

IN FOCUS

From CARE

Four young men at HMP Preston talk about their difficult childhood experiences
Jessica Bradley reports



Kate Littler (left), a social worker who has worked in prisons, and Nina McNamara, a user experience researcher, founders of the Bird podcast

According to the latest government figures, 52 per cent of children who have been in care hold a criminal conviction by the age of 24 compared to 13 per cent of children outside the care system.

The reasons for this are complex and often statistics and research drown out the voices of care-leavers themselves. But an episode of the Bird Podcast, hosted by social worker Kate Littler and user experience researcher Nina McNamara, offers insight from four care leavers who have served numerous prison sentences.

The episode was facilitated by the 'Time4Change' initiative, which works to rehabilitate prisoners in HMP Preston and Pentonville London through talking therapies and workshops...

Reece

Reece was taken into care when he was 12-years-old, due to domestic violence at home.

"My dad couldn't control me," he said. "I was too naughty for him."

Reece spoke to Bird Podcast at the age of 27, after 15 years of repeat contact with the criminal justice system.

"I was in and out of juvenile jail in my younger days," he said. "It's a pathway you learn to keep going. Once you get used to something, that's normal."

Reece's parents could have been offered more support to keep him out of care, he argued.

"I've lost two sisters to care. They were took at birth from my stepmum. They swooped in and took them because my mum's a heroin addict," he said.

Social workers, he says, should support parents who take drugs so they can prevent their children going into care.

"It doesn't mean that you're a bad parent because you took drugs," he added. "You should support people like that."

Reece views his time in care as one reason for criminal activity, but also takes personal responsibility.

"You can't forget what you see," he said. "Your brain's a filing cabinet. No matter what you do to suppress it, it can't be suppressed. It's had an impact on my life, but I chose that way. I can't blame it all on that. Some is down to childhood trauma but it's not all down to my parents. I could have stopped this years ago."

Reece, who has bipolar disorder and is awaiting an assessment for ADHD, has found a lack of support for his mental health within the criminal justice system.

"People say you can speak to people for your mental health but there's not as much help out there as you think. There's always waiting lists. Some staff do help you, but it's

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not the right staff to help you through what you need."

Reece is aware of the impact of an absence of parenting on his life.

"Every child deserves their parents, but not every child gets it," he said. "They should be able to go out and do family things, not being mistreated or neglected."

Kian

Kian was the only boy among his seven siblings, and felt like his mum preferred his sisters over him.

"I knew my mum never liked boys," he told the podcast. "At Christmas she'd get the girls presents and not me. I used to call my auntie my mum because she's got three boys and she knows how boys rule."

But he didn't want to be taken into care.

"Getting taken away from my family was horrible. I cried my eyes out," he said. "When I first got taken away, I asked my sister to come and kidnap me and take me home. I felt like I was a spare part."

Kian lived in a series of children's homes, and said he didn't know where to call home.

"You don't know whether you're coming or going – being so young, you shouldn't have to be putting up with that," he said.

Kian kept attempting to run away, and was returned by police officers.

"They had to move me further away because I kept running back to my mum," he said. "She never rung the police and told them I was there – she used to hide me and the police used to find me."

Kian traces the start of his time in the criminal justice system back to when he was arrested for assault, and links this back to when he was taken into care at the age of eight.

"The police didn't take me to the cells, they just put me straight in care," he said.

"If I could go back in time, I would go back to being eight or nine, and not spit at my mum. If I didn't hit and spit at my mum, I don't think she'd have got rid of me," he said.

Kian had a poor relationship with his social worker.

"I didn't really see her. And now I'm part of the leaving care team I don't see my leaving care worker. They are supposed to be there to support us."

Shane

Shane was 16 when he fell out with his dad, and his parents voluntarily agreed, through a section 20 agreement, for Shane to go into care.

"My dad signed up for it all. I agreed. It was good for me because we weren't getting along, so it was good for us to go

our separate ways," he said.

Shane's mother was often absent from the home.

"At that time, I didn't care," he said about going into care. "I just wanted to get away from them."

Shane had a positive experience in care. Overall, he stayed in around seven or eight places.

"Every single one has been perfect," he said. "They really helped me. They understood who I am and what I can be. The places I've been were all men, I looked up to them. I could talk to them about my feelings, which I couldn't do with my father."

Asked what he would do differently if he could go back in time, Shane said: "I'd actually be myself and not what other people want me to be. I'd hang around with the right people and understand that they're my mates, and the others aren't."

Aidan

Aidan was taken into care after getting excluded from school.

"My mum was on speed, she'd stay up for three days, so there was never any time for me. I'd wake up not knowing what to do... there would be mould on the bread. I remember one time I ate half a tube of toothpaste I was that hungry."

Aidan was sofa-surfing at friends' houses every night, and eventually was suspended from school. His parents got in contact with social services and he was taken into care. He said he was repeatedly restrained by staff in the residential care home because he struggled to follow rules after being self-sufficient for so long.

Aidan feels he was failed by social services.

"I didn't really speak to them. Social workers never advised me to get my own place. I never talk to them about anything – I'd just say 'yes.'"

For Aidan, getting involved in crime was a cry for attention.

"I think going down the criminal road is getting seen and not just heard. You think, 'yeah, now I'm getting attention.'"

Being obsessed with money, instilled in him from a young age through exploitation by gangs, is no replacement for feeling loved as a child, says Aidan.

"The money doesn't matter. It's trauma. You need love at that age. When different staff are coming in and out at different times, you're not used to anyone but yourself."



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