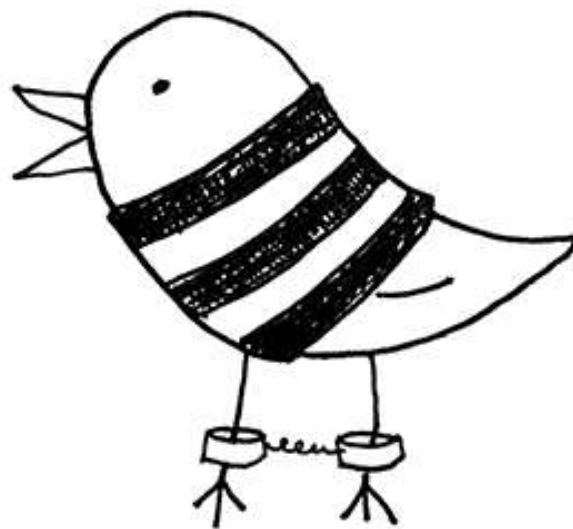


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HMP Belmarsh - Real voices from Category A young adults

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Bird Podcast has portrayed the UK's challenging criminal justice system for five years. In our latest episode, we spoke to young adults to discover what it really means to do time in HMP Belmarsh.

They shared their experience and suggested improvements to prison conditions and ways to reduce crime in society. We'd like to share some insights from the podcast so readers can hear directly from these young people's experiences. When we refer to someone as a young adult, this means somebody aged 18-25.

Cat A restrictions as a young adult

Most of the young adults we spoke to at Belmarsh are 'Category A' prisoners. This label has restrictions and connotations which can negatively affect a young adult. Being a Cat A prisoner may affect their outcomes and hopes of rehabilitation.

The men we spoke to cited delays in visits, being left out of prison-wide social events and a lack of opportunities to progress, leaving them feeling frustrated and isolated.

"There's actually been times I've had to wait a long time until I saw my mum. Obviously, Cat A comes with disadvantages but eight months, seven months... it's just a bit ridiculous."

Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

In a thematic inspection of Young Adults in custody in 2020, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) found that, generally, outcomes are poor for young adults compared with older

prisoners (those over 25). Cat A prisoners are disproportionately subject to the lowest IEP level - IEP refers to the privileges given to prisoners based on good behaviour, e.g. they are placed on Basic, Standard or Enhanced status.

"It [being Cat A] messes with you a lot because it's like, everyone's going to do something, and everyone's gone and I'm saying let me go as well, and they say no, you're 'A Cat.' When everyone's coming back to the wing talking about having fun, laughing... you'll just be sitting yourself thinking... Why am I being singled out?"

Taylor, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Young adults are disproportionately involved in violence, suggesting that having more money to spend on prison shop items each week, additional visits or television are insufficient in preventing younger prisoners from using violence. Without specific interventions, research finds that young adults remained on the lowest level of the incentives scheme, with no improvement in their behaviour.

"As time went on, they segregated me from the rest of the general population, I asked what was going on and he told me, 'You're Cat A now,' so that's when I got into my first real interaction with them... it just all got out of hand... they put me in a banana suit, which is the green and yellow one, double handcuffed me, all that type of stuff made me feel like I was the biggest criminal in the world."

Taylor, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Challenges with progression between categories

Each young man we spoke to was willing to self-improve, progress and rehabilitate. Some felt held back by what was available in Belmarsh for young adults and found the Cat A review process frustrating. Often a lack of or breakdown in communication exacerbated the situation:

"I've only had one [Cat A review], and they didn't really give me an explanation. I just got a piece of paper that I didn't really understand. My OMU [Offender Management Unit] didn't even come and see me about it."

CJ, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Offending behaviour courses are a crucial part of someone progressing to the next category; for young adults in Belmarsh, the courses they need to get to the next stage should be made available.

"We're kind of in a Catch-22 Because from 18 to 21, we're here and we're trying to come up from A Cat...every single young Cat A are all stuck in Belmarsh, and we can't do the courses to come off cat A"

Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Young adults we spoke to reported feeling 'stuck' since they were too young to go into a high-security environment but too high risk to be in a regular YOI.

"... a lot of those courses they take between nine months to a year, so I don't think Belmarsh has the mindset to be keeping prisoners for that long. When I come in, I was like 18, and I can't really go to another jail because I can't go to the high security as I'm not 21 yet... I can't be in a normal YOI because our risk is too high. So you just get stuck here"

Taylor, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

We heard some positive things regarding learning and progression in Belmarsh. The young adults said that Listeners training and acting classes were the courses they'd benefitted from the most.

"The Listeners course was about serious life events, people talk about having all of these problems...that's probably one of my favourite courses I've done that shows you a different side to life 'cos my problems might be problems, but other people's; I've just come prison, I'm gonna lose my house, kids, wife, I'm like woah this is bigger than me."

Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

"It was an acting course that I've done...I played the grandad and all of our families came out... everyone enjoyed it, all the prison staff on the wing and stuff was coming up to us on the wings sayin' you lots done very well"

CJ, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Simple things prisons and society can do to make things better

The group had many ideas for improvement based on genuine lived experience. Although Belmarsh is a notoriously violent jail, we also heard many positive things thanks to prison staff willing to go the extra mile. These ideas could benefit prisons nationwide.

We discussed the evolution of young adult (YA) groups over time. Once staff began listening to participants and focusing the groups on current challenges, there was much more engagement and improvement for longer-term prisoners.

"At the beginning, we used to speak about what we were going to do on the outside my personal opinion was that didn't make sense because there'll be two people sitting in a YA group, one of them will be on a six month sentence and another is down for twenty-seven years... an officer really took in all our words and things started to change. Now I've got two jobs, I'm a listener and the YA group rep. I feel like that's improved quite a bit."

Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Empathy and accountability are critical to building relationships. When staff and prisoners understand each other, it promotes shared responsibility. When Belmarsh decided to host a prison-wide football tournament, prisoners knew the risks staff took and understood that they needed to resolve conflicts for things like this to go ahead. Empathy meant an understanding that causing an altercation during the day would spoil the benefit for everyone.

"I just thought about a gov' that helps a lot of us and who kind of put a neck on the line to make the football tournament happen. I said, if this goes wrong, I won't even be able to look at her, I'll avoid her for

weeks. That was a great day, we took a big group picture that a lot of us still have on our wall, it's a day that a lot of us appreciated"

Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Advice for people serving time

Attitudes and stigma towards Category A prisoners prevent positive change from happening. We found that a human-centred approach creates better outcomes. All of the Young Adults we spoke to have had their own nuanced experiences with prison; different rules, regimes and experiences. Here's five pieces of advice for those who might be finding themselves in a similar situation and are looking for guidance.

1. Read the welcome pack when you arrive
2. Don't stress and keep a calm mind
3. Keep your head down and don't get involved in things you know you shouldn't be getting involved in
4. Stay in contact with family and friends
5. Focus on you and your progression

"Don't stress, keep a calm mind and just find any way to get in contact with family... when I first spoke to my mum, everything I just calmed down, my mum calmed me down."

CJ, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh

Our visit to Belmarsh challenged the stereotypes of the prison. Contrary to stories of violence and turmoil - our guests reported feeling settled here. There are still enormous challenges faced by prisons across the UK, and we hope this episode has highlighted some simple ways the men inside can be treated more humanely, ultimately leading to a kinder society.

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