

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE TOLD SPARK INSIDE

In September 2021, young men with lived experience of prison, including young Black men, talked to us directly about their wellbeing; of being young in the prison system; and of being a young Black man in the prison system. Thank you to the young people who took the time to talk to us individually, and to the group of young people from Leaders Unlocked.

A GROUP OF YOUNG MEN TELL US HOW BEING IN PRISON IMPACTS THEIR WELLBEING...

"I just wanted to say in prison you don't get no help. I can tell you that. With mental health, people that have got mental health in there get treated like dogs. Like, the nurses get paid to do a job, but they are in a room conversating with each other, making conversation when other people need their help.... people say, you can get drugs faster than you can get their help in there and that's the truth of it. Because, what people don't actually know, you don't actually see what's inside.

"When they come to investigate and see the state of the place, they nice it up, they sugar coat it. So, by the time everyone leaves its back to normal, like the heating. Like the heating when they turn it on, they say it's on, it's not on. Like, you can get more heat if you just stay in your sheet and that's what most of the time you have to do is wear double clothing.

"Like, to me it's shocking because people with mental health and normal people without mental health are getting treated... less than humans. So why would people want to rehabilitate their self or reform? You are just creating angry men or angry women. That's what you are doing. You are throwing them in there, not giving them nothing, making them more angry, coming out putting more pressure onto them telling them what they need to do and do the impossible which everyone knows... So I just think, I feel like they feed you to the lions and see how you come out at the end. That the way I feel".

- Mo, 26 (name changed to protect their identity)



"I'm quite an optimistic person and like I went into prison thinking that I was mentally strong.... I was in there for over three years when I left prison. But the thing is yeah, you don't realise, like for me I didn't have a concept or understanding of mental health beforehand because I went into prison as a young man. I may have not suffered it or been able to identify what it was before. So it's like you go in there as a person and you are telling yourself that you are gonna be strong and you are gonna get through this, so what you end up doing is having this false sense of optimism and you neglect your own mental health.

What you don't realise is, is that it slowly breaks you down without you noticing. So, essentially you have to project yourself as a confident person within prison especially, well I can't speak for a female institution but in a male institution you have to project yourself cos it's about being masculine. So, you develop a false sense of confidence and you don't realise that you are no longer confident until you get outside in the real world.

Erm, so, for me, erm I didn't notice that I was very depressed and very anxious whilst I was in prison. I felt like I was confident, I felt like I was handling it well. All these things.... Erm all these things... but when I got out of prison I neglected my own physical and mental health, I lost a load of weight.. and then also having seen a psychological expert I was diagnosed with chronic depression and anxiety so these things I would have never have identified in prison. I felt like a confident male, but then when I left prison it was almost like I was a broken person.

You have to create this false sense of yourself whilst you are in there, so you can go under the radar. So, I wouldn't have been highlighted as a person that was suffering from mental health cos outwardly I was projecting myself as somebody that was confident, somebody that was ok, somebody that was happy. Also, when you live in prison for years, you have to kind of create your own world in there, so you have to create your own happiness as well. So I would say to people, they were my worst days and my best days. I had to create happiness for myself if that makes sense? Yeah you don't realise that it's slowly breaking you down until you are outside, outside of the cage essentially."

- Rahim, 26 (name changed to protect their identity)

"When it comes to like to like when you say 'wellbeing', for a lot of people you probably go into prison feeling positive. I was quite positive when I went inside and I think the system strips you of that. And once it has been stripped you then have the issue of well, trying to get that back and they are not putting support in place to rebuild that... the whole point of rehabilitation and for you to re-settle back into the community and society and whatever is kind of like broken then and they are the ones that have stripped that from you. I feel like when I went in, even though ok yes, I was going to prison, I still went in in a positive way, as a positive person, leaving they stripped that away. Once there was no support to help kind of rebuild I was left to my own devices to rebuild that myself and it took a long time until now probably."

- Ross, 27 (name changed to protect their identity)

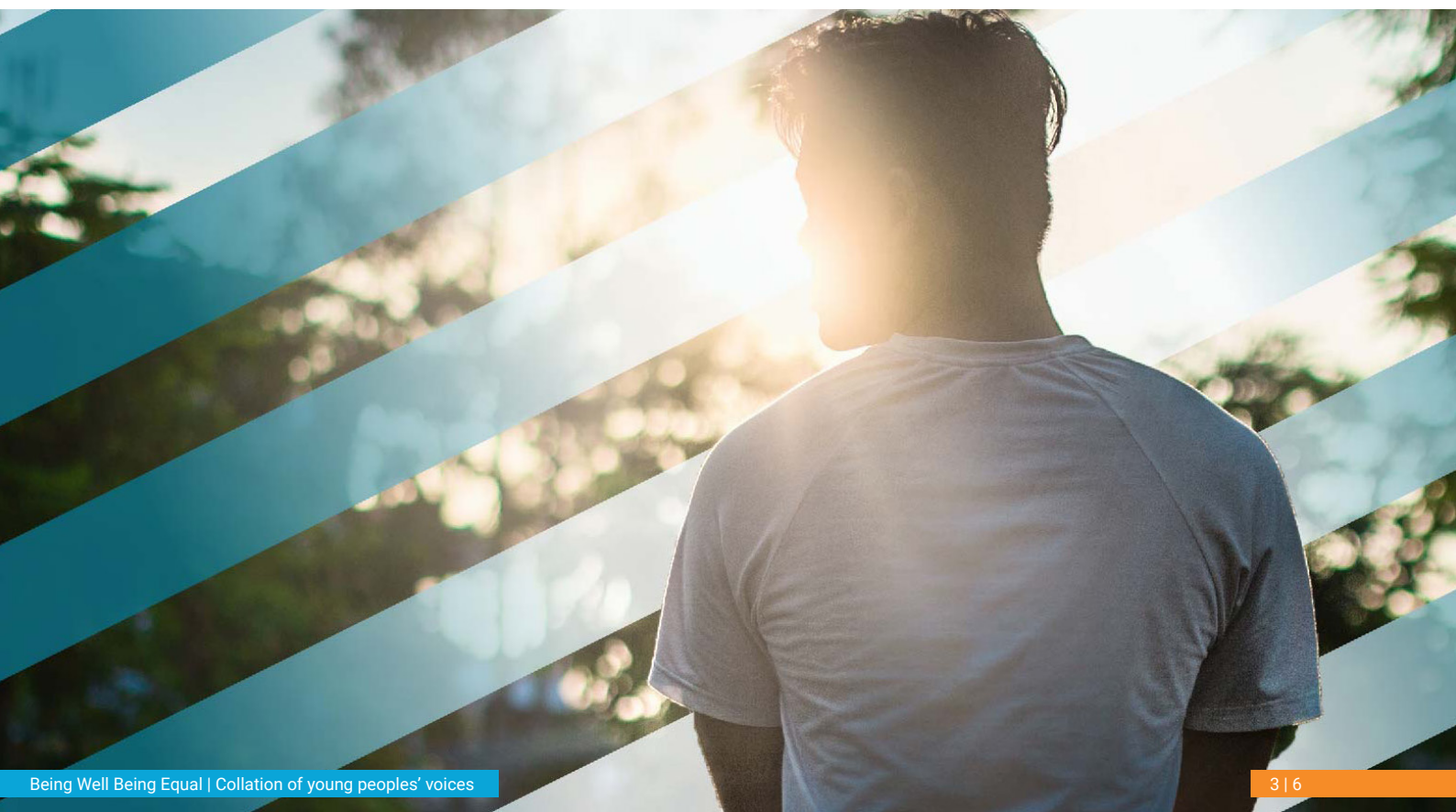
A YOUNG MAN (26 YEARS OLD) TELLS US WHAT WELLBEING SUPPORT HE WAS OFFERED IN PRISON...

"None. To be honest. Um, none. You had a few govenors there at the time that were...later, particularly women that were alright... there wasn't necessarily offering that sort of support but you could talk to them if you wanted to ...but other than that they wasn't like oh if you're feeling this way ...this sort of support that you can go to talk and to... you know let us know how're you're feeling so we can make you feel more comfortable, there was nothing like that."

A YOUNG MAN TELLS US WHAT HE THINKS IS NEEDED IN PRISONS TO SUPPORT MENTAL WELLBEING...

"I think a lot of people just need someone just to vent to and just, talking to someone is just relieving yourself of the stress. Like they don't have to solve your problems, but I think just listen to it, just try and help them out a bit more and take your time with the person you're dealing with in those situations, because there's gonna be a lot of things going through whoever's mind at that time, and they might not want to talk about it."

It has to be genuine ...people doing their jobs have really gotta care for people that they're dealing with and have empathy, and have empathy for what's going on. If you take a genuine interest I think the person can, kind of clock or read that energy and be like this person wants to know so I'm just gonna tell them what's going on. When it seems false and they just ask you the question, it just feels like they're just doing their job, then you're just gonna wanna just get it over and done with but, if you sit down and talk then I think you might just get a little bit outta them."



A YOUNG MAN (22 YEARS OLD) TELLS US ABOUT HIS TIME IN PRISON DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC...

"I think that's like one of the worst... I think that's one of the worse periods for my mental state, but in the year, it's kind of like I've kind of sucked it up and was like d'you know what it is? ...

I started to read more, I started to exercise... and then Ihave little episodes where I'm like I'm living in a fairy tale, like this is really going on and at some point this court date's gonna come. So it's like I go back into that sunken feeling where it's like ah, I don't wanna do nothing until I find out whether I'm going or not.

So yeah, yeah, I think I'd say I was feeling depressed, I wouldn't say I was depressed, but I was feeling depressed in that period of time. Especially I had a lot of other stuff going on outside of the case, so all of that adding onto the case made it bad, especially in lockdown as well, you couldn't really do nothing, you're stuck at home, so it was a bad time I think."

A BLACK MAN (26 YEARS OLD) TELLS US ABOUT HOW HE FELT IN CUSTODY...

"I feel like when something is out of your control, like your first instinct is to fight it. So you're constantly fighting it, just thinking why can't I go out, what about this, what about that? Or like, you know, in being innocent or what not. ...then after a while you just realise that you are just not coming out. And it is just more of an acceptance thing again, just adapting to your new environment and your new reality, you know. Yeah just having to accept that."

YOUNG PEOPLE TELL US THEIR THOUGHTS ON REOFFENDING...

"I noticed when I was in that situation, that prison is designed to either make you or break you. If you are not mentally strong minded then it will break you and it will mentally mess with you for the rest of your life and that's how a lot of people become institutionalised and get into the routine of reoffending and going back to prison cos when they come out of prison they are trying to transition from prison back to normal society, there is no transition they just throw you out of prison, they give you your stuff you get released and bang you are back into the normal world. Like everything that you most probably would have known, depends on how long you have served would have changed over time, things change. Then they become scared and within the first two weeks they reoffend cos it's not what they are used to, they are scared and their environment has changed so much that it's a dramatic effect on them."

"When you are dropped out, back into society you are expected to find your own two feet but at the same time you have the officers in the back of your head... 'I'll see you back in two weeks, or I'll see you next week, or I'll see you in a couple of days, don't worry you'll be getting a recall soon.' So you are leaving the gates automatically with that negative stigma in your head. 'Oh am I gonna get recalled, am I gonna get recalled?' So the whole time, that's all you are thinking about. And then where you gonna live, how you gonna find your feet?"

- Alex, 26 (name changed to protect their identity)

A YOUNG BLACK MAN TALKS ABOUT WHAT PRISON IS...

"I think the point of prison is that... is prison is supposed to disrupt and.... and... and alienate you from those needs. It's supposed to keep you in a position where you are a number, dependent on the prison system to provide certain things for you, and you are also denied those things as well. So little pieces are denied warmth, you are denied safety and security, you are denied these things and that's supposed to be... I think that's the function of the prison system. I think it goes further than that as well. I think after prison, you end up as a ... in a situation where the criminal system, erm, denies you access to those things on a more permanent basis as well ... for a lot of people. So after you leave prison, after you have served your times, you continue, you are continually denied access to those erm need, those basic needs.

So fundamentally what prison ends up doing it ends up alienating you from opportunities to be actualised, to reach self-actualisation to actually get to a point where you can connect fully with other people because it's designed to alienate you. If you look at what prison is its basically society's way of saying we don't care why you did, what you did, we don't care about the systemic issues that led to whatever happened to you and whatever you ended up doing. But we what we are gonna do is we don't wanna deal with you so we are gonna stick you away over there so you are not actually seen. So, the rest of society doesn't have to look at you. That's essentially what prison is, it's a way of getting rid of our problems rather than dealing with them."

