

Ψ **psychOUT**

ISSUE 16

FEATURE THEME

Forensic Psychology

ΨSYCHOUT

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Policing & crime

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ΨSYCHOUT

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue explores forensic psychology, including the effect of death row on inmates mental health, the effect of isolation on inmates wellbeing, and the strength based approach of positive criminology.



As you've probably guessed from the cover, this issue of PsychOut is all about forensic psychology.

The scope of this issue is wide; from the effects of isolation and death row on inmate mental health, and positive criminology and the strength based approach. PsychOut also features an article about our fascination with true crime, the representation of inmate mental health in prison documentaries, an article about the support available from KYRA, and an interview with a trainee forensic psychology.

We would like to thank all the writers for their outstanding contribution to this newest issue of PsychOut and can't wait to publish more of their work. We would also like to give a special thanks to Fiona Sweeney for agreeing to be interviewed for this issue and the KYRA team for detailing the incredible work they do.

We hope all our readers are doing well and enjoy the issue!

LUCY STAFFORD & HATTIE JONES

Editors

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Features

ISSUE 16



Image from Wales Online

POSITIVE CRIMINOLOGY

**DEATH ROW AND ITS
PSYCHOLOGICAL
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Positive criminology: A strength-based approach for offenders

BY BRANISLAV KALETA

Traditional criminology has largely determined the factors involved in deviant behaviour, but we still don't know much about how to change the minds of offenders for the better after they've been punished, which is where positive criminology has found its place. By focusing on personal development, positive criminology offers a more balanced approach and instead of just punishing people, aims to decrease reoffending rates and overall criminal behaviour (Ronel & Elisha, 2011).

As is common with emerging fields of science, positive criminology doesn't yet have one unifying theory and is more a mix of various theories and models. Despite this, the theories and models share a common goal of focusing on positive interventions and virtues. Due to the field being just in its infancy, there are a plethora of factors being investigated, some of which are listed here: resilience, post-traumatic growth, exposure to goodness, acceptance and inclusion, restorative justice, and mindfulness (Sutton, 2020). The focus of the research is to add to traditional criminology: rather than focusing on why people re-offend, it stresses the importance of looking into why they don't and what factors influence the people who don't return to criminal behaviour.

The findings of a study by Elisha et al. (2013) suggests that positive criminology could indeed find its place in practical applications for assessment, rehabilitation and treatment of offenders. This hasn't gone uncriticised and further principles and practical applications were elaborated on in a later paper by Ronel & Segev (2014) as a response to the first wave of discourse on the usefulness and potential of positive criminology.

It's essential to stress that positive criminology isn't here to replace traditional criminology in any way. Rather, it's here to complement it and fill in the gaps that traditional criminology has failed to explore extensively until now. The field is new and very little research has actually been conducted, but that does not mean it should go unnoticed. At the moment the question is: Can positive criminology transform criminology as a whole, or will criticism and scrutiny dampen its potential?



LOCKED UP IN LOCKDOWN:

The influence of isolation on inmate mental health

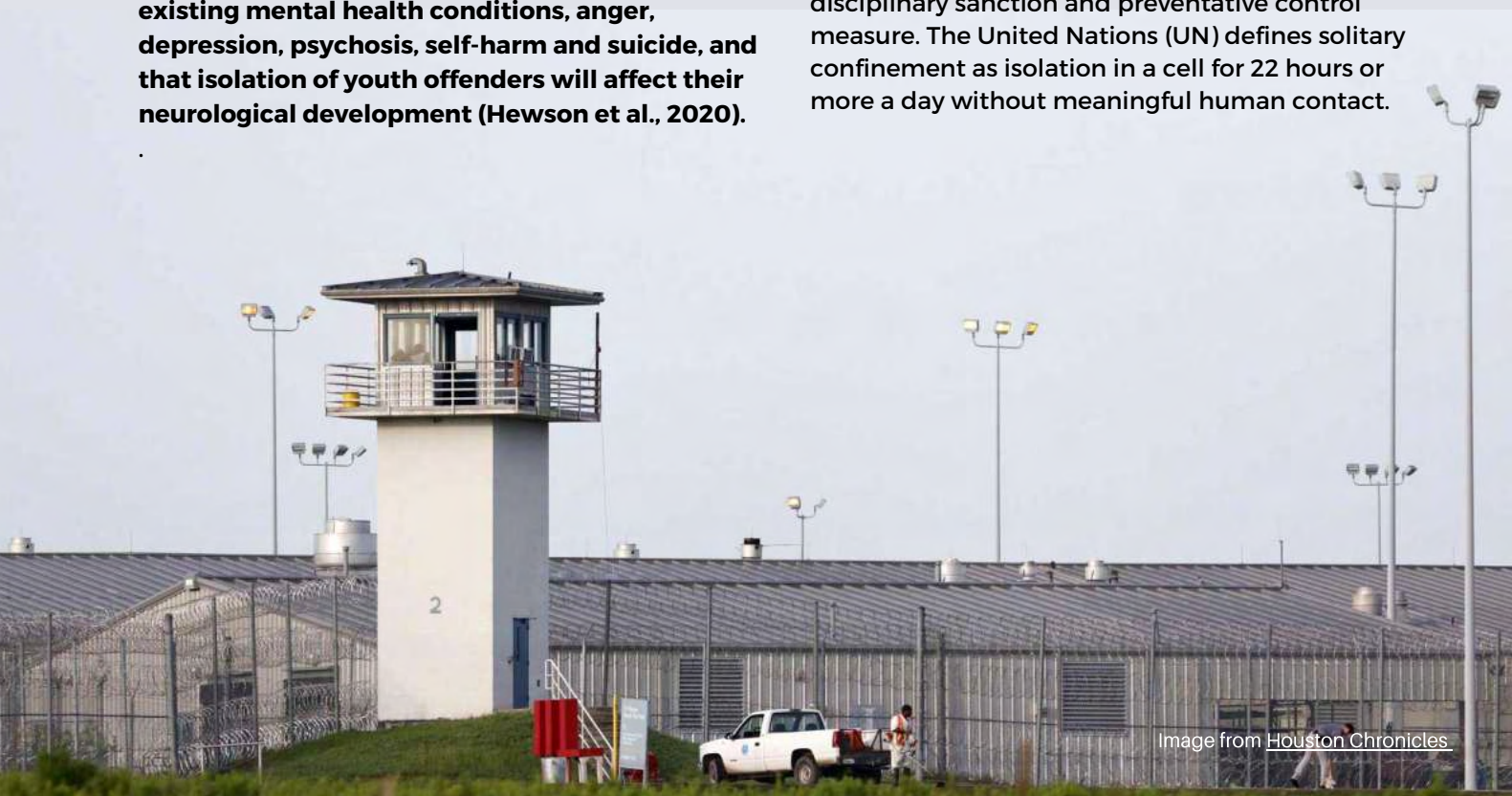
By Rebecca Willis

Communicable diseases spread rapidly in prisons due to poor healthcare, overcrowding and uncleanliness (Bick, 2007). In response to news of the hastily spreading SARS-CoV-2 virus, in March 2020, HM Prison and Probation Services instigated a number of actions to preserve life, maintain security safety and stability, and provide sufficient capacity (Ministry of Justice, HM Prison & Probation Service, 2020): prison visits were suspended, inmates spent more time alone in cells (typically up to 23 hours per day), prison activities were suspended, new arrivals were isolated for 14 days, mental health services were reduced, and remand times increased due to delayed hearings (Hewson, Shepherd, Hard, & Shaw, 2020; Sinclair, O'Shea, Allwood, & Durcan, 2020). These regime changes reduced social contact and autonomy, and increased uncertainty about the future: conditions which are known to contribute to poor mental health (Seco Ferreira et al., 2020; Hawryluck et al., 2004; Jeong et al., 2016; Van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). Therefore, there has been apprehension that the measures introduced to control infection will result in endemic exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions, anger, depression, psychosis, self-harm and suicide, and that isolation of youth offenders will affect their neurological development (Hewson et al., 2020).

The psychological strain caused by these measures is only beginning to be officially observed and recorded, and current findings are often contradictory. Despite this, the gist of research has, unsurprisingly, given the impression that these tough measures have been accompanied by a broad deterioration in inmate mental health. For instance, around half of 2,000 prisoners from 19 different prisons surveyed reported experiencing a decline in mental health (Webster, 2021), and isolated inmates were observed to be feeling fatalistic and experiencing sensory deprivation (CAPPTIVE, 2021).

This worsening in mental health is particularly concerning because while the effects of the pandemic affected inmates' physical health less than initially anticipated (Davies, 2020), the mental consequences are likely to be severe and long lasting (Johnson, Cutridge, Parkes, Roy, & Plugge, 2021). This in turn is likely to be costly to the state as poor mental health has been linked to recidivism (Chang, Larsson, Lichtenstein, & Fazel, 2015).

However, isolation in the prison system is no novel, short-term preventative strategy, but a common disciplinary sanction and preventative control measure. The United Nations (UN) defines solitary confinement as isolation in a cell for 22 hours or more a day without meaningful human contact.



Furthermore, the UN recognises solitary confinement lasting 15 days or more to be cruel, inhumane or degrading (The United Nations, 2015). On a prison visit, Charles Dickens (1842), reflected that solitary confinement is a “slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain... immeasurably worse than any torture of the body”. The practice of solitary confinement as a punitive method has been controversial for at least the last 150 years due to its link to psychological harm (Smith, 2006). This was demonstrated by The Prison Reform Trust and Dr Sharon Shalev who named the common elements of segregation (social isolation, a lack of activity, and a loss of autonomy) associated with anxiety, depression, anger, difficulty in concentration, insomnia, and self-harm. They found that half of segregated prisoners interviewed experienced

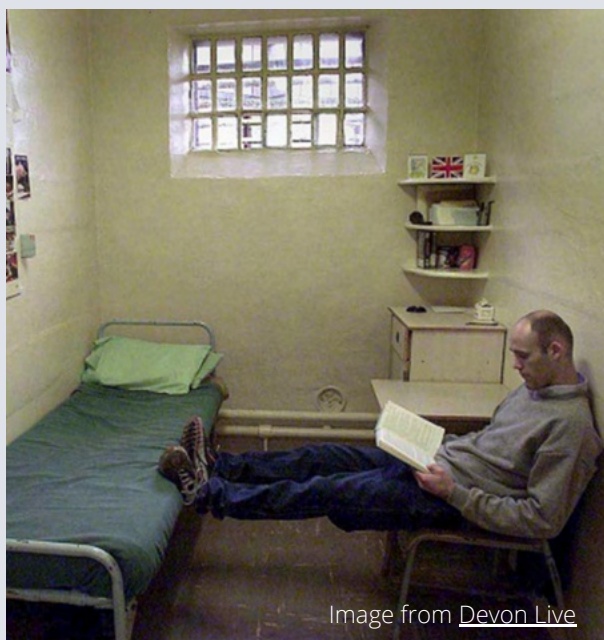


Image from [Devon Live](#)

three or more of these symptoms (Shalev and Edgar, 2016). Furthermore, those with pre-existing mental health problems are more susceptible to the negative consequences of segregation and are more likely to be put into solitary confinement (Arrigo & Bullock, 2008), creating the potential for a negative spiral. Therefore, while the use of solitary confinement has been debated for many years, perhaps the pandemic has brought public attention to its existence, hardship and ethics, and has shone a spotlight on debates surrounding detainees' civil rights.



Image from [The New Yorker](#)

“
Slow and daily
tampering with the
mysteries of the brain...
immeasurably worse
than any torture of the
body. ”

-Charles Dickens

To conclude, the extreme isolation which has occurred in prisons since March 2020 has provided the quasi setting to demonstrate the need for stimulation, social support, and future certainty for the maintenance and improvement of mental health, which is absent during commonplace solitary confinement. This calls into question the morality of solitary confinement. It is also clear that more research is urgently required to understand the mental consequences of the regime changes and develop helpful and realistic strategies to balance prisoners' mental and physical health and public safety.

DEATH ROW:

Does its psychological effects make it unconstitutional?

By Holly Caffyn

Death row is the term used to describe the place in which people found guilty of a capital crime, and sentenced to execution, reside. The only first world, western country to still utilize the death penalty is the USA. Between a lengthy trial and sentencing (to ensure that those executed are guilty beyond reasonable doubt), and the appeals process, the average US death row inmate spends 264 months on death row (US Department of Justice, 2021). The process of spending an average of 22 years in isolation awaiting one's execution would undoubtedly cause emotional trauma. This article aims to determine whether the psychological effects of residing on death row in the USA are so severe that it renders the process inhumane.

The American constitution does not allow for the infliction of cruel and unusual punishment of prisoners. However, it has been argued that death row violates this element of the constitution. So, how inhumane are the conditions of death row? In the US, death row inmates are held in single cells, which are visited by staff every 15 minutes. They are allowed 2 hours of recreation time 6 days a week and three 1 hour no contact visits a week (Armstrong, 2017). This is significantly harsher than prisoners serving a life sentence. Spending 22 hours in a prison cell, with little means of entertainment or opportunity for growth is arguably inhumane, and even more so with the addition of awaiting one's own execution. In 1989, the European court of human rights agreed that the poor



Image from [The Intercept](#)

“ In the US, death row inmates are held in single cells, which are visited by staff every 15 minutes. They are allowed 2 hours of recreation time 6 days a week and three 1 hour, no contact visits a week (Armstrong, 2017) ”



Image from [The New York Times](#)

conditions of Virginia's death row should mean that fugitives cannot be extradited to US unless the US agreed they would not be executed (Salzman, 2005). This demonstrates that the death penalty is not in line with other western countries standards of human rights and poses the question: How can the death penalty be adequate for the US?

The death row phenomenon is defined as the harmful effects of death row conditions, while death row syndrome is the manifestation of psychological illness that can occur because of the death row phenomenon (Harrison and Tamony, 2010). Although this phenomenon is not acknowledged in the DSM, the supreme court have acknowledged it in some decisions. Some supreme court judges have cited death row phenomenon theory as support for the ethical issues of death row, however others have argued that the prolonged stay on death row is due to inmates appealing and prolonging their own stay. This can be evidenced in the case of Gary Gilmore, who was executed less than a year after sentencing as he waived his right to an appeal process (Dorius, 1981). Critically, this was in 1977 and the process of death row has been significantly prolonged since then.

It has been argued that solitary conditions are a form of psychological torture (Shalev, 2008), which is supported by the fact that one third of inmates in solitary conditions have a serious mental disorder (Haney, 2009). This forms support for the death row phenomenon theory, as it shows that death row does have a psychological effect on inmates. This is further supported by the suicide rates of death row inmates: 133 per 100,000 death row inmates commit suicide (Tartaro and Lester, 2015), which is 6x that of the rest of the prison population and 10x that of the general population. Although the case of Gary Gilmore can be used to evidence the fact that the death row sentence may be self-prolonged by the inmate through appeals, the case can also be used to evidence the unethical nature of death row. Gilmore was one of 145 prisoners between the deinstitutionalisation of the death penalty in 1976 to 2017 who waived their rights to appeal in order

to avoid the prolonged wait on death row (Blume, 2004). The fact that 145 people believed that death was a more desirable option than staying on death row is telling of the conditions faced by death row inmates. This view may be problematic for prisoners to hold as 185 death row inmates have been exonerated of all charges and removed from death row since 1973 (Tondreau, Phillips, Holmquist, 2015). This means that prisoners taking the stance that death is better than a stay on death row results in less time and appeals to potentially exonerate them leading to a higher likelihood of false convictions. A study found that the psychological effect of death row became more severe the longer the inmate was on death row, and this was regardless of race, sex, and childhood experiences (Garrison, 2008). This uses an objective measure to demonstrate the prevalence of the death row phenomenon regardless of outside factors.

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One third of inmates in solitary conditions have a serious mental disorder (Haney, 2009).”

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence implying that the death row phenomenon and death row syndrome are a genuine effect of death row. The conditions in death row lead to psychological issues unparalleled to any other prison sentences and are so poor that 145 people in 41 years deemed death a more desirable option. The evidence suggests that the unethical conditions of death row lead to such severe psychological damage that it is cruel and unusual punishment and therefore violates the US constitution. The psychological damage could be minimised by reducing the average time an inmate spends on death row, however this would leave less time for appeals and for more information to present itself leading to a higher amount of false convictions and unjust deaths. Taking this into consideration, reducing the time inmates spend on death row does not seem feasible, but providing mental health professionals equipped to reduce or treat death row trauma might be.



The representation of inmate mental health in prison documentaries

BY JESSICA HODGSON

It's safe to say that recently there has been increasing interest in true crime, serial killer, and prison documentaries, with many new documentaries/series premiering on TV and streaming services each year. The spike in popularity has ultimately seen greater public education and insight into the prison/criminal justice system. While no singular documentary is devoted to the discussion of inmate mental health, this is a topic which inevitably is a crucial part of these programmes. Here I will discuss how inmate wellbeing is portrayed and therefore perceived by the public in a select few (of the many!) prison documentaries out there.

While technically a film, but still a worthwhile contender, *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (2015) is a re-telling of the infamous Zimbardo study from the 1970s. While this may be heavily dramatised, it is an eye-opening watch to see how the shocking results we have all most likely read about may have played out for the actual participants at the time. Ultimately, *The Stanford Prison Experiment* provides a chilling glimpse into how the mentality of those in prison is affected on an individual level - no two participants react the same, for example how 'Prisoner #8612' is depicted as becoming increasingly disturbed and emotionally unstable as days passed. Viewers can easily put themselves in the shoes of the 'participants'; the concept of everyday people which viewers likely relate to being put into the prison environment encourages awareness of how it must feel for this to be a daily routine within the simulated prison. Despite this, it is still notable that this film shows a prominent gender and cultural bias, and is not entirely realistic due to being based on an artificial prison environment.

Inside the World's Toughest Prisons (2016-2021) is a Netflix docuseries where each episode follows daily life for inmates from different prisons around the world, thoroughly capturing the cultural differences within prison life. This series approaches each prison from a neutral perspective, as the series journalist Raphael Rowe enters the facility to receive the same treatment as other inmates. Viewers see from the inside how factors such as harsh environments, living

conditions, and prison gang culture affects inmates around the world. Raphael carries out interesting 1-1 interviews that reveal how inmates each feel differently towards the crimes committed, and how each deal with prison life differently. These interviews reveal how some inmates struggle to live with the tough conditions, while others become emotionally numb to it, with one commonality being that prison staff and systems in general aren't doing enough to change this. For example, in one particular episode, inside footage showed that solitary confinement was still in use and the negative impact this has on inmates mental health. Inside the World's Toughest Prisons is a fascinating series that is a worthwhile watch; its extensive coverage of different prison facilities around the world proves very useful for public awareness of how inmates are affected by the system.

Ross Kemp Behind Bars: Inside Barlinnie (2017) provides insight into the UK prison system and how inmates in the UK are treated. Similar to Inside the World's Toughest Prisons, the system is viewed from an unbiased perspective; we see the positive and negative effects on the wellbeing of different individuals within the prison. For example, Ross Kemp speaks about how humiliating and frightening the process of arriving in prison can be, with only a brief mention of the wellbeing checks prisoners receive on arrival. There are raw interviews throughout which provide a balance between inmates that have positively learnt from the prison experience and emotional impact of their crimes, and alternatively those who appear unaffected by guilt/regrets, claiming they cannot be rehabilitated. These interviews were quite shocking to watch, but are extremely important for

public education of the fact that these inmates are real people with real emotions who are all impacted differently by the actions of their past. This documentary captures the connection between the prison experience and mental health impact particularly well, for example how tough prison gang rules intimidate certain individuals, and how drug use in prison is punished in ways similar to confinement by denying inmates any social interaction. Despite this, there is recurrent focus on how much each inmate costs the taxpayer and their monetary value, which can be harmful for the public perception of inmates by playing into stereotypes and ignoring their rights and wellbeing.

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There are raw interviews throughout which provide a balance between inmates that have positively learnt from the prison experience and emotional impact of their crimes, and alternatively those who appear unaffected by guilt/regrets, claiming they cannot be rehabilitated.

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It is important to remember that while these documentaries were extremely interesting and eye-opening to watch, there is much more to learn surrounding this topic, and had I chosen different programmes to watch, the overall take-homes would be very different. Overall, whilst many prison documentaries focus on the prison experience as a whole, many are taking steps in the right direction to provide a greater focus on the mental health impact the prison system has on inmates.



THE FASCINATION WITH TRUE CRIME: Understanding the 'bad guys'

By Marysia Witczak

"In general people are drawn into the darker sides of life. Within regard to why people are so fascinated by serial killers, mass murder and violent crime, it could be that deep inside everyone is the desire to take out ones anger and frustration upon someone else. Man can become violent and beast like in a moments time. Concerning evil, perhaps everyone has a potential, under the right conditions and circumstances, to do terrible, horrendous things. People want to understand why."

- David Berkowitz (Bonn, 2014)

Although the interest in serial murder can be traced back as far as 1888, when Jack the Ripper become somewhat of a celebrity, the passion for true crime still seems to be growing. Since year 2000, eleven different productions were released about the life of Ted Bundy, three of them being created in 2019. Among books, movies and tv shows infamous names monopolise on the murderabilia market. The exchange of art work, weapons, clothing and many other artifacts previously owned by serial murderers is in high demand despite ethical concerns (Bonn, 2014). So, is there any truth to David Berkowitz's claims? Does the fascination with serial crime truly come from the need to confront our inner demons or can this phenomenon be explained by curiosity?

Chilling fairy-tales for adults

The children's tale Hansel and Gretel follows two frightened children through the forest right into the gingerbread house owned by a cannibalistic witch. Going one step further, one can recall a story about Little Red Riding Hood. A young girl

manipulated by an old wolf, who tried to enjoy a two course meal made out of her and the grandmother. What do these seemingly cheerful stories have in common, besides the morbid plot? Both have a happy ending, leaving kids uplifted and hopeful that the good always triumphs. As we grow up the fairy-tale and fictional characters become based in our reality. Media are more likely to cover the story of a murder or kidnaping of a young girl – just like in the Red Riding Hood- therefore creating the skewed

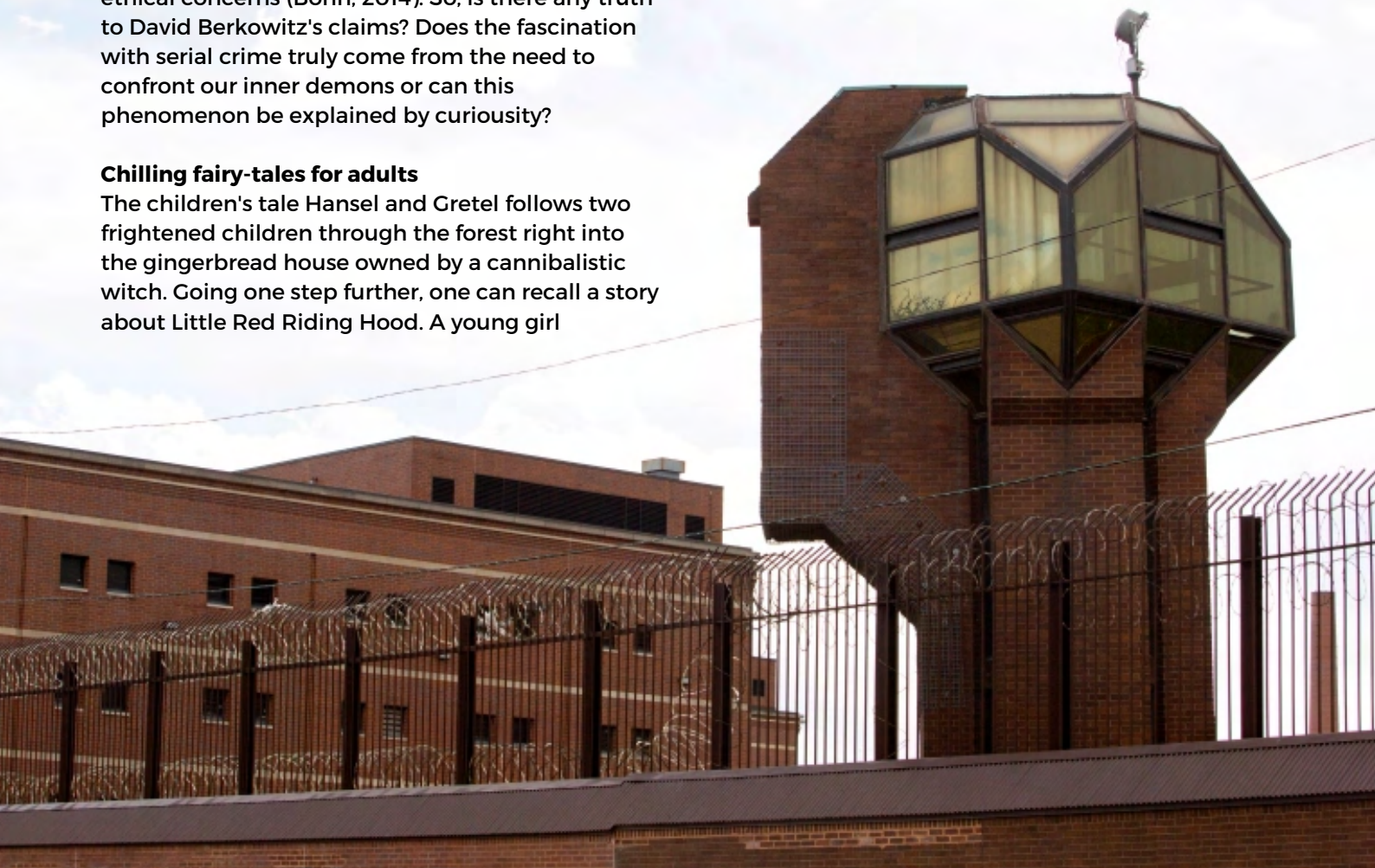


image of the crime reality (Bonn, 2014).

Additionally, the coverage based on stereotypes and exaggerated language, allows the line between fiction and reality to be blurred (Thomas & et al, 1977). Therefore, crime shows, just like old fairy-tales, reassure us that good wins at the end, while keeping us entertained.

The devil you know is better than the devil you don't

Studies have shown that horror movies can reduce feelings of anxiety, allowing audiences to live through their fear in a safe environment (Clasen et al., 2020). Could the same formula be applied to the crime shows phenomenon? The short answer is: most likely yes. Driven by curiosity and fear while watching crime series, we can get familiar with the problem. It can be argued that horror movies affect our body similarly to sport, by activating our flight or fight response, followed by a feeling of relief and accomplishment (Clasen et al., 2020). From the safe distance of our couch, we are allowed to live through the horrors and gain control over our fears and nightmares. Just like in exposure therapy, re-watching the crime shows desensitizes our emotional response to violence, but does not affect our empathy (Thomas & et al, 1977). Additionally, the adrenaline rush experienced during the show can be addictive. Crime shows give us the opportunity to unconsciously prepare for the worst.

Comprehend the incomprehensible

Gruesome murders and unremorseful criminals sparks a curiosity to understand the incomprehensible. Such behaviours are distant from our own, so we struggle to find the answer to how and why the tragedies have happened. The puzzling mystery of a criminal mind keeps us hooked on the crime stories, wishing we could finally understand the inner working of the brain (Bonn, 2014). Not only do the horrifying acts shock and bewilder, but also might pose questions for and challenge our moral systems (Bonn, 2014). Sociological approach says that crime helps to define boundaries in the society, and so the law defines the limits of acceptable behaviour (Lauderdale, 1976). Serial killers might be so fascinating because they are one of us, yet due to horrendous acts, they become an outcast. They provide an escape from our own lives

Is crime glorified?

There might be more uplifting side to our fascination. Criminologist Oriana Binik quoted in a BBC article says that such stories allow us to empathize with the victims as well as self-reflect on the moral actions. The literature is divided by the evidence on how the violence in the media affects society. Studies have shown that way sexual violence is portrayed in television influences audience response (Hust et al., 2015). Tv can serve an educational purpose, showing that after being exposed to sexual assault stories through media, the acceptance for not only sexual assault myths but also the bystander effect decreased (Hust et al., 2015).

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The majority of research conducted on the effects of violence in the media is based on video games in teenagers. The generalization of those studies is questionable. However even then video game violence is highlighted to be only one of the factors affecting real life behaviour in high risk individuals (Kaplan, 2012).

Does that mean that Berkowitz was right in his claim to why we are drawn to serial murder? Thankfully most of the evidence contradict the statement of humans having a hidden dark side and desires to take out the anger on others. Although escapism does plays a role in our interest, true crime series also provide comfort, allowing us to confront our fear in the controlled setting. True crime stories can trigger two systems: the fear-based flight or fight response and the dopamine system. But more than that, they allow us to discover something new about the human condition.

Psychology in Action

THE SUPPORT AVAILABLE FROM
KYRA

ISSUE 16



Image from [Better Help](#)

ABOUT

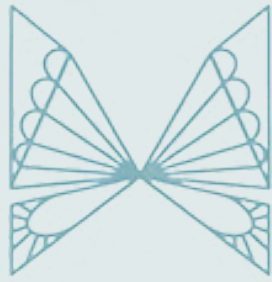
Kyra Women's Project
inspiration and beginnings



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SUPPORT

The support Kyra can offer to
York residents



kyra women's
project

By Hannah Allison

Understand the real cost to society of domestic abuse and isolation and meet a charity at the forefront of supporting women with change.

The economic and social costs of domestic abuse Research Report 107 (Oliver, Alexander, Roe and Wlasny, 2019) estimates the social and economic cost for victims of domestic abuse in 2016/17 in England and Wales to be approximately £66 billion.

The average unit cost of a domestic abuse victim is calculated at £34,015. The largest element of domestic abuse cost is the physical and emotional harm suffered by the victims themselves (£47 billion), accounting for 71% of all estimated costs of domestic abuse. The next highest cost is for lost output relating to time lost at work and reduced productivity afterwards [£14 billion (Oliver, Alexander, Roe and Wlasny, 2019)].

Whilst this research contains a formulaic assessment of reduction in quality of life, it fails to account for the psychological impact of emotional abuse, such as controlling and coercive behaviour, and financial abuse. The study recognises this as a key limitation and strongly suggests any future updates to this research review the available literature to establish whether these impacts can be included.

In order for such information to be recorded it is necessary to connect meaningfully with women who have experienced abuse and isolation and gather relevant data. The innovative work done by Kyra Women's Project offers an opportunity to explore some of these information gaps and

provide, not only a more robust insight into the impact, but also a best practice pathway to support women in their ongoing journey.

The Kyra Women's project is an innovative charity, based in the heart of York, with one clear aim: to help women be the person they were always meant to be.

Kyra was founded in 2013, when founder Yvonne Copley became aware that, after any intervention or when people are feeling vulnerable and alone, there is a need for support.

Following research and meetings with a range of organisations in York, Yvonne learned that many women had to wait a considerable length of time to receive the specialist intervention and support they desperately needed. This occurred at a time when they were vulnerable, often isolated and at risk of making poor decisions. In addition, a lack of support following formal specialist treatments diminished their effectiveness of primary intervention and outcomes.

Kyra Women's Project began as a support centre for women, run by women, providing encouragement, companionship, information, training, and importantly, a sense of belonging.

Kyra supports women to help overcome challenges and make change in their lives.





A safe and welcoming space for women across York

Be the person you were always meant to be

It acts as a support group to prevent a relapse in behaviour and develop new habits.

Kyra's vision is to provide non-judgmental support and information to all women. Whatever their reason for seeking help, Kyra recognises that women face challenges in their lives that are distinct from those of men. Their services are tailored to support women to make the changes they need, at their own pace. They achieve this by focusing on five objectives

- To provide a safe, non-judgemental environment for women
- To promote equality and inclusion
- To address social isolation and develop sustainable support networks for women
- To improve well-being outcomes for children and families
- To develop partnerships with statutory, voluntary and private sector services to meet the needs of women and the community

Now in its eighth year, Kyra Women's Project has 1300 members across all age groups and ethnic backgrounds. During the 2020 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, Kyra's team of volunteers supported 346 women every week with 22 different remote activities including classes, counselling and check in telephone calls, keeping women connected at a time when the impact of isolation could have been devastating for them.

Operating with a small team of paid staff and a cohort of volunteers, Kyra Women's Project demonstrates the value in supporting women who have lost confidence in their own abilities through isolation, vulnerability or abuse and the feedback from women who are members of the project supports this. Women's feedback demonstrates the power of reaching in when people may find it hard to reach out for support.

"I've found it really beneficial to talk to someone about the things that troubled me over lockdown. I've found it inspiring, I've done lots of artwork... I'm starting to feel better in my mental health... I feel a lot stronger."

The range of activities and services on offer demonstrates Kyra's commitment to meet women 'where they are' and support them to get 'where they want to be'. With a variety of classes and activities covering a diversity of subjects including Spanish, Yoga, Art, poetry, and Gardening, there is also access to counselling and programmes to build self-esteem and recover from domestic violence and trauma.

“ Their services are tailored to support women to make the changes they need, at their own pace. ”

Kyra is also a delivery partner for the Action Towards Inclusion Programme (ATI) which supports those furthest away from the labour market to progress closer to or into employment.

Kyra understands the value of collaboration and works with other organisations such as MIND and IDAS to create robust support pathways to help women be the person they were always meant to be.

To find out more about Kyra please visit www.kyra.org.uk/rg.uk, email contact @kyra.org.uk or call 01904 632332. Please quote SWIRL 11.

Interview Exclusive

WITH FIONA SWEENEY, A TRAINEE CLINICAL
PSYCHOLOGIST

ISSUE 16



ACADEMIC AND CAREER BACKGROUND

How Fiona found her place in
forensic psychology.



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TOP TIPS

Fiona's top tips for any
aspiring forensic
psychologists.



INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

"NO DAY IS THE SAME- YOU EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED"

Naomi Walker and Molly Howarth interview Fiona Sweeny, a forensic psychologist in training.

It would be great if you could introduce yourself to the PsychOut readers. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I'm Fiona and I'm currently a trainee forensic psychologist. I've just submitted my final piece of work, so I'm waiting for my results next month! Originally, I did my undergraduate degree at Hull University in 2011. During that time, I had lots of volunteering experiences. I worked for Mind in two different volunteering capacities - I did befriending/mental health support and I also worked as part of the Don't Look Back Project, piloted in Hull, that aimed to support people who were in custody and needed more of a support network upon release. Here, my role was to make connections with those currently in custody leading up to their release, and think about strategies and support they required, and then work with them upon release on a weekly basis to navigate more practical support. I also had other volunteer projects as well, as a befriender in a learning

disability service, supporting the organisation with its positive behavioural support strategy. When I graduated university I became a healthcare worker in the crisis team, supporting people presenting an acute mental health crisis. I then got a job in the Prison Service and worked as an Intervention's Facilitator delivering different offending behaviour programmes to men convicted of sexual offences. That's really when I decided to go into forensic psychology. I took a career break to study my masters at the University of York, then started my training in forensic psychology within a medium secure hospital. A career in forensics is intense so I think it's important to have other focuses and interests. I'm a massive foodie but also love the gym- it's a good de-stress. I also have a horse who I've had for 20 years who takes up a lot of my time.

What was it that first captured your interest in forensic psychology?

It wasn't something I was particularly interested in when I



Image from the Financial Times

was studying my undergraduate. I was very interested in clinical psychology because I feel that it was almost pushed and focused upon more. I was very focussed on mental health. Both my mum and dad are doctors and my dad had a particular interest in mental health so I feel like through conversations with him an interest was sparked. But it was only really when I saw the job advertised in the prison service and I started working there that my interest began. I think that job was really challenging but there were lots of rewards. There are a lot of misunderstandings in forensics and a lot of areas that continue to develop and need to develop. It's a really good area if you're interested in research and service development but also the clinical side of things and supporting people.

What is everyday life like as a forensic psychologist?

With forensics, no day is the same- you expect the unexpected. You can go in with a clear diary and schedule and it can go out of the window within 10 minutes of opening your emails as it is very fast paced. My day-to-day work is all about delivering therapies to people, conducting risk assessments, and providing consultancy to other professionals

This may consist of trying to tap into functions that could be used to challenge someone's aggression, particularly aggression linked to trauma. Alongside that though we also deliver training sessions to staff to promote their wellbeing. This could be debriefs following incidents that have happened at work, or reflective practice to encourage professionals to think about the impact of the job and their reactions to this.

From what I've read, it seems you got your university project published. Why did you decide to publish your research project and how did you go about this?

My research project was looking at prison officer's experiences of suicide related behaviour in custody. This was a very applied piece of research that was conducted within the prison service. I think one of the big things that drove me to publish is that it's something anyone and everyone should strive for when doing research. From a student's perspective, research is something I used to dread but I also think it's a privilege to do research. When finding things out, we need to share amongst the wider professional community because that's how we learn. For me there was this sense that it was a duty to

as people had invested a lot of time taking part in my research and it was an area where people exposed their vulnerabilities with the intent that we could develop more ways to support staff in forensic settings. Within forensic services, professionals are exposed to a range of challenging behaviours and traumatic events so vicarious trauma amongst professionals is high. I don't think it's paid attention to as much as it should be, especially in the prison officer culture because there's a macho culture where you don't talk about your vulnerabilities. I think it was really important to publish, drawing people's attention to the implications of practice and how that could change within the prison service so prison officers are better supported.

As to how I went about it, I worked very closely with my supervisor to get it published. The first step was to research journals. It's really important to get the most appropriate journal for the piece of research you're doing. For example, some journals won't publish qualitative research as they are quantitative focused, and others have specific psychological areas of interest so you need to find a journal that matches your research to have a good chance of being published. Also, a lot of

journals will have guidance around formatting. For example, dissertations are 8,000-10,000 words but journals will not publish that- 5000 words is generally the limit. This means you must rewrite, which I found the hardest part of the process. Mine was qualitative research, so this was challenging because I wanted to keep as much depth as I could whilst trying to be as concise as possible. Once submitted, they may reject the article if they don't feel like it is suitable or if there are major flaws within it. They may make minor amendments or they may publish it without any changes, which I'd say is generally rare. Mine came back with minor amendments like changing the title and providing more explanation in the results. I think it's a process but it's definitely worthwhile and like I said at the beginning, anyone doing research should consider that because we do research for a purpose and the purpose is to really expand the evidence base.

What advice would you give to students who want to publish projects they work on with the university?

I would say gain support from your supervisor and work very closely with them. They are probably the most experienced in terms of getting research published, so they will know what is publishable, what isn't, and give you advice and tips on that. I think my main piece of advice is to emphasise how your

research really builds on past research and adds to the evidence base. Make this argument very clear at the beginning so there is a unique selling point to your research. Also, when I read papers, and I can potentially be quite biased as a clinician, what I am really looking for is practical implications. Have that within your research paper- what you have found but also how this relates to practice in terms of a forensic setting. What might we have to consider as part of our service development? Having the confidence to actually put your research out there and get some feedback from peer reviewers is an invaluable experience. Even if the research isn't published, you're still giving that process a go.

What has made forensic psychology the most worthwhile/rewarding pathway for yourself?

I find working in applied psychology generally, not just in forensics, an absolute privilege because individuals are letting you into their lives and are putting their trust in you. Whilst conducting therapy with individuals and working alongside professionals, they are coming on a journey and willing to learn alongside and reflect with you, which is a really vulnerable position for someone to be in. The other thing that I think is worthwhile about forensics is that there is always development and changes needed in terms of

considering trauma, for example, and how that interplays into offending behaviour and mental wellbeing. I think as psychologists, we bring a unique set of skills that can help to advise and guide that process.

Are there any particular groups within society that you are interested in studying in the future?

Most of my experiences have been with adult men [in prisons], however in my current role, I also work with women, which has been something that I had to adapt to but has still been a positive experience. A part of me wants to explore adolescents because I feel like it's a very challenging time in terms of someone's neurodevelopment, and I feel it is where real shifts can be made. However, my focus at the minute is to work and develop a greater understanding of trauma and how it interplays within the criminal justice system. A lot of individuals that I work with find their diagnosis quite oppressive and stigmatising, so I don't tend to use a diagnostic model outside of work in terms of systems and people being detained under the mental health act. I actually want to understand what has happened to that person and not what is 'wrong' with them. I also find that trauma is something huge within forensics, so I want to develop my knowledge even further on how it impacts an



individual's neurodevelopment. This is especially important as individuals often have adverse childhood experiences, like repeated incidents of interpersonal trauma from a very young age.

What are some common misconceptions about forensic that you would really like to change?

A common misconception about forensics and the criminal justice system more generally is that punishment works. This misconception really annoys me because what we know is that harsh prison sentences and the current prison system is contributing to a lot of difficulties in terms of re-traumatisation and reoffending rates. When you look at countries like Norway and Denmark who operate a very different forensic system, their reoffending rate is miniscule in comparison, and I think we can learn a lot from them. This misconception stems from the belief that giving harsh prison sentences to minor offences will deter people from crime, which statistics show doesn't work. Something that has become more apparent to me is that a lot of offending behaviour is thought to result from an inability to regulate emotions, leading to impulsivity and lack of thinking through the consequences. However, there is also a population of people that are too controlling of their emotions and utilise this control to cope. I am trained in radically open dialectical behaviour therapy, which targets individuals who have maladaptive levels of control. These people often excel at inhibiting and controlling their emotions, delaying gratification, and planning. However, they are often very rule-governed and at times experience social ostracism. This can then result in other difficulties including offending behaviour when an individual may use their superior capabilities of control to plan an offence after someone may have, in their opinion, violated their rules.

Do you have any tips for anyone who wants to pursue a career within forensic psychology?

My main advice would be to gain as much experience as possible and not to pigeon-hole yourself into what is deemed to be the most desirable experience. Competition for assistant psychologist posts is huge and because people strive for this position they are unaware of other positions that could also provide valuable experience. I think gaining as much experience as you can in terms of volunteering, working with different age ranges, and populations will all benefit you in the long run. Viewing everything as a learning opportunity and using reflective practice as a practitioner is also important as it is something you have to do throughout your training and in any applied training in psychology.

I recommend also thinking about why you want to get into your desired career; question and reflect on your own values and what you

think you would bring to psychology and forensics which will enable you to decide whether that is the right career for you.

The third thing I will mention is to welcome feedback from your supervisor at university or volunteer placement. I have found forensic psychologists to be very friendly and willing to help others out, so be open to having those conversations as this is where the learning takes place. It [forensics] is a challenging profession as you are working in environments that can be very fast paced. This is why doing your own research and figuring out why you want to go down the forensics path is important.

If you are interested in a career in forensic psychology please see the [British Psychological Society](#) guide for more information.

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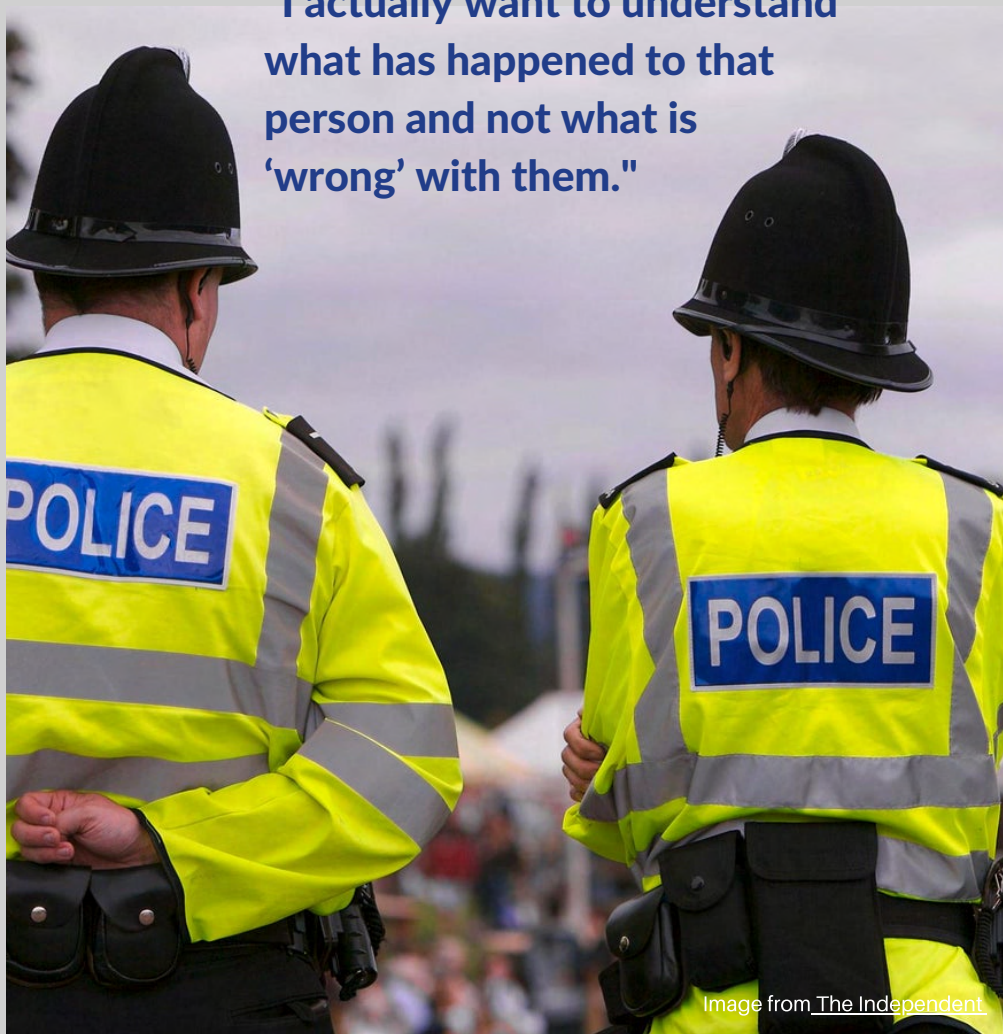


Image from [The Independent](#)

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