

Street Weapons Commission – Liverpool

Bob Croxton

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Well hello Bob you're the Chair of the Criminal Information Bureau Limited of Liverpool. But in fact you've had an interesting personal life. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Bob Croxton

That's an understatement. As you said my name is Bob Croxton I'm the Chairman of the CIB. It was an idea conceived in a prison cell. I was on my second custodial sentence. And I made a conscious decision to turn my life around. And how I tackled my issue was I started to write. And I was in a really unique place. It's called Liverpool Prison. One of the most densely populated and place of despair to be quite honest with you. And I just started to write. I've got no guidance. I don't know what I'm doing. I hadn't written for the best part of 25 years. Probably since I was last at school. And I was talking to a unique breed of people. They were called criminals. And what I found out at the really early stage is how little we actually understand about crime and its consequences. And I just carried on writing.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

You mean we as people who committed crime?

Bob Croxton

Yeah. In fact as you say if you throw a pebble in a stream it's the ripples and the effect. And I kept myself on a rehab wing. It's not that I had a drug related. I just wanted to actually see the impact of what I'd actually personally done myself. I spent 18 months on that wing. And I learned more of them people than I've learnt in my life. and on the back of that I went to Sudbury

Prison and I put a business plan together and with me being a Scouser we have an unusual gene in our body and we are cheeky you know so and so's and I pitched the idea to the business community. And I raised a substantial amount of money and I came out of prison. I've been running three and a half years now. I've got nine members of staff. I've got the worlds biggest criminal information website. It's now developing each and every day. And I literally do look

after 80 thousand people in prison. All my market research is done inside prison. I go in and visit people. And I speak to mums and dads every day in prison and ask them about their kids getting involved in crime. And they all say. If there's anything you can do to help do it. And that's what I've been doing for the last three and a half years.

Commissioner

So you weren't inside for petty crime you were heavy duty, drug dealing, nasty piece of work gangster type.

Bob Croxton

Yeah. I won't use the word gangster. The definition of a gangster is a guy that was an honourable man in the community and he was the type of person that you could go to and he could get things done for you many years ago. I was a drug dealer and they're not the type of people you go to to get things done in the community. They're basically in my eyes the people that are bringing our communities down. So was I a gangster? No. Was I a drug dealer? Yeah I was.

Commissioner

What was a key moment? You said you started to write. Because of course many of your contemporaries can't write. That's one problem.

Bob Croxton

My key moment was simple as this. I landed in the very same cell I'd left some 14 months ago and I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't actually believe. I thought there'd be an infrastructure put together for me when I left prison and it wasn't there. It really, really wasn't. I'm in the process of trying to put that infrastructure together. I do try to deter people from a life of crime. So to actually land back in that cell 14 months later and I was looking at a 15 year jail sentence. And I thought I can't do this. All I ever seen in front of me was a life of custodial sentences. So I made that decision myself to turn my life around and that's what I've done.

Commissioner

Tell us why you know one of your things is that you think that we should be much more punitive around punishment in terms of reducing gun and knife crime so one of your suggestion is ...

Bob Croxton

I mean again speaking to lots of people regarding crime, especially guns, I do a very, very successful outreach and I take a very hard hitting no frills fact based account of crime into many different classrooms and training sensors. And I have a really good success rate. And these kids actually think about what I'm saying. You know and we do have an impact. And I discuss

gun crime at level with these kids. And I wrote an idea a long time ago about a slash gun crime. Something like 80% of all guns that are on the street are reactivated guns. They're not actually bought as in proper like a 9mm or something. It's actually a reactivated gun. And it takes a skill man to reactivate a gun. And a skilled man is basically an engineer and a decent engineer can earn seven to 800 pound a week. So why he needs to reactivate guns for a couple of hundred pound is just beyond me? So I thought to meself well there's the beginning of the answer to a problem. Tell every engineer in this country if they are caught reactivating guns they'll be given plus 40 years. Because if you're going to take a piece of metal that is

just a fancy looking piece of metalwork which is a gun and then reactive it to a killing machine then you should forfeit something for that and it should be a massive custodial sentence.

Commissioner

I have to say I have never heard of someone being caught for reactivating a gun. Is that something that people get caught for?

Bob Croxton

I was actually in prison with a guy who was actually done and the guy knocked me physically sick to be quite honest with you and I told him since and I tell him every time I see him. And his attitude was towards guns was I don't give an f. I said you're selling kids guns. He said I don't care I'm going to live in Spain. And he's gone to live in Spain. And he's left thousands of guns on our streets. And so I look at it this way. That man should have been given 40 year jail

sentence. He got given four years. And the way I look at it anyone who carries a gun should be given 35 years. Anyone who shoots anyone with a gun should be given life with no chance of parole. And for the mums and dads ...

Commissioner

INAUDIBLE ...

Bob Croxton

Whatever their age. And for the mums and dads who are hiding guns for 150 pound a week they'll get 35 years. And I'd do a six month gun amnesty. And I'd put it in every paper, on every radio station, and I'd say from x y and town these are the new rules. And I guarantee you will slash gun crime by half overnight.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

But you were a drugs dealer and the penalties for dealing in drugs are harsh.

Bob Croxton

Yes.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

It didn't stop you dealing in drugs though did it?

Bob Croxton

The first time I went to prison it was a three and half year jail sentence as I had license to do. And I didn't learn nothing I'll be quite honest with you. And I really thought when I come out there was gonna be a support package put in place. And I came out and the probation service was so overwhelmed they can't deal with it. And I couldn't get work. I'll be quite honest with you.

I just couldn't get a job. I've now got a drug conviction and I struggled. And within a matter of months I was back dealing with people. Now although I've never actually fell out with anyone what I did was I completely removed myself from the people who were more enticing me to get back into that. So I made a whole life decision that I'm not going to associate with this

and I'm not going to do this and that's how I turned my life around. Prison is a punishment it's not a way forward. You have to make that decision within prison. So you can give them all the courses they want. You can give them everything. Prison is an inconvenience to an awful lot of people yeah. It's not a way of changing your life. you have to make that decision to change your life and if somebody has made that decision to change their life it's then for us to put the mechanism in place to make that work.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Mark I think you probably have a comment about that.

Mark

I could have millions of questions Bob. The one that I just pick up on what you said about the amnesty. I would agree with that. You know there needs to be definite significant amnesty all over the country really. But what you were talking about with the punishment and increasing the punishment it is all about punishment. What I would be sort of more prone to want to look at is

incentivising. You know what's in it for me to put it down because your profile of who you are a professional career criminal you're a rare breed you know in the British prison system. You know you're quite a rare breed and you made a choice. A lot of people, especially young people, don't make choices or if they do they're based on very narrow little alleys of choice available. So

the people that are caught up in it didn't make the choice I'm going to pick up a gun and shoot somebody. They've done it for a myriad of different reasons like the social sociological reasons which are different to you.

Bob Croxton

There's been guns in the UK for god knows how long. But what's actually happened is that someone has realised that they can make money from it now and there's still guns flooding onto the streets and what I'm saying is you have to put a policy on that that says you can't do this no more. there's lots of fantastic schemes out there to get kids back into training, into education, and into employment. They're all there. But these kids are not doing it because you've got somebody offering them 150 pound a week just to sit in the house and mind their gun. Well we have to take that away from that kid and put them into a job that'll give 150 to

200 pound a week rather than put them in the hands of the drug dealer or the gangster.

Commissioner

What you were talking about as a solution is a top down approach. But really shouldn't it be with like all the information we've got with sink estates, with Northern Ireland, it should be the bottom up approach you know what I mean where you change it from within.

Bob Croxton

There's no reason to tackle it from both ends Mark. You can tackle any problem whatever way you wish to do it but somebody in this country today is reactivating guns with machines and they're called skilled men. You have to stop that skilled man from reactivating that weapon.

Mark

But don't you think that we need to probably maybe look at them with a different type of law to most of the young people that get caught up?

Bob Croxton

But we could confuse it Mark all day long by adding more and more to it. It's a simple solution. Set us a rule in stone and these are the rules. And for those who fall foul of them rules have to pay that punishment. It's as simple as that.

Commissioner

But I mean in some ways you're a breath of fresh air. There's no touchy feely self esteem I feel your pain. You have that and you go away. Setting to one side the cost of that because it would be incredibly expensive.

Bob Croxton

Put the price on the cost of life.

Commissioner

Well that's what policy makers have to do. We have to do that. Is it worth sending a 12 year old to jail for 40 years and that's going to cost 300 million quid or whatever. But in your research behind your business here have you been to America or have you been to other countries where they have punitive three stage.

Bob Croxton

I'm banned out of America.

Commissioner

Is it evidence based that this works?

Bob Croxton

I'm banned out of America because I got two drug convictions so the answer to that question is no. I can't. I've got drug convictions. It's very, very difficult to even get a holiday out anywhere because I've narrowed me own field of where I can go. And you know I can accept that. What kind of market research we've done. I do all my market research on the people that I speak

to. Yesterday I was with a group of 20 young lads and we were talking about knife crime and gun crime and a knife is just as dangerous as a gun right. So I talked to these people and we talk about the gangsters living down the end of the street that everyone fears because they know he's got access to guns. See you what I mean. So do I go to America? I don't need to go to America.

We don't need to. We've got some great policies here. This is what I'm saying. I'm always hearing this was conceived in America and this was done here and this was done there. We got some of the best policies in the world. We don't have to go anywhere else.

Commissioner

If you want to convince policy makers here to take a very radical sort of scorched earth approach it would worth looking at would it not the three strikes and you're out? Has that had an effect in America on crime?

Bob Croxton

Let me explain where I am. It's took me three and a half years to get me where I am now. I'm only just passing break even point. And if you think my business has been easy. It hasn't. It's been the most difficult decision I've ever made in my life. Most of my community turned on me because they're very very unsure whether I'm a police informer or a grass or this. I've never told a tale on anyone in my life. And I still wouldn't to this day. But if I can help them.

Commissioner

Not even if it would save a life?

Bob Croxton

Sorry?

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Even if it would save a life?

Bob Croxton

I would actually intervene in every way I possibly could Mrs Booth and I'd do everything I could but as for going to the police I think actually the police, the Chief of Police Merseyside has ever had. He's probably one of the best in the country. I mean I admire that man for standing on our local television and declaring a war on all criminals. And I thought sounds good. And the

next day he put a ring of steel round Merseyside and took thousands of cars off the streets and as we speak there's probably another warrant getting issued today for another door to go in coz he's averaging three a week at the moment. The guy is doing what he said he was going to do. And he's gonna bring crime under control and he's doing a fantastic job. So as I say

going back to like you know I get called absolutely everything. I get called because I've gone straight in life you know you're working with the police. INAUDIBLE now in the Merseyside police have never opened their arms or embraced the CIB at all to this day and you know I can accept that.

Commissioner

Where is the evidence that will improve that if you put 12 year old in prison for having a gun for 30 years.

Bob Croxton

This is where I'm coming up to now. My business now I'm starting to become quite well-known and recognised and we've got a lot of people now stepping forward. Once you get past that three year stage and people say well you're not gonna go away there's big people coming along. That policy what I said with the guns is its rarity it's rawity. That's the idea. That's the concept

of the idea. To make that work I have to sit down with people like yourself and convince them how this is gonna work. I'm not saying you should be putting a 12 year old in for 35 years but what I'm saying is we have to look at this. you have to work on if you are caught bang to rights hiding a gun in your bedroom under your bed be prepared to forfeit the penalty and it could mean

35 years. There's not one 12 year old kid in this country that would mind that gun coz I tell you what I'd be searching my kids bedrooms.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

But is that really true? Because you had already got a conviction for drugs and you must have known for supplying drugs you know for no convictions at all four years is a serious penalty. So you also knew that the next time it happened you were facing and you didn't tell us what you were sentenced to the second time?

Bob Croxton

It was drugs again.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

For how many years?

Bob Croxton

I got a three and a half years and then I got a five year sentence. Not long after.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

So you knew again you were facing.

Commissioner

If it was 30 years are you saying you wouldn't have done it?

Bob Croxton

Oh no.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

But you knew you were going to go into prison again and it didn't stop you.

Bob Croxton

Quite simple. There's an idea a solution to a massive problem that the UK has right. The first time I was in prison I don't mind going over it again. The first time I was in prison I left prison and there was no support mechanism put in place.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

I agree with you about that. There's no way of helping you leave that life behind.

Bob Croxton

What I tried to do is I'm trying to put them support mechanisms in place. We've set up a number of projects. I'll just run a quick project past you. I've set up what I call a two week intensive intervention project by where I take a group of ten young lads or ten young girls and I'm keeping them separate for no other reason that I'm taking them into prison. I don't wanna take a group of

young girls into a mainstream male prison. I don't wanna take a group of young lads into a female prison. And my job is to change their attitude towards crime and its victims over a two week period. We go through four outreaches and we also do four separate questionnaires and the questionnaires we can come back and judge whether um is

everything OK.

Commissioner

Carry on.

Bob Croxton

Sorry you can actually come back and judge on this questionnaire whether they're nil to low, low to medium, medium to high or a high risk of going into a life of offending. We also take them into long term cat b for a day. We give them a freedom and choices day. We give them a opportunities day. They have a restorative justice day and have a building and rendition even

and we do this over a two week period. Now with connections Greater Merseyside they've agreed to do key stage three which is to do the support service. I do key stage one. I'll change their attitudes to crime and its victims yeah. I do key stage two. I get them into education, employment or training. There's no one better in this country than the likes of me and Mark that can actually deliver these projects. So what we could potentially do is bring a group of ex offenders out, rehabilitated. Gone through a series of course. And they could come out and actually deliver these projects. So in effect if it did go across the country which is looking like it possibly could Mrs Booth, yeah, we could then put anywhere between two and two thousand ex offenders on leaving prison. Right. That's a massive proportion of the criminal population being taken to one side and given jobs and using our negatives as positives in these young lads and these girls going forwards. So there is. We are working on trying to fill that gap. Instead of coming out and going into a life of crime well I give you a job. I'll use your negative with these people. And let's try and deter these kids from going into a life of crime.

Commissioner

You're an example of if you've got when you come out of prison something that you can positively do that'll earn you an income then that'll work and that sounds fantastic. And I think one of the things we can take away and learn from. I guess you know the thing that perhaps the rest of the panel are questioning you about more is the stuff around the effectiveness of long term prison sentencing. And you know interestingly I know a number of people who've

had their doors kicked in regularly three or four times over a period of a few months because the police know that their kid is involved in some activity. But it hasn't actually changed the behaviour of the kid because it's distressed the parent. And what you're proposing is actually the

parent has some consequences for that. And I think there's some real difficulties with that because it isn't shown, in my experience, to work. That actually making that parent responsible for that ...

Bob Croxton

The biggest problem facing our kids on the streets today is guns. It's the biggest social problem that we've ever had. And all I'm saying it's like a draconian law for the draconian kind of crime. We need to tackle it and we need to tackle it hard. You can't mess around with guns.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

I was going to say what about drugs?

Bob Croxton

Well same with drugs Mrs Booth. It's a massive problem. But what I'm saying is most gangs are hanging round a gun. And they are. I talk to these kids every day. And no disrespect to who you are and where you stand but you're not on the same. I'm chatting to these kids. I'm going to next week to hard to reach areas in Liverpool and I go in there with no fear of any of these kids but I actually go in and talk about guns and they will openly tell me that they know where these guns are and what's going on. So to me I know drugs is a massive problem and it is a huge problem. There's lots of problems. The country's got lots of problems but one of the biggest ones is guns. There's kids around the local areas here 12, 13 and 14 can go and get access to a gun. 10 years ago this could never happen. When I was a former criminal I remember actually going to try and get a gun and I had to go through a series of questions. Lots of questions. These fellows were like what's it going to be used for? What's it about? And they wouldn't give it coz they had a bit of pride and respect in what they were doing. Now they haven't. It's completely different. But there's no boundaries to it anymore. So we got 12, 13 and 14 year old kids who haven't really got the mindset to understand what they're doing. And also I understand what you're saying over massive jail sentences but we have to educate

these. I see that as my job. I'll go and educate these. It cannot work. These engineers have to stop

reactivating these guns. These merciless criminals who have got a few quid should stop selling these guns to these kids. They should put a bit of honour in amongst into what they were doing. At one time there was pride in certain areas of crime and you couldn't buy these guns. Now they'll sell guns to anybody.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Bob I'm afraid we've come to the end of our time.

Bob Croxton

No problem at all.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

But anyway thank you and for also for showing that you can turn your life around.

Bob Croxton

Yeah OK thank you.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Thank you.