My role was to offer him the opportunity to talk, and support him through his time in custody. It took a while to build a therapeutic relationship but eventually we were able to talk through his concerns and anxieties. I came to learn that one of the most important aspects of my job was to be consistent and allow the young person to discuss their concerns in a safe, non-judgmental environment.

After a successful first few weeks of working as an acting Assistant Psychologist my caseload grew and I started working with a more diverse group of young people. This meant the range of support I was able to offer had to increase to include their varying needs. I started working with young people experiencing anxiety, depression, PTSD, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. One particular young male I worked with experienced anxiety which affected his ability to attend education. Together we did some semi-structured CBT work focusing on his triggers and the negative thoughts that led to his feelings of anxiety. Over time he began to recognise his triggers and learnt ways to challenge the negative thoughts these caused. This helped him to return to education. It was incredibly rewarding to watch him progress over the weeks and use the tools we worked on during our sessions.

As my caseload grew so did my confidence in my abilities to offer support and therapy, but on the other side so did my attachment to the young people in my care. Despite the crimes that they had been charged with, or were on remand for, it was my job to support them and look after their wellbeing. This meant building a therapeutic relationship and setting goals that we could work towards together.

### **Challenges of the job**

The most important aspect of working in the prison is also the most difficult. This is to develop the ability to manage your own thoughts and emotions when working with an individual who has committed a serious crime. It was my job to put aside the offence and see the young offender as a young person. However, this was sometimes hard to do when dealing with a young person who has committed, what you believe to be, a particularly nasty crime. It became important to talk through how you were left feeling with other members of the team and in supervision, so you are able to continue doing your job affectively.

Another challenging dynamic of working within a prison environment is that the young people could be transferred, taken to court, or released with little or no warning. After a week off work I was informed by my team that two young people on my caseload had been transferred to an adult prison. I was upset and frustrated that it was standard procedure for young people to be moved without consultation in the middle of therapy, especially given that one of the concerns many of these young men have is the transition to an

adult establishment. I felt I had failed them. I contacted both adult prisons to give a full handover of their notes, and wrote a final session letter to both young men summarising all the work we had completed. It still didn't feel enough.

An additional frustration was gaining access to the young people for appointments. Young people could not be unlocked from their cells if there was not enough prison staff on duty – it was not safe. At times the only way I could access and talk to the young people on my caseload was through their cell door. This was incredibly frustrating as it was not confidential, and sometimes other young people on the landing would call out unhelpful comments. This would set back our progress and made it challenging to properly check on their wellbeing.

### **The chance to change**

When I started working in the institute I was often asked why I would want to work with young offenders. The answer was simple; because when I went to work I didn't see criminals, I saw potential. Despite the many challenges of the job, these young people could leave the criminal justice system for good if given the right support. Some people would say 'lock them up and throw away the key', but every young person who enters prison will eventually leave no matter what crime they have committed. If they are sentenced to 21 years for murder or three months for robbery, they will still leave prison and return to living in the community. Why wouldn't we want to support and encourage them to make the most of their freedom, and become functioning members of society without the need to reoffend?

The young people we work with are just that: teenagers aged 15-18. Many don't have the support they need in the community. For some, the only people who have been consistently there for them are the other members of their gang or criminal network. They need encouragement within the custodial system and their community to allow them to reach their full potential. I'm not saying that they don't need to be punished for their crimes... but prison is meant to rehabilitate and offer them the chance to change.

### **Returning to prison one day**

While I no longer work in the institute, it is my goal to work with young offenders in the future. It is a challenging, frustrating, and sometimes upsetting job, but it is also incredibly rewarding. Every day I was able to work with an immensely talented team of professionals in an environment which was both demanding and full of possibilities. I learnt so much. Every challenge I encountered has helped shape and refine my abilities, which I aim to use as I move on to a new role as an Assistant Practitioner working with older adults, to expand my experience with the aim to move towards applying for the Clinical doctorate.