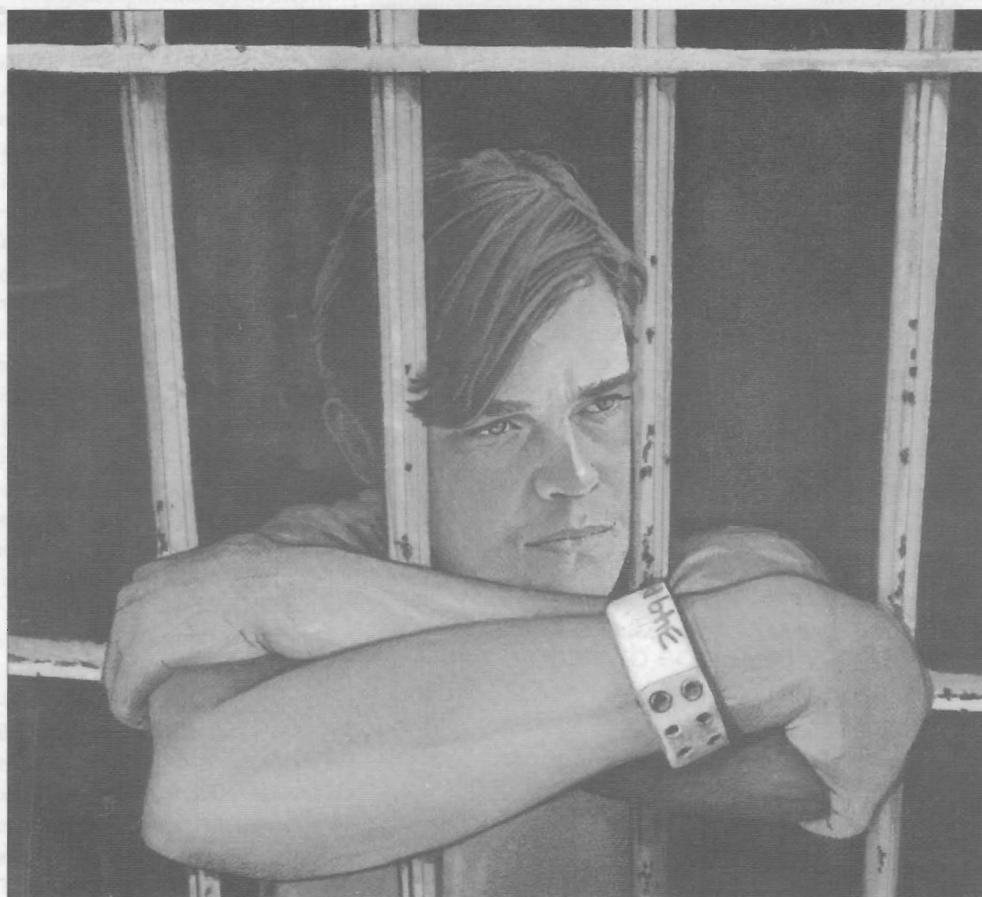


James Hodgkinson

Captive courses

Inside intervention



Research from The Mount prison indicates that group programmes for inmates help with issues of abstinence, harm reduction and other effects of drug use

Druglink is a non-statutory community-based drug agency (with no relation to this magazine) based in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire. Together with the Hertfordshire Probation Service they run courses as part of a drug intervention programme for prisoners at The Mount prison.

They set up research to assess the

impact of the work and find out what changes could be attributed to it. The aim was to find out how significant and useful a contribution it is to the lives of prisoners and the communities to which the prisoners return. Hertfordshire Drug Action Team funded the research and publication of the report entitled *I am worth more than drugs can offer*.

The Mount is a category C prison at Bovingdon near Hemel Hempstead and holds over 700 men, who are mainly from Greater London and the home counties. About 25 per cent have committed directly drug-related offences.

The Mount reflects the prison service's national anti-drugs strategy, which involves mandatory and voluntary drug testing. Drug-free prison wings have been developed, supported by voluntary drug testing and a commitment by prisoners to remain drug free.

A total of 75 prisoners took part in courses, and in this article 'prisoners' refers to those who attended courses or were in contact with the drug services. The University of Hertfordshire monitored and evaluated the research into the results.

Separate courses

At The Mount, group courses were run separately for 'suppliers' (convicted of offences concerned with importing or supplying drugs) and for 'users' (convicted of robbery and burglary to support drug habits).

The courses mixed interactive exercises and teaching. Many participants only had basic education so had low literacy and numeracy skills. This is not unusual in prison inmates. In a recent report the Basic Skills Agency estimated that 60-70 per cent of Britain's prison population have literacy and numeracy levels so low that they are ineligible for 96 per cent of all jobs.¹

Four headings covered the range of topics in the courses:

- Expected objectives/outcomes –

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explored strengths and achievements with prisoners, and looked at ways to avoid relapses

- Awareness – explored the effects of drugs on user, family and the wider community
- Connections – explored links between drug taking and offending
- Information – looked at the legal consequences of drug use and supply, harm reduction from HIV and hepatitis, and services available on release.

Education packages and exercises that are often used in general drug education, such as the 'Law and Drugs' exercise from *Taking Drugs Seriously*, were adapted for use with the groups.²

Wider victims

Prisoners who completed the courses had better knowledge about drug laws, and health – including physical effects on the body and psychological effects on the mind. The increase was as high as 22.4 per cent for users on their knowledge of psychological effects and 19.1 per cent for suppliers on their knowledge of the law.

One result of the courses was that prisoners understood more clearly that drug supply and use creates a wide circle of victims within the community:

'I realised that I've got victims of my drug supply that I never thought I had – as they came to me requesting supplies' (supplier)

'I have understood how others are affected by my drug taking and that has helped me change my views' (user)

'People that bought drugs from me had to rob and steal to get the money' (supplier)

The group courses, where men could talk relatively openly about their lives, were a rare opportunity for men to talk intimately with groups of other men. It was something they had not done before, but after initial scepticism they enjoyed the experience and found it useful.

Prisoners learned about themselves and about others from the process of talking in a group. At the end of the courses prisoners rated the group work very highly, they thought it interesting,

informative and helpful, particularly around drugs and health concerns such as HIV and hepatitis.

'I didn't feel that I'd be able to participate, as it's hard to explain oneself, but I found that I could and I'm pleased I came' (supplier)

'If I hadn't gone to that group I would probably have had a spliff this week' (user)

'I learned that I can talk to people in a group, where in the past I couldn't unless I was filled up with heroin' (user)

'You find that you're not alone when it comes to screwing up your life' (supplier)

Drug services provided at the prison are seen as a positive intervention and there is a high demand – from self referral by prisoners and referral by prison staff. When the research project finished there were 196 prisoners on the waiting list for the drug courses.

Drugs and crime

Most prisoners saw links between their drug supply or use and their offending. Suppliers often stated that they offended because of financial problems or greed:

'I saw no other quick way out, in a quick sense, in finding money to pay my business debts' (supplier)

'Supplying drugs financed my gambling habits' (supplier)

'I could not support my crack habit on the money I was getting' (supplier and user)

Although much crime is drug related some prisoners are criminals before becoming drug users.

One of the young men was serving seven years for numerous burglaries, the proceeds from which he used to finance his heroin addiction. It was his ninth custodial sentence.

His criminal career started long before his drug taking, which progressed each time he was in prison. It may be significant that he saw his criminality as the cause of his problems, rather than his drug use and behaviour.

Users gave their reason for starting

drugs as through friends, and problems with lifestyle or family.

Users who stopped taking drugs while in prison cited drug free wings and prison itself as motivation:

'When I came into prison on that first night I lay down and thought, "Thank God this will save me"' (user)

'When I came into prison I stopped using heroin and just smoked puff, then I failed a piss test and stopped' (user)

Eight out of ten prisoners who classed themselves as 'users' admitted that they had used a drug while in prison. One in three said that they were still using at the time of the course. Seven out of ten stated that their drug of choice was available in prison.

Less than half the users felt confident at remaining or becoming drug free, which has implications for throughcare and support in the community on release. Half the users found it difficult to cope with life without drugs. But, most users had ideas about what they needed to do to change their drug use.

The courses stimulated and helped prisoners but for some it was the prison sentence that was the main deterrent, not the group work.

Availability and motivation

Currently drugs are reported as being easily available and use widespread in The Mount, as across the prison service generally. Drug-free wings, with frequent drug tests combined with good drug support services, are essential for some prisoners.

The introduction of CARAT (Counselling Assessment Referral Advice and Throughcare) in October 1999, started comprehensive assessment and drug services in prison, including vital follow up support in the community on release. This could be significant help for prisoners to become and stay drug free.

The research demonstrated that the courses at The Mount helped the prisoners. It showed that drug services can be effective, but they only provide support. The determination and motivation of individual prisoners is the key element.

The determination of the Prison Service, at both a national and local level, to address this issue will, it is hoped, make a dramatic change in the situation in the near future ■



The full report and evaluation can be obtained from Druglink Ltd, Trefoil House, Red Lion Lane, Hemel Hempstead, HP1 1RT. Phone 01923 260733

The title of the report, *I am worth more than drugs can offer*, is from a statement made by a 24-year-old participant of the courses.

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Linzi Woods, John Brennan, Lesley Parkes and Sarah Viner.

1. Basic Skills Agency report.

2. Clements I., Cohen J., Kay J. *Taking drugs seriously: a manual of harm reduction education on drugs*. Liverpool: Healthwise, 1991.