

CRIME & PUNISHMENT

By now every one must know that our prisons have filled up even though crime is not increasing, but have you asked yourself who these people are whom we have locked up. Many are young people on remand or in for minor offences, not ones that make them a threat to society. Have you thought what lessons they will be learning in prison? Prison Officers are too stretched to do much to improve their skill base. Some may still get employment when they are released, but I fear that many will find that their time inside has simply been a master class in crime and if, like many of the young remand prisoners, they are released on a Friday evening, far from their home, which their landlord has probably let by now, with almost no money and Social Services closed until Monday, what choice is open to them, other than petty theft, to get enough for a meal and a bed? Are you surprised if they find themselves back inside by the Monday? - for another eleven month master class.

The Government must be aware of this, but they are under enormous pressure from the media. This pressure is real because our politicians fear that they will lose votes if they are not seen to be tough on crime. How much better if instead we put them under pressure to be tough on the causes, to respond to the typical plea by the victims for 'their' offender to be turned round, not punished. Here is something we can all do - help our MPs to be bold, give them the courage to face down the howls from the media in the confidence that they will not in the end be penalised for doing the right thing

And how much better too if these young men could be prepared for their release, with accommodation found and a Mentor already in contact to help them readjust. That is what CARD (Closing a revolving door) is trying to do in Exeter. Set up with the support of Exeter Prison staff and hosted by Exeter Community Initiatives, it is an idea that should be widely supported. Perhaps that is another way we could help. It is worth pausing for a moment to think about it.

Richard Hilken

BBCRadioDevon Oct.06