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You’re Not Just a Number: Experiences of the Key4Life Programme at HMP Fosse Way.

Dr Natasha Du Rose

Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society Working Paper Series

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Foreword

Since its launch in 2012, Key4Life has been committed to supporting young men in prison and those at risk of entering the criminal justice system to rebuild their lives and create positive futures.

When we first launched our innovative 7-Step Programme, it was a new and untested model within the rehabilitation landscape. We set out to address a persistent challenge within the justice system: the cycle of reoffending among young men who often face multiple barriers to change, including trauma, social exclusion, limited educational opportunities and little or no experience of employment.

Fourteen years later, Key4Life has grown into an established national programme, which has delivered 47 rehabilitation programmes and supported more than 3,000 participants both in custody and in the community. Throughout this period, the organisation has consistently demonstrated positive outcomes, particularly in reducing reoffending and improving access to employment, education and training.

Central to the Key4Life model is the belief that lasting behavioural change begins with emotional change. By helping participants address underlying trauma, build resilience and develop a sense of purpose, the programme supports individuals to make meaningful and sustained transitions away from crime.

This report presents independent research conducted by London Metropolitan University exploring the experiences of 46 men who participated in the Key4Life programme at HMP Fosse Way and within the community. The study provides valuable qualitative insight into participants' journeys, focusing particularly on the pre-release stage of the programme and the support provided through the gate into the community.

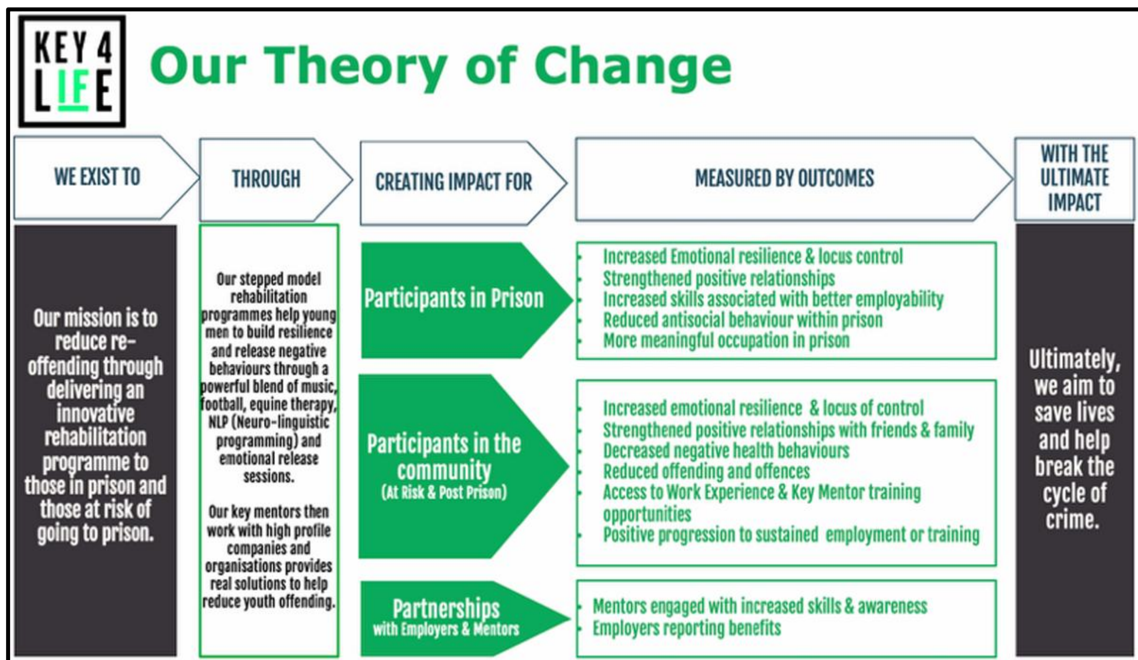
Highlighting evidence for transformation, desistance and prison safety, the study identifies 12 interconnected positive outcomes from participation with Key4Life, including: adoption of a prosocial identity, increased emotional resilience and confidence, changed mindset, improved behaviour and reduced violence, enhanced employability skills and economic contribution, and crucially - hope for the future.

The research underlines the profound emotional impact of the programme. Many participants described confronting and processing long-held trauma and pain, often for the first time, and developing a more hopeful and constructive vision of their future. Through mentoring, employability training and emotional resilience work, participants begin to see a clear roadmap for life after prison - one that centres on stable employment, positive relationships and a renewed sense of personal responsibility.

For many of the young men involved, this transformation represents a significant shift. A large proportion of Key4Life's programme participants have never had access to stable employment and have spent much of their lives caught in cycles of offending. Supporting these individuals to prepare for a different future - particularly

one centred around work, community and personal growth - is therefore transformational on both personal and societal levels.

This research provides an important opportunity to understand not only the outcomes of Key4Life's 7-Step Model but also the lived experiences of those participating in it. By documenting the emotional, psychological and practical changes that take place during the programme, the study contributes to a growing body of evidence demonstrating the value of holistic, trauma-informed and employment-focused rehabilitation programmes.



At a time when the UK justice system continues to face high levels of reoffending and increasing pressure on prison capacity, the findings of this report underline the importance of investing in approaches that support genuine rehabilitation. Key4Life is proud to have partnered with London Metropolitan University to bring forward this research and we hope it contributes meaningfully to the wider conversation about how best to support individuals leaving prison to build brighter futures and crime-free lives that positively contribute to society.

Executive Summary

Context and Challenge

The United Kingdom's prison system faces a crisis of capacity, safety, and effectiveness. In July 2024, Lord Chancellor Shabana Mahmood warned that "our prisons are broken… unsafe and catastrophically close to bursting at the seams" and argued that "our prisons today create better criminals, not better citizens." Prisons Minister James Timpson echoed this assessment, stating that "dangerously full prisons lead to more crime and more violence" and are "failing one of their most important functions- cutting crime."

The statistics bear out these warnings. Reoffending rates for those leaving custody are disproportionately high: children released from custody reoffend at 66.1%, compared to 22.2% for those receiving a caution, while adults released from short custodial sentences reoffend at 56.9% (Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board, 2025; Ministry of Justice, 2025b). At an average cost of £51,724 per prison place annually, despite substantial public investment, the system struggles to deliver rehabilitation, manage violence, or prepare individuals for successful reintegration. The result is a revolving door of reoffending that imposes enormous costs on victims, communities, and public services.

Against this backdrop, there is growing recognition that effective rehabilitation requires more than containment. It demands interventions that address the root causes of offending behaviour including disrupted education, fractured family relationships, limited employment prospects, and underdeveloped emotional and social skills. The Key4Life programme at HMP Fosse Way represents one such intervention. It is a relationship-based model combining emotional development, lived experience mentoring, and employer engagement. This research provides rigorous evidence of its impact.

Research Approach

This study was conducted with 46 men who participated in the Key4Life programme. The sample comprised 41 men serving custodial sentences at HMP Fosse Way (15 of whom were Key Mentors) and 5 men living in the community post-release (3 of whom were involved in programme delivery as Key Mentors). This design provided robust evidence by capturing perspectives from men at different stages of engagement with the programme, including those who had successfully reintegrated into the community.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and field observations conducted over an extended period of engagement with the prison and programme participants. Analysis was grounded in desistance theory and prison sociology, drawing on established frameworks from scholars including Maruna, McNeill, Giordano, Farrall, Liebling, and Crewe. The research examined how participation in Key4Life influenced participants' identities, relationships, behaviour,

and future orientation—factors consistently identified as central to the desistance process.

The study's qualitative design prioritised depth over breadth, enabling detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences and the mechanisms through which change occurred. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding complex social interventions where quantitative measures alone cannot capture the nuances of transformation.

Key Findings: 12 Interconnected Outcomes

The research identified twelve interconnected outcomes arising from participation in Key4Life. These are not isolated achievements but mutually reinforcing dimensions of change. Improved emotional resilience reduces violence. A changed mindset enables the adoption of a prosocial identity. Better communication strengthens family relationships. Hope and motivation drive engagement with employment. What emerges is a picture of holistic transformation where individual, relational, and institutional dimensions interact to support desistance.

Individual Transformation: Identity, Relationships, and Emotional Development

The Adoption of a Prosocial Identity: Perhaps the most significant outcome was the emergence of a new prosocial identity: one not defined by crime, survival, or the streets, but by care, authenticity, and responsibility. Through emotional reconnection, changed behaviour, and a supportive peer community, men began to see themselves differently and to imagine lives rooted in positive social roles. Crucially, participants described this not as total reinvention but as reconnection with a truer, earlier self. The programme helped men not simply to perform change but to internalise it.

Yasin described speaking at a Key4Life graduation attended by his family:

> “At my last graduation about a month ago, I spoke so confidently. Got up, gave a speech. I think there were over 100 people. My family was there, my partner was there, my brothers were there. They were so impressed; they'd never seen me in that light. They remember me as a 17-year-old coming to prison, being a little rebel, now they're seeing me as a man and standing up being who I want to be... My little brother said to me: 'After all these years, we're proud of you and it's lovely the changes you've made. We look up to you still.' That really resonated. He had a chance to see me in a different light before I come out” — Yasin, Key4Life Mentor

This identity transformation is central to desistance theory and represents a shift from "offender" to "someone who helps others." It is a reframing with profound implications for public safety and social reintegration.

Improved Relationships and Family Stability: Participants commonly described improvements in their relationships with family members, partners, and children. Through structured reflection and encouragement from facilitators and mentors,

many men re-evaluated how they had treated loved ones and sought to rebuild trust. The importance of being a better father, son, or partner emerged repeatedly. Several participants described a newfound sense of emotional availability and commitment to maintaining healthy, supportive relationships. This is particularly significant given the strong link between family stability and desistance. Men who repair family relationships are less likely to reoffend and more likely to contribute positively to their communities. They also break intergenerational cycles of offending, instability, and harm.

Improved Emotional Resilience: Many participants developed new tools to manage their emotions more effectively, particularly in high-stress or triggering situations. Through workshops, roleplay sessions, and equine therapy, men learned to identify, process, and articulate their emotions. This increased emotional awareness and control was often described as a turning point. Rather than defaulting to anger, withdrawal, or violence, men began to reflect, pause, and choose more constructive responses. Emotional resilience is foundational: it underpins violence reduction, improves relationships, and enables effective communication. Given the disproportionate prevalence of mental health difficulties among the prison population, interventions that build emotional resilience address a critical gap in custodial provision and contribute to both individual wellbeing and institutional safety.

Reintegration and Desistance: Employment and Communication

Employability Skills and Economic Contribution: The programme placed strong emphasis on preparing participants for employment through CV writing, interview preparation, and direct engagement with employers. For many participants, this was their first exposure to professional working environments. Employers attended the prison to conduct mock interviews, provide business mentoring, and demystify what had once felt unreachable. Participants reported increased optimism about securing work, a clearer understanding of their transferable skills, and greater motivation to pursue legitimate income.

The experience of being seen, heard, and validated by professionals disrupted internalised narratives of exclusion. Kingston described the impact of employer recognition:

> “It was generally a morale boost because... you're genuinely trying to sell yourself to these people. And the fact that they said, like, 'Oh, we see something in you,' you don't get that... So, for someone to say, we see something in you, that's powerful... Yeah, no one said that in such a long time. Like, we can see some value in you. Like…it makes you feel like, okay, I have got some kind of purpose on this earth” — Kingston, Key4Life Participant

This directly addresses one of the strongest predictors of desistance: stable employment. By building employability, Key4Life contributes to reduced reoffending, economic participation, and decreased reliance on public services.

Improved Communication Skills: Participants reported that the programme improved their ability to express themselves, listen actively, and navigate conversations with greater confidence and clarity. This was fostered through structured group activities that encouraged dialogue, vulnerability, and respectful listening. These skills translated into better relationships with family, peers, and professionals, including prison staff and potential employers. Improved communication was seen as a cornerstone for conflict resolution, relationship repair, and successful engagement with employment and community services. In policy terms, communication skills are essential for successful resettlement and reintegration.

Institutional Impact: Creating Safer, More Rehabilitative Prisons

An Improved Prison Culture: One of the most striking findings was the collective cultural shift created by Key4Life within HMP Fosse Way. As participants developed new ways of thinking and behaving, others on the wing took notice. Men described how their changed attitudes created a ripple effect, fostering a more positive, reflective, and emotionally open environment. Prison officers responded to the calmer, more constructive atmosphere by treating participants differently. The presence of Key4Life contributed to a broader shift in prison culture that challenged negative norms, reduced tension, and made it safer for men to be vulnerable and emotionally expressive. This cultural transformation has significant implications for prison management, staff safety, and the reduction of violence.

Improved Behaviour and Reduced Violence: Participants reported becoming less confrontational, more patient, and better able to manage conflict without resorting to aggression. Men who had previously reacted with anger or violence described adopting more composed, reflective responses. Some lifers and mentors observed tangible changes in wing behaviour, attributing a calmer atmosphere directly to the influence of the Key4Life cohort. This shift was consistently linked to increased emotional intelligence and empathy. One participant, Vincent, described a transformative moment immediately following a Key4Life session:

> “I had an altercation with someone after the session, actually. We was arguing, arguing, arguing. My first instinct would be to say, 'Yo, step in the pad and let's scrap'… but I seen that they didn't want to. So, I was like 'Alright then cool', told everyone to go, and then me and him was just chatting. I said, 'All right, cool. Look, my bad, I shouldn't have spoke to you like that.' Then he said, 'I understand, this, that and the other' and then we just shook hands after that” — Vincent, Key4Life Participant

The reduction in violence and improved conflict management delivers clear benefits for prison safety, staff wellbeing, and the creation of environments where rehabilitation (not merely containment) can take place.

Mentoring Skills and Giving Back: A Self-Sustaining Model: Several participants who had previously completed the programme returned as mentors, describing how

this deepened their own transformation while allowing them to support others. Acting as mentors fostered a sense of responsibility, reinforced personal change, and cultivated leadership qualities. The opportunity to give back was described as healing. Yasin, a Key Mentor, explained:

> “The day you get sentenced, it breaks you as a person. You're never the same person ever again. After years of pain and darkness, there comes a time when you reflect, and you realize something: the only way to mend that broken part of you is by helping others, one person at a time. Every single person that you help, you're healing yourself. That's what drives us as mentors—helping others helps you become that whole person again”
> — Yasin, Key4Life Mentor

This creates a self-sustaining model where programme graduates support future cohorts, embedding positive change within the institution itself without escalating costs.

Enabling Mechanisms: Psychological Foundations of Change: Four additional psychological outcomes function as enabling mechanisms that underpin the outcomes described above: changed mindset, hope for the future, increased confidence, and motivation and purpose. These represent internal shifts in how participants understood themselves, their potential, and their relationship to the future.

A changed mindset (moving from fatalism and defensiveness to openness and possibility) created the internal conditions for behavioural change to take root. Without this cognitive shift, interventions often produce compliance rather than transformation. Hope for the future provided a motivational resource that sustained effort and persistence, helping men invest in the difficult work of change. Increased confidence, fostered through challenges such as public speaking and employer engagement, enabled participants to navigate the transition from prison to community. Motivation and purpose, often tied to specific goals such as supporting children or starting a business, provided direction and meaning.

These mechanisms are not policy outcomes in themselves, but they are critical to understanding how and why Key4Life succeeds where other interventions fail. They represent the psychological groundwork that makes lasting transformation possible.

Recommendations for Government Action

At a time when reoffending costs the taxpayer an estimated £18 billion annually and prison safety remains a critical concern, the evidence consistently points to the value of relational, lived experience-led rehabilitation approaches. The Justice Data Lab has now evaluated over 250 rehabilitation programmes, with a small but significant number demonstrating statistically significant reductions in reoffending. Programmes such as Key4Life, which integrate lived experience mentoring, cultural relevance, emotional rehabilitation, and employer engagement, address multiple policy objectives simultaneously and represent a compelling case for strategic investment.

The evidence presented in this research supports four priority recommendations for scaling the impact of relational, lived experience-based rehabilitation programmes such as Key4Life across the criminal justice system. While this qualitative study provides rich evidence of participant experience and perceived benefit, it does not allow causal conclusions about system-level effectiveness. These recommendations should therefore be read in conjunction with the call for longitudinal evaluation detailed in the full report.

Recommendation 1. Commission National Expansion of Relational Rehabilitation Programmes Across the Prison Estate

HMPPS has taken positive steps to support third sector rehabilitation through the Rehabilitation Grants Scheme 2026-2029, providing grants of up to £150,000 per year for evidence-based projects across prisons and probation. This is a welcome foundation, but scaling up this investment is now essential if proven relational rehabilitation programmes are to reach the prisoners who need them most.

The Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service may wish to consider building on the existing grants framework by establishing a dedicated multi-year funding stream for relational, lived experience-based programmes with an independently verified evidence base, such as those assessed through the Justice Data Lab. Such programmes directly align with ministerial priorities to reduce reoffending, improve prison safety, and enhance rehabilitation outcomes. Their model, combining emotional development, cultural credibility, structured mentoring by individuals with lived experience, and employer partnerships, offers a scalable intervention that addresses the root causes of offending behaviour.

The Government could usefully consider recognising such programmes within the national rehabilitation strategy as core interventions for young men at high risk of reoffending, with funding allocated through the next Spending Review to support delivery in at least 15 additional establishments by 2029-30, beginning with a pilot expansion in the 2027-28 financial year.

Immediate action: The MoJ may wish to commission a costed expansion plan and identify priority establishments for rollout by the end of the 2026-27 financial year, prioritising Young Offender Institutions and Category C training prisons with high concentrations of young adult men serving sentences of 12 months or more.

Recommendation 2. Strengthen and Scale the Existing Employer Engagement Infrastructure

Significant progress has already been made in supporting prison leavers into employment through the New Futures Network, Employment Advisory Boards, Employment Hubs, and the Going Forward into Employment Civil Service scheme. These initiatives, many developed under the leadership of Prisons Minister James Timpson, represent a strong foundation. However, employer engagement remains inconsistent and the structural incentives needed to drive wider private sector participation are not yet in place.

The Department for Business and Trade, Ministry of Justice, and Cabinet Office may wish to consider building on this existing infrastructure by introducing the fiscal and procurement levers needed to embed inclusive hiring more deeply across the economy. Specifically, government could explore introducing employer National Insurance relief for businesses hiring individuals within 12 months of release, with the precise cost and mechanism to be determined through HM Treasury modelling and consultation with employer bodies. Embedding inclusive hiring commitments into public sector procurement contracts above £5 million would further extend the reach of existing schemes. A national "Second Chance Employers" campaign, building on the profile already generated by Employment Advisory Boards, could consolidate and amplify existing momentum.

Employment is the strongest predictor of successful desistance. The infrastructure exists. The missing levers are structural incentives that would make inclusive hiring the norm rather than the exception.

Immediate action: The MoJ could convene a roundtable with leading employers, the New Futures Network, third sector rehabilitation organisations, and sector bodies to identify the specific barriers that remain and co-design a strategy to address them, with outputs delivered by Q3 2026-27.

Recommendation 3. Strengthen Prison Officer Training Through Lived Experience Expertise

HMPPS has made progress in developing trauma-informed and desistance-based approaches to officer training, including the Becoming Trauma Informed programme now being extended from women's prisons into the male estate, and the Impact framework grounded in desistance theory. These are welcome developments. However, this research identifies a specific gap: the systematic involvement of organisations with lived experience expertise in delivering officer training.

Participants in this evaluation described significant cultural shifts on prison wings where the programme operates, including reduced violence, more positive staff-prisoner relationships, and greater engagement with purposeful activity. These shifts depend not only on programme participants but on staff who understand and support the emotional and behavioural change process. Training delivered by individuals with lived experience brings authenticity and credibility, helping staff understand the relational skills needed to support change.

HMPPS may wish to consider commissioning organisations such as Key4Life to develop and deliver training modules for prison officers, complementing rather than replacing existing provision.

Recommended action: HMPPS could commission Key4Life and similar organisations to develop and deliver training modules for prison officers and operational managers that draw on lived experience to help staff better understand and support the emotional and behavioural change process. This could include insights from programme participants and practical tools for supporting emotional development and relational safety. Rollout could be linked to existing officer

professional development frameworks, with a pilot commencing in the 2027-28 financial year.

Recommendation 4. Develop a Professionalised Framework for Lived Experience Mentoring

Peer mentoring is already widely practised across the prison estate, with provision including the Prisoners' Education Trust Level 2 Peer Mentor course, the HMPPS Creating Future Opportunities wing model, and various establishment-level schemes. However, the MoJ's own research confirms that these schemes remain non-standardised, inconsistently accredited, and offer little opportunity to share best practice between establishments. There is no national framework recognising lived experience mentoring as a professional pathway with clear standards, training, and employment outcomes.

HM Prison and Probation Service and the Department for Work and Pensions may wish to consider jointly establishing such a framework, building on existing provision rather than replacing it, and recognising lived experience mentoring as a distinct professional pathway with clear standards, training, and employment pathways for programme graduates.

Participants in this evaluation consistently identified their mentoring roles as transformative, not only for those they supported but for their own sense of purpose and desistance. However, uncertainty about expectations, limited formal recognition, and inconsistent support between programme cycles undermine the sustainability and impact of this work. The Government could usefully recognise lived experience as a distinct professional asset within criminal justice, health, and social care sectors, with structured pathways into paid employment as peer mentors, desistance coaches, or rehabilitation practitioners.

> “I think it will be quite interesting to see how this program is replicated elsewhere. Because the mentoring cohort that Key4Life were working with here, I would say were a group of talented men of much many years of lived experience within prison. Some doing, most of them doing over a decade in prison. So when you are working with people like that, they've got a lot to bring to the table anyway. For example, if culture carriers and others that are actively engaged in this kind of work are trained by Key4Life, it helps give more momentum and more training towards the work that they're doing and want to go into. So I think in that case, the mentoring side of it does work, where both parties benefit from one another. I think ultimately, the people that you're working with, the mentors, it kind of helps with their rehabilitation as well. So they're likely not to come back to prison. You can't forget that as well” — Salman, Key4Life Programme Participant

Recommended action: There is value in HMPPS commissioning the development of a national Lived Experience Mentoring Standards Framework, drawing on the expertise of organisations such as Key4Life and building on existing accreditation schemes, piloted across a small number of establishments with a pilot

commencing in the 2027-28 financial year. DWP could usefully explore employability incentives and support packages for mentors transitioning into peer support roles post-release.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that programmes such as Key4Life deliver precisely the kind of transformative, evidence-based intervention that the government's prison reform agenda demands. At a time when reoffending costs the taxpayer billions annually and prison safety remains a critical concern, relational, lived experience-based rehabilitation programmes represent models with a compelling and growing evidence base, combining cost-effectiveness with measurable impact on desistance, employability, and institutional safety.

The integration of lived experience mentoring, cultural relevance, emotional rehabilitation, and employer engagement addresses multiple policy objectives simultaneously: reducing reoffending, improving prison culture, supporting employment outcomes for prison leavers, and creating self-sustaining change. The twelve interconnected outcomes identified in this research show that rehabilitation is not a linear process but a holistic transformation involving identity, relationships, emotions, and future orientation.

The cost of inaction is clear: continued cycles of reoffending, wasted human potential, unsafe communities, and unsustainable pressure on public services. With appropriate investment and political will, programmes such as Key4Life can be scaled nationally to transform lives, reduce harm, and deliver value for money. The question for government is whether they will be supported, scaled, and sustained. The evidence is compelling. The need is urgent. The opportunity is now.

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1. Introduction

The United Kingdom's prison system is widely recognised as being in a state of crisis (Howard League, 2025; Independent Prison Capacity Review, 2025). Rates of reoffending remain persistently high, capacity is at breaking point, and fiscal pressures have constrained the ability of the justice system to deliver meaningful rehabilitation (Ministry of Justice, 2025a; National Audit Office, 2024). Recent political commentary has underscored the urgency of reform. In July 2024, Lord Chancellor Shabana Mahmood warned that "our prisons are broken… unsafe and catastrophically close to bursting at the seams" and argued that "our prisons today create better criminals, not better citizens" (Mahmood, 2024). Prime Minister Keir Starmer similarly identified prisons as "another obvious example of how parts of the system are broken" (Financial Times, 2024). The appointment of James Timpson as Prisons Minister, known for his commitment to second-chance employment through his retail business, signals a policy shift towards more constructive, community-focused approaches (The Guardian, 2024). Minister Timpson has emphasised that "dangerously full prisons lead to more crime and more violence" and that prisons are The UK prison system faces a crisis of capacity, safety and effectiveness, with high reoffending rates and mounting pressure on an overstretched estate underscoring the need for greater investment in rehabilitation and preventive intervention.

The scale of the challenge is substantial. Official data indicate an average cost per prison place of £51,724 in 2022–23 (Ministry of Justice, 2024b). Despite this spending, proven reoffending remains persistently high among those leaving custody. While the overall reoffending rate for the January to March 2023 cohort was 26.5% (Ministry of Justice, 2025b), this figure masks considerably higher rates for those released from custodial sentences. For children released from custody in the year ending March 2023, the reoffending rate stood at 66.1%, compared to just 22.2% for children who received a caution as their index disposal (Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board, 2025). A similar pattern is evident for adults: those released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months recorded a reoffending rate of 56.9%, compared to 19.2% for those serving sentences of 12 months or more (Ministry of Justice, 2025b).

These figures highlight an entrenched cycle of incarceration and relapse that imposes not only economic costs but profound social and emotional harm on families, communities, and victims. While the proportion of reoffenders who subsequently receive a custodial sentence is not routinely published as a standalone statistic, the scale of this revolving door dynamic is reflected in the sharp rise in recall admissions, which reached nearly 32,500 in the year to September 2024, a 27% increase on the previous year (Prison Reform Trust 2025). It should be noted, however, that the majority of recalls are triggered by licence non-compliance rather than new offending (ibid). There is growing consensus that the future of criminal justice must be rooted in rehabilitation, prevention, and desistance rather than reliance on incarceration alone (Koehler and Lösel, 2025; Ministry of Justice, 2021).

1.1 From Systemic Crisis to Site of Reform

Within this national landscape of overcrowded, ageing prisons and renewed calls for reform, a small number of new resettlement establishments have been developed to model a more rehabilitative, technologically enabled approach. These prisons form part of the government's New Prisons Programme, which aims to modernise the custodial estate and embed rehabilitative design principles into everyday regimes. They are intended to provide safer, more purposeful environments centred on education, employment, and preparation for release.

HMP Fosse Way, opened in 2023, represents one of the flagship examples of this agenda. It was selected as the setting for the present study because it provides a unique opportunity to explore how rehabilitation is experienced and enacted within a newly opened prison explicitly designed to embody a rehabilitative culture.

1.2 Setting: HMP Fosse Way

HMP Fosse Way is a newly built Category C resettlement prison in Leicester, operated by Serco under a ten-year contract. The facility opened in May 2023 on the site of the former Glen Parva Prison and forms part of the government's New Prisons Programme. The prison is designed to accommodate up to 1,715 men, offering a modern environment structured around education, training, and purposeful activity. It houses 24 workshops and 8 classrooms, and partners with commercial and educational organisations to deliver accredited vocational training, including construction, woodwork, waste management, barbering, business skills, and music production (Serco, 2024).

Fosse Way was envisaged as a flagship resettlement establishment, integrating technology-enabled design, sustainability, and through-the-gate pathways such as Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) employment and external work placements. However, as a new prison still stabilising its operations, it has faced early challenges. Inspection evidence has highlighted drugs availability, high levels of violence, and staff inexperience (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2025), with the IMB reporting pressures linked to safety and population mix (Independent Monitoring Board, 2025). Media reports have drawn attention to serious incidents and safety concerns, illustrating the tension between innovation and institutional growing pains (ITV News, 2025; The Justice Gap, 2025). It is within this dynamic and evolving environment that the present research was undertaken.

1.3 HMPPS Priorities and Policy Context

His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) frames rehabilitation, resettlement, and safer prisons as core strategic priorities (HMPPS, 2022a). Policy frameworks emphasise that safe, decent, and procedurally fair regimes are preconditions for rehabilitation, and set mandatory requirements for identifying and managing risks of violence and self-harm across the estate (HMPPS, 2024a). HMPPS maintains an evidence-led accreditation system for programmes through the

Correctional Services Advice and Accreditation Panel, requiring a sound theory of change, risk-need-responsivity alignment, fidelity to design, and regular evaluation.

Current guidance underlines that ill-targeted or poorly delivered interventions can be counter-productive, reinforcing the need for quality assurance, appropriate targeting, and measurable outcomes (HMPPS, 2024b). In parallel, HMPPS has signalled increased investment in voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) partnerships to improve rehabilitation outcomes (HMPPS, 2022b). In September 2025, HMPPS launched the Rehabilitation Grants Scheme (2026-2029), a £3 million fund for voluntary-sector projects supporting rehabilitation across prisons and probation, indicating a shift toward collaborative, locally responsive delivery models (HMPPS, 2025).

This evolving policy backdrop, emphasising safe and rehabilitative cultures, evidence-based interventions, and stronger third-sector partnerships, provides the context in which Key4Life operates at HMP Fosse Way.

1.4 Study Context and Aims

This report examines male prisoners' experiences of Key4Life's rehabilitation programme at HMP Fosse Way. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with 46 men: fifteen *Key Mentors* (graduates who now mentor others), twenty-six *programme participants* at Fosse Way, and six *community participants*. Conducted between August and September 2024, the interviews explored participants' life histories, experiences of prison, and involvement with Key4Life. The research was funded by a London Metropolitan University Transformation Fund. Ethical approval was granted by the London Metropolitan University Ethics Committee and through the HMPPS National Research Committee process, with approval issued by Serco's research ethics panel (see Appendix A).

The analysis focuses on participants' accounts of their engagement with the programme and its capacity to shape their lives and influence the culture of the prison in positive ways. Particular attention is given to the first three steps of Key4Life's *seven-step model*, which are delivered inside custody and centre on emotional resilience, mentoring, and work preparation.

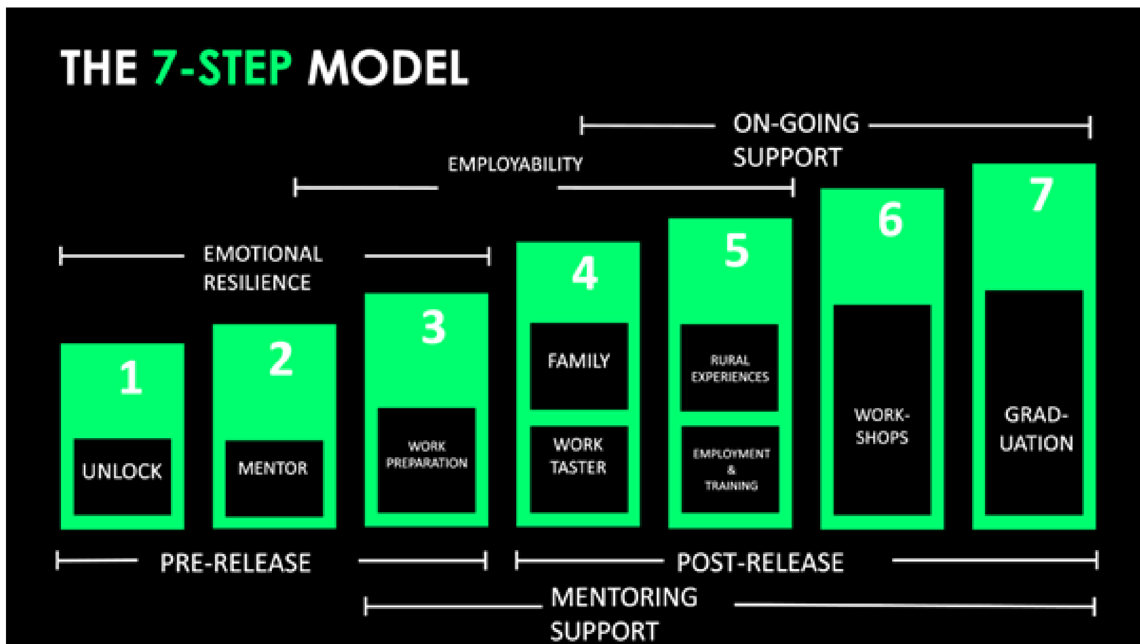
1.5 The Key4Life Model

Key4Life is a UK charity that rehabilitates young men in prison and in the community through a distinctive blend of emotional development, employability training, and long-term support. Its work is structured around three core pillars:

1. **Emotional Resilience** – equipping participants with tools to understand and regulate emotions, often through trauma-informed activities such as equine therapy, sport, and music;
2. **Employability** – building readiness for work through tailored mentoring, CV workshops, and placements with partner employers; and

3. **Ongoing Support** – maintaining post-release contact to sustain reintegration and accountability.

The Key4Life seven-step model spans custody and community. Steps 1–3 (delivered in prison) comprise Unlock: intensive emotional work to address trauma and destructive patterns; Mentor: pairing each participant with a trained volunteer mentor; and Work Preparation: employability sessions and employer engagement. Steps 4–7 take place post-release, encompassing Work Taster and Family Engagement, a Residential Experience and Employment/Training Support, Monthly Workshops, and a Graduation and Alumni Network which includes progression into Key Mentor roles. This sequencing ensures continuity between internal change and external reintegration.



At the core of Key4Life's philosophy is the belief that lasting behavioural change must begin with emotional change. The programme aims to "unlock" trauma, self-limiting beliefs, and unresolved pain that often underpin offending. Only when this groundwork has been laid does it introduce employment training, on the premise that individuals need emotional resilience to sustain new lifestyles, relationships, and employment. Upon release, Key4Life practitioners meet participants at the prison gate, link them with job opportunities, and maintain weekly contact to consolidate progress.

According to Key4Life's internal evaluation, 65 per cent of participants moved into employment or meaningful occupation, 78 per cent improved emotional resilience, and 75 per cent strengthened family relationships (Key4Life, 2024). These outcomes were measured using pre and post programme self-report measures: emotional resilience was assessed using the Warwick Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale, family relationships were evaluated through participant self-report and feedback from close family members, and employment was verified through P45 records (Key4Life, 2024). While these figures reflect one programme's own assessment rather than

independent evaluation, the use of validated measures (such as the WEMWBS) and verification methods (P45 records) provides some methodological rigour.

Independent social return on investment analysis estimates a social return on investment of £13.46 for every £1 spent, based on an independent analysis by Bean Research of outcomes for 63 participants, which generated an estimated £4.08 million in economic and social benefits over three years (Key4Life, 2024; Ministry of Justice, 2024b).

It should be noted that participants are not a random sample of the prison population.

Key4Life works specifically with young men aged 18 to 25 who are repeat offenders, many with histories of multiple custodial sentences, substance misuse, adverse childhood experiences, and poor mental health (Key4Life, 2024). Questions of self-selection are relevant here: while some participants may enter the programme with existing motivation to change, Key4Life's approach actively recruits prolific offenders for whom motivation to change emerges through engagement with the programme rather than preceding it, consistent with desistance theory's understanding of change as a relational and emergent process (Giordano et al., 2002; McNeill, 2006).

1.6 Theoretical Context

The principles underpinning Key4Life's model resonate with contemporary theories of desistance from crime, which emphasise psychosocial change, identity reconstruction, and supportive social bonds (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Desistance is conceptualised as an ongoing negotiation between personal agency and structural opportunity (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Giordano et al., 2002), often articulated through what Maruna (2001) terms a "redemption script" a narrative re-authoring of one's life toward a prosocial future. Key4Life's focus on emotional literacy, trauma recovery, and mentoring appears to operationalise these insights, while its relational emphasis aligns with McNeill and Weaver's (2010) argument that desistance is a social as well as an individual process.

At the same time, critical criminology warns that transformative rehabilitation models cannot be divorced from the wider structures of inequality, institutional harm, and social exclusion that shape prisoners' lives (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Weaver, 2015). Understanding Key4Life's impact therefore requires situating participants' accounts within these broader contexts. The following chapters do so by examining how men at HMP Fosse Way describe the emotional, relational, and cultural shifts that accompanied their involvement in the programme.

1.7 Statement of Significance

This study holds significance on multiple levels. Empirically, it offers one of the first in-depth qualitative examinations of prisoner experience within HMP Fosse Way, a newly opened resettlement prison designed to embody the government's rehabilitation agenda. By documenting how men experience and interpret Key4Life's

programme, the research provides valuable insight into how rehabilitation is enacted within a new custodial environment that is itself in the process of cultural formation.

Theoretically, the study extends scholarship on desistance and identity transformation by grounding abstract frameworks in the lived narratives of men actively engaging in emotional and behavioural change. It explores how "hooks for change" (Giordano et al., 2002) and "redemption scripts" (Maruna, 2001) are constructed and supported through structured mentoring and trauma-informed practice.

Practically and politically, the research provides an evidence base for understanding how innovative, non-punitive approaches can operate in partnership with the prison estate and private providers such as Serco. The findings have direct implications for rehabilitation policy, programme design, and staff culture, especially at a time when government priorities are shifting towards rehabilitation and employment-based reintegration. More broadly, the report speaks to the urgent need for humane, cost-effective, and psychologically informed responses to offending, offering insight into what enables men to rebuild meaningful lives beyond custody.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Rehabilitation

The concept of rehabilitation has long been central to the philosophy and practice of criminal justice. Within criminology, rehabilitation generally refers to the processes and interventions designed to address the factors that contribute to offending and to promote desistance from future crime (Bullock and Bunce, 2020). It has been defined as "a planned intervention which aims to bring about change in some aspect of the offender that is thought to cause the offender's criminality, such as attitudes, cognitive processes, personality or mental health" (Dissel, 2008, p.156). However, scholars argue that rehabilitation extends beyond cognitive or behavioural modification to include broader social and moral dimensions, preparing prisoners to reintegrate as productive and responsible members of the community (Bullock and Bunce, 2020; McNeill, 2012).

Contemporary penal policy in England and Wales reflects this broader understanding. HMPPS emphasises the importance of helping individuals lead law-abiding and purposeful lives, with rehabilitation understood not merely as an outcome but as a relational and developmental process dependent on prison environments that promote dignity, fairness, and opportunity (HMPPS, 2024a). The concept of rehabilitative culture emphasises that emotional safety, prosocial modelling, and constructive staff–prisoner relationships are essential preconditions for genuine change (Mann and Howard, 2018; Liebling et al., 2011).

McNeill (2012) identifies four forms of rehabilitation that must work in concert: psychological or personal rehabilitation (emotional change such as increased insight, self-control, and resilience); legal or judicial rehabilitation (the formal restoration of rights and removal of legal barriers); moral rehabilitation (the reparation of harm and restoration of moral standing); and social rehabilitation (the re-establishment of family and community ties, employability, and social acceptance). These forms collectively frame rehabilitation as both an individual transformation and a social reintegration process, requiring collaboration between statutory, voluntary, and community agencies (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2012). It is within this evolving landscape that third-sector programmes such as Key4Life have emerged, seeking to operationalise rehabilitation in holistic and relational ways.

2.2 Historical Evolution of Penal Rehabilitation

The philosophy of rehabilitation within criminal justice has evolved in response to shifting political ideologies, social attitudes, and academic research. During the mid-twentieth century, the "treatment model" dominated penal thinking, viewing offending behaviour as a product of individual pathology and social deprivation that could be corrected through education, therapy, and vocational training (Cullen and Gendreau, 2001).

By the 1970s, the rehabilitative ideal came under intense scrutiny. Martinson's (1974) review of correctional studies led to the widely cited conclusion that "nothing

works," fuelling penal pessimism and a shift toward deterrence and incapacitation. Garland (2001) notes that this era marked the beginning of a "culture of control," in which political discourse favoured punitive approaches and the expansion of imprisonment.

The 1980s and 1990s entrenched this punitive turn. In England and Wales, Home Secretary Michael Howard's declaration in 1993 that "prison works" symbolised a retreat from rehabilitative rhetoric (Burnett and Maruna, 2004). By the end of the century, however, meta-analyses by Gendreau et al. (2000) and others demonstrated that well-designed, targeted programmes could significantly reduce reoffending, reviving the question not of whether rehabilitation works, but what works and for whom. This "What Works" movement reframed rehabilitation as evidence-driven, though it attracted criticism for narrowing the moral and social purpose of rehabilitation to behavioural management (McNeill, 2012).

The contemporary model can be characterised as a hybrid penal philosophy, blending welfare-oriented rehabilitation with punitive control (Garland, 2001). Policy continues to advocate rehabilitation but within a climate shaped by austerity, overcrowding, and managerialism (Bullock and Bunce, 2020). Understanding these shifts is crucial for contextualising third-sector initiatives such as Key4Life, which attempt to restore a human-centred and relational dimension to rehabilitation.

2.3 The Contemporary Rehabilitation Landscape (UK)

The landscape of offender rehabilitation in England and Wales has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades. The establishment of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in 2004 represented a major structural reform, linking prison and probation services under a shared objective of reducing reoffending and formalising partnerships with voluntary and private sector organisations (Home Office, 2004). In 2017, NOMS evolved into His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), whose strategic priorities place rehabilitation, safety, and decent treatment at the centre of penal practice (HMPPS, 2024a).

In practice, however, the delivery of rehabilitation remains uneven. Overcrowding, staff shortages, and reduced funding have limited access to purposeful activity and education. According to the Prison Reform Trust (2023), only one quarter of male prisons received positive inspection ratings for purposeful activity in 2021–22, compared with half in 2016–17. Official statistics show participation in prison education fell from 101,600 learners in 2014/15 to 49,855 in 2021/22, before rising to 63,744 in 2022/23 (Ministry of Justice, 2024a). Joint inspection evidence for 2021–22 found very limited good provision, with only one of 22 prisons rated "good" (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2022).

Research suggests that the prison environment itself significantly shapes the success of rehabilitation. Bullock and Bunce (2020) found that many prisoners viewed rehabilitative programmes as tokenistic or imposed, perceiving a disconnection between official language and the adversarial culture of many prisons. Liebling and Arnold (2004) argue that genuine rehabilitation depends heavily on the moral performance of a prison: its capacity to foster respect, trust, and a sense of

legitimacy. Rehabilitation is not solely a matter of programme delivery but is fundamentally shaped by staff-prisoner relationships, the quality of daily interactions, and the overall institutional climate (Liebling et al., 2011; Mann and Howard, 2018).

To address this, HMPPS has promoted the concept of a Rehabilitative Culture, integrating relational ethics, fairness, and opportunities for growth into the fabric of prison life (Mann and Howard, 2018). This model prioritises procedural justice, ensuring prisoners perceive staff actions as fair (Liebling and Arnold, 2004); prosocial modelling, where staff demonstrate empathy and self-control; and emotional safety, considered prerequisites for engagement and change (Auty and Liebling, 2020).

Despite these aspirations, persistent structural constraints, overcrowding, high turnover of staff, and limited continuity of care, undermine rehabilitative intent (Bullock and Bunce, 2020). Against this backdrop, voluntary and third-sector organisations have played an increasingly significant role, developing holistic and relational approaches that operate both inside and beyond the prison gates (Tomczak, 2016; Corcoran, 2012).

2.4 Comparative Models: The Scandinavian Context

Scandinavian penal systems, particularly those of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, are frequently identified as exemplars of humane and rehabilitative imprisonment (Pratt, 2008; Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012). While these systems differ in practice, they share a commitment to normalisation, dignity, and reintegration. The comparison with the UK highlights how structural, cultural, and relational factors shape the capacity of prisons to promote change.

At the heart of Scandinavian penal philosophy is the principle of normalisation: life inside prison should resemble life outside as closely as possible. Imprisonment is the deprivation of liberty alone; all other aspects of life, work, education, relationships, should mirror ordinary social conditions (Pratt, 2008). Norwegian legislation stipulates that the purpose of punishment is "the return of the offender to society as a good neighbour" rather than retribution.

This is operationalised through several design and policy choices. First, Scandinavian systems make extensive use of open prisons and progressive regimes that emphasise trust, autonomy, and responsibility rather than surveillance and control (Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012; Pratt, 2008). Second, establishments such as Halden and Bastøy are designed to facilitate social learning through shared responsibility, education, and meaningful work, with particular attention to physical environment and spatial design (Jewkes and Moran, 2015). Third, prison officers are conceived not simply as custodians but as rehabilitative agents (Pratt, 2008). Finally, prisoners have access to accredited education and employment programmes identical to those available in the community, ensuring continuity on release (Pratt, 2008).

Unlike the managerial "risk and responsivity" frameworks prevalent in the UK, Scandinavian systems are underpinned by relational and moral rationales. Rehabilitation is not an isolated programme but a moral orientation embedded in daily interaction. Scandinavian prisons operate through dynamic security, where

safety is achieved through knowledge, communication, and mutual respect rather than coercion (Pratt, 2008; Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012). This approach is associated with lower levels of institutional violence and greater perceived legitimacy among prisoners. Importantly, the Scandinavian model views rehabilitation as reciprocal: society must also be "rehabilitated" to reaccept those it has punished (Pratt, 2008).

Comparative evidence suggests benefits of the Nordic model, though methodological differences complicate direct comparison. Norway's two-year reconviction rate is commonly reported at around 17–20 per cent (Yukhnenko et al., 2020). In England and Wales, proven reoffending rates have consistently remained in the mid-20 per cent range, though direct two-year comparisons are not published on a like-for-like basis. Beyond reconviction, prisoners in Norway report significantly higher levels of perceived safety than those in England and Wales (Martens, 2024).

By contrast, English prisons tend to be larger, more hierarchical, and governed by security logics rather than relational trust (Crewe, 2009; Liebling and Arnold, 2004). The result is a rehabilitative rhetoric that often fails to align with prisoners' lived experience (Bullock and Bunce, 2020). While the UK context differs markedly in scale and political culture, the success of the Nordic approach in achieving lower recidivism and more humane conditions provides a compelling benchmark for what a truly rehabilitative system can achieve (Yukhnenko et al., 2020; Martens, 2024). It reinforces the importance of third-sector organisations like Key4Life, whose relational and humanistic methods embody, on a smaller scale, principles such as emotional literacy, empathy, and responsibility that underpin the most effective rehabilitative systems worldwide (Tomczak, 2016).

2.5 Demographic Overview

Understanding the social and demographic profile of men in prison is essential to contextualising the need for targeted rehabilitative interventions such as Key4Life. The prison population in England and Wales reflects deep-rooted patterns of social disadvantage, trauma, and structural inequality that both precede and perpetuate offending (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

As of 2024, there were approximately 87,900 people in prison in England and Wales, of whom more than 95 per cent were men (House of Commons Library, 2024b). The population is disproportionately young, with approximately 45 per cent under the age of 30, and ethnically diverse but unevenly represented: 29 per cent identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic compared with 13 per cent of the general population (Prison Reform Trust, 2023; Lammy, 2017).

Most prisoners come from backgrounds marked by economic and social deprivation. The imprisonment rate for the ten most deprived local authorities in England was ten times greater than that of the ten least deprived areas (Jones, 2022), underscoring the degree to which incarceration is concentrated among the most structurally disadvantaged communities. Around two thirds of prisoners were unemployed prior to custody, nearly half left school before the age of sixteen, and 47 per cent were permanently excluded (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). More than half have literacy and numeracy skills below those expected of an eleven-year-old

(Coates, 2016). Significant proportions have learning difficulties or neurodivergent conditions (Bradley, 2009). The prevalence of trauma, mental ill health, and substance misuse is striking: 51 per cent of men in prison have a diagnosed mental health condition, 68 per cent reported drug use in the year prior to custody, and over 60 per cent experienced adverse childhood experiences (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). Around 53 per cent of prisoners have dependent children, meaning an estimated 195,000 to 310,000 children are affected by parental imprisonment at any given time (Ministry of Justice, 2024d). The intergenerational dimension is stark: approximately 63 per cent of sons of male prisoners go on to offend themselves (Farmer, 2017).

These demographic and psychosocial patterns reveal that imprisonment in England and Wales disproportionately captures young men who have experienced poverty, exclusion, disrupted education, trauma, and racialised policing. As the Ministry of Justice (2013) has acknowledged, employment, education, stable relationships, and hope for the future are key predictors of non-reoffending. Effective rehabilitation therefore requires a holistic model that recognises the emotional, social, and structural dimensions of desistance. Programmes such as Key4Life are designed precisely around these factors, combining emotional development with employability training and sustained mentoring.

2.6 Structural Inequality, Urban Marginality and Pathways into Crime

Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a powerful framework for understanding how social position shapes individual dispositions and trajectories. Central to this framework is the concept of 'habitus': the embodied set of perceptions, values, and orientations that individuals develop through their social position and which shape how they perceive and respond to the world around them (Bourdieu, 1986).

Crucially, habitus is not simply internalised but operates reflexively. The dispositions it produces are recognised and reinforced by others, reproducing the very social conditions from which they emerged. For young men growing up in poverty and exclusion, habitus may develop in opposition to mainstream values of achievement and delayed gratification, not as a failure of individual aspiration but as a rational adaptation to a social world in which legitimate pathways to dignity and success appear structurally inaccessible.

Bourdieu's related concept of 'symbolic violence' (1990) captures how institutions, including schools, subtly communicate who is destined to succeed and who is not, reinforcing class-based hierarchies through seemingly neutral processes of assessment and expectation.

Wacquant (2007) extends this framework into the specific context of urban marginality, arguing that in advanced capitalist societies, certain neighbourhoods become zones of 'territorial stigmatisation': spaces experienced as socially abandoned, heavily policed, and saturated with violence. Residents of such areas are marked by what he terms the 'blemish of place', a powerful form of misrecognition where individuals are perceived through the lens of territorial threat regardless of their individual conduct or character.

This spatial stigma is particularly relevant to the UK context, where the clustering of disadvantage in urban estates has been compounded by punitive policing strategies, gang databases, and the criminalisation of place-based social networks. Together, Bourdieu and Wacquant provide a structural and spatial lens through which the life histories of Key4Life can be understood, situating individual pathways into crime within broader conditions of inequality, stigma, and institutional exclusion.

2.7 Theories and Mechanisms of Change

Understanding how rehabilitation occurs requires engagement with the theoretical frameworks that explain *why and how* individuals stop offending. Desistance theory has become central to this debate, offering a nuanced account of change that recognises both agency and structure, emotion and opportunity. It provides a conceptual lens through which a wide range of rehabilitative interventions, including creative, sporting and therapeutic programmes, can be understood.

2.7.1 Desistance as a process of change

Desistance is not a single event but an ongoing process of reflection, choice and transformation. Laub and Sampson (2001) distinguished between the termination of criminal activity and desistance as the process that leads to it, while Maruna and Farrall (2004) differentiate between primary desistance (a temporary cessation of offending) and secondary desistance (the development of a new non-criminal identity). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) added a further dimension, relational desistance, to capture the importance of social recognition in sustaining change.

These theories suggest that desistance involves both internal cognitive transformation and external validation from family, peers and institutions. Programmes that create safe and meaningful spaces for reflection, skill-building and prosocial connection are understood to provide conditions in which change may occur (McNeill, 2006; Ward and Maruna, 2007).

2.7.2 Cognitive transformation and “hooks for change”

Giordano et al. (2002) proposed that desistance depends on a series of cognitive shifts: openness to change, exposure to "hooks for change", formation of a replacement self, and redefinition of offending as inconsistent with that self. These "hooks" can take many forms, including education, employment, creativity or relationships, but all provide opportunities to imagine and inhabit a different future.

A growing literature suggests that experiential and relational programmes, such as those involving music, sport, and animal-assisted activities, may function as such hooks. Studies of music-based interventions (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Daykin et al., 2017) and sports initiatives (Nichols, 2007; Parker et al., 2019) show that these activities can promote teamwork, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation. Equine-assisted learning programmes have been found to foster empathy, patience and self-awareness (Bachi, 2013; Burgon, 2011). These programmes share key features: they

are embodied and experiential, engaging emotion as well as cognition; they build social capital through group collaboration; and they create symbolic bridges from destructive to constructive forms of expression.

2.7.3 Identity, maturation and meaning

While early "maturation theories" (Glueck and Glueck, 1940) linked desistance to age, later work shows that maturation is better understood as a psychosocial rather than biological process (Maruna, 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2003). Change often involves a growing sense of responsibility, perspective and moral reflection.

Engagement in structured, prosocial activity can accelerate this process by allowing individuals to experience themselves in new roles, as team players, mentors, learners or creators, rather than as offenders. These opportunities support what Maruna (2001) describes as the development of redemption scripts, where individuals reinterpret their past in light of their potential for good.

2.7.4 Social bonds, mentors and relational change

Desistance also depends on the quality of social bonds and recognition from others. Hirschi's (1969) social control theory emphasises that strong attachments and commitments reduce the likelihood of offending. Weaver (2015) emphasises the importance of social relations and mutual trust, while Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) concept of relational desistance foregrounds mutual recognition as a catalyst for change.

Mentoring has been identified as a particularly effective mechanism for building these relationships. Authentic "agents of change" (McCulloch and McNeill, 2008), often individuals with lived experience of offending, can model alternative behaviours and offer empathy and accountability. Across creative, sporting and therapeutic settings, facilitators play a similar role: creating emotionally safe environments, promoting perseverance, and modelling emotional intelligence (Daykin et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2019).

2.7.5 Strengths-based models and wellbeing

Desistance scholarship has increasingly converged with positive criminology and the Good Lives Model (Ward and Maruna, 2007), which views rehabilitation as the pursuit of wellbeing and capability rather than risk management. Offending is understood as the pursuit of basic human goods, belonging, competence, purpose, through maladaptive means. Effective rehabilitation enables people to attain these goods through legitimate, prosocial avenues.

Creative, sporting and therapeutic interventions align closely with this framework, promoting wellbeing, agency and connection (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Parker et al., 2019; McNeill, 2012).

2.7.6 Summary

Theoretical and empirical research suggests that rehabilitation is most effective when it combines emotional insight, social connection and meaningful activity (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Ward and Maruna, 2007). Programmes that integrate creativity, sport and therapeutic engagement exemplify the principles of desistance and the Good Lives Model by helping participants to develop self-regulation, empathy, and purpose (Daykin et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2019). These frameworks provide the theoretical basis for understanding how initiatives like Key4Life are designed to promote change, though their effectiveness ultimately depends on the quality of relationships, context and continuity of support (McNeill and Weaver, 2010; Weaver, 2015).

2.8 The Third Sector and Rehabilitation

The voluntary or third sector has become a central actor in the delivery of rehabilitative services in England and Wales. This shift reflects both structural changes within criminal justice policy and the recognition that community-based organisations can reach and engage individuals who may be resistant to state-led interventions.

2.8.1 The emergence of the third sector in criminal justice

The involvement of voluntary organisations in penal work has a long tradition in the United Kingdom, dating back to nineteenth-century philanthropic and faith-based prison visiting schemes (Corcoran, 2012). However, the sector's formal integration into criminal justice delivery expanded significantly under the New Labour government from the early 2000s. Policy documents such as the Reducing Reoffending National Action Plan (Home Office, 2004) and the establishment of NOMS encouraged a "mixed economy" of service provision, inviting voluntary and private organisations to deliver rehabilitative programmes under contract.

This shift was driven by several factors: harnessing the innovative capacity and community legitimacy of voluntary organisations; improving cost-effectiveness and flexibility; and delivering more personalised services that reflect local needs. Since the formation of HMPPS in 2017, the third sector's role has remained critical, particularly in bridging the gap between prison and community (HMPPS, 2022b; Gojkovic et al., 2011).

2.8.2 The character and strengths of the third sector

Third sector organisations are diverse, encompassing charities, social enterprises, cooperatives, and faith-based initiatives (Gojkovic et al., 2011). Despite their variation, research suggests they possess several characteristics that distinguish them from statutory agencies.

First, independence and trust: third sector organisations are often perceived as less coercive and more empathetic than statutory agencies, enabling them to build authentic, trusting relationships with participants (Tomczak, 2016). Second,

responsiveness and innovation: the flexibility of third sector provision allows organisations to tailor support to individual needs and to experiment with creative, relational, and trauma-informed approaches (Hughes, 2016). Third, community connection: many work within local networks, providing continuity of support post-release and helping individuals reconnect with employment, family, and prosocial communities (Martin et al., 2017). Fourth, lived experience and credibility: organisations employing mentors with lived experience of offending can model hope and the possibility of change, acting as what desistance scholars describe as credible role models (McCulloch and McNeill, 2008).

Tomczak (2016) argues that the sector's contribution lies not only in service delivery but also in the "soft power" of moral legitimacy and relational work, which statutory systems often struggle to replicate.

2.8.3 The tension between partnership and independence

Despite their strengths, third sector organisations operate within a complex policy environment. The increased commissioning of services through competitive contracts has blurred boundaries between voluntary and state provision, raising concerns about co-option, dependency, and mission drift (Corcoran, 2012; Tomczak, 2016). Some scholars question whether organisations can retain their distinctive ethos when embedded in a system shaped by managerial and punitive logics.

Nevertheless, partnerships between state and voluntary providers can yield positive results when underpinned by mutual respect and shared rehabilitative goals (Dominey, 2019).

2.8.4 Third sector practice and desistance

The contribution of the third sector to desistance aligns closely with contemporary rehabilitation theory. Weaver (2015) and McNeill (2012) emphasise that change is relational and requires recognition and support from others. Third sector organisations are often well placed to provide this through mentoring, community engagement, and lived-experience leadership.

Research suggests that effective third sector interventions share certain characteristics: personalisation and relational depth through one-to-one mentoring; holistic support integrating emotional, practical, and social needs; continuity across the prison–community transition; and strengths-based approaches focusing on capability and aspiration rather than deficits (Abrahams et al., 2016). These approaches reflect the principles of the Good Lives Model (Ward and Maruna, 2007) and desistance theory.

These approaches reflect the principles of the Good Lives Model (Ward and Maruna, 2007) and desistance theory, positioning the third sector as a key facilitator of wellbeing and moral growth.

2.9 Key4Life Within This Landscape

Within this ecosystem, Key4Life exemplifies a third-sector organisation with a distinctive theory of change grounded in relational, emotional, and experiential methods. By integrating creative expression, sport, and equine-assisted learning with mentoring and employability training, it embodies the holistic and human-centred ethos that the literature associates with effective rehabilitation.

Image showing a large group of Key4Life participants, mentors and staff celebrate together, reflecting the community spirit and shared achievement central to the programme's graduation and milestone events.

The organisation's independence from statutory authority allows it to engage participants who may distrust formal systems, while its partnerships with prisons, employers, and community networks ensure continuity of support. Key4Life can thus be situated within the broader movement of voluntary-sector innovation that seeks to humanise justice, bridge institutional gaps, and create the conditions for genuine desistance.

2.10 The Seven Pathways to Reducing Reoffending

The Seven Pathways to Reducing Reoffending framework remains one of the most influential policy initiatives shaping rehabilitation in England and Wales. Introduced in 2004 following the Social Exclusion Unit's (2002) landmark report *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*, it provided a structured model for addressing the social and practical barriers to reintegration. The SEU's research found that 58 per cent of prisoners were reconvicted within two years of release, costing the state at least £11 billion annually, and concluded that rehabilitation must address not only individual behaviour but also the structural conditions that sustain reoffending.

The Reducing Reoffending National Action Plan (Home Office, 2004) translated these insights into a national strategy, emphasising multi-agency coordination and local partnerships between the state, voluntary, and private sectors.

The Seven Pathways identified the principal domains of need around which rehabilitation services should be structured:

1. Accommodation – stable housing provides the foundation for employment, family contact, and personal stability. The SEU (2002) found that one in three prisoners lost their home during custody, and that secure housing could reduce reoffending risk by more than 20 per cent.
2. Education, Training and Employment (ETE) – 57 percent of adult prisoners have literacy skills below those expected of an 11-year-old (Ofsted 2022), and two-thirds were unemployed before custody (SEU, 2002; Prison Reform Trust, 2023). ETE programmes build skills, confidence, and legitimate means of income.
3. Health – 46 per cent of prisoners report long-term illness or disability, and 90 per cent have experienced a mental health issue (SEU, 2002). Addressing both mental and physical health is essential for rehabilitation and stability.
4. Drugs and Alcohol – approximately two-thirds of prisoners used drugs in the year before imprisonment, and one-third identified substance use as a cause of offending (Albery et al., 2013). Effective recovery support is integral to reducing relapse and recidivism.
5. Finance, Benefit and Debt – financial instability and debt contribute to stress, exclusion, and reoffending. Over two-thirds of prisoners relied on benefits before custody (SEU, 2002).
6. Children and Families – maintaining family ties is one of the most protective factors against reoffending (Farmer, 2017). Yet around half of prisoners lose contact with their families while incarcerated, and approximately 160,000 children in England and Wales are affected by parental imprisonment each year (Ministry of Justice, 2024d).
7. Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviour – offending behaviour programmes aim to improve decision-making, self-control, and empathy through structured interventions and reflective work.

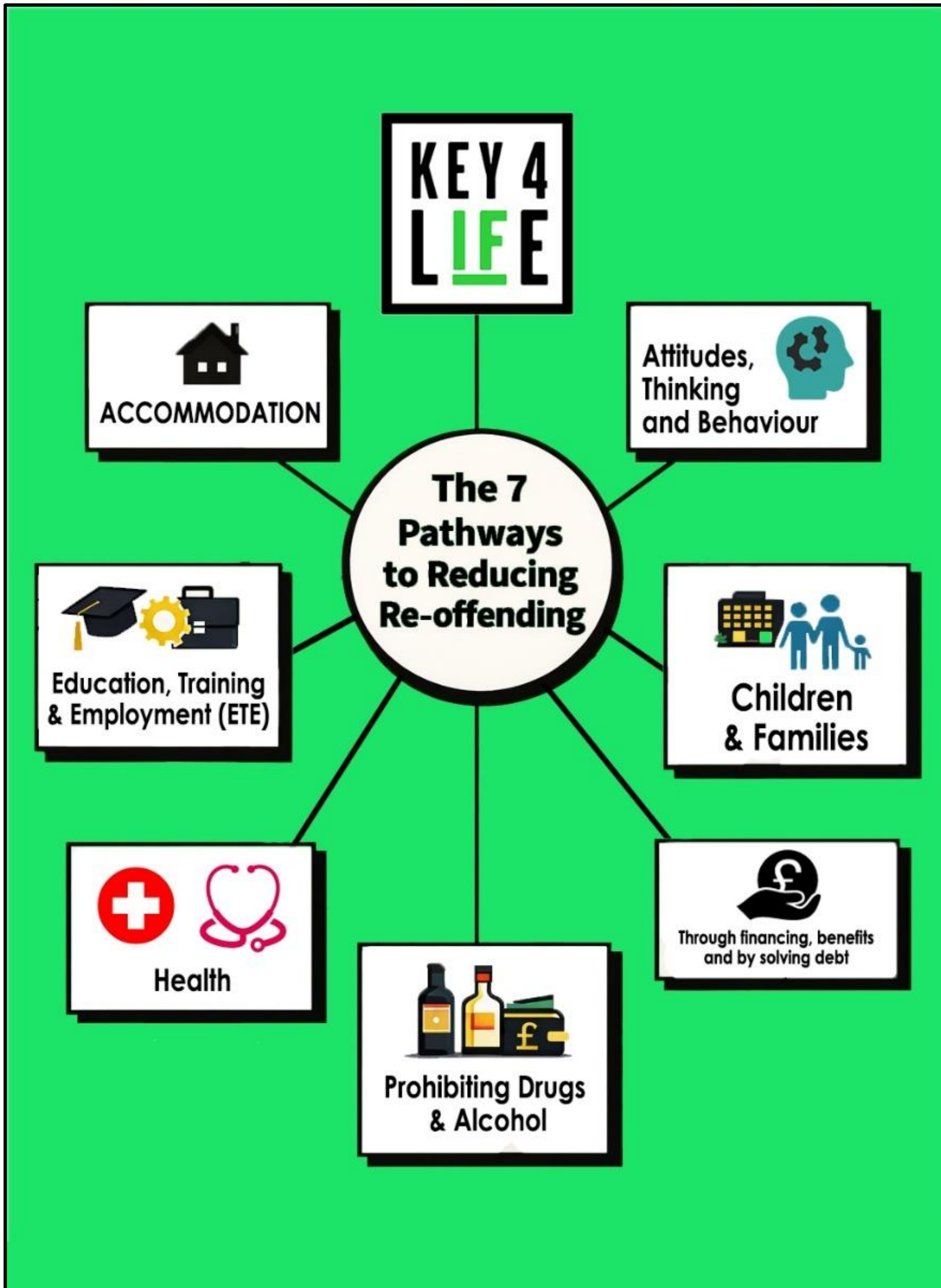


Diagram depicting the seven evidence-based pathways Key4Life addresses to reduce reoffending: accommodation, attitudes and behaviour, education, training and employment, children and families, health, finances, and drug and alcohol use.

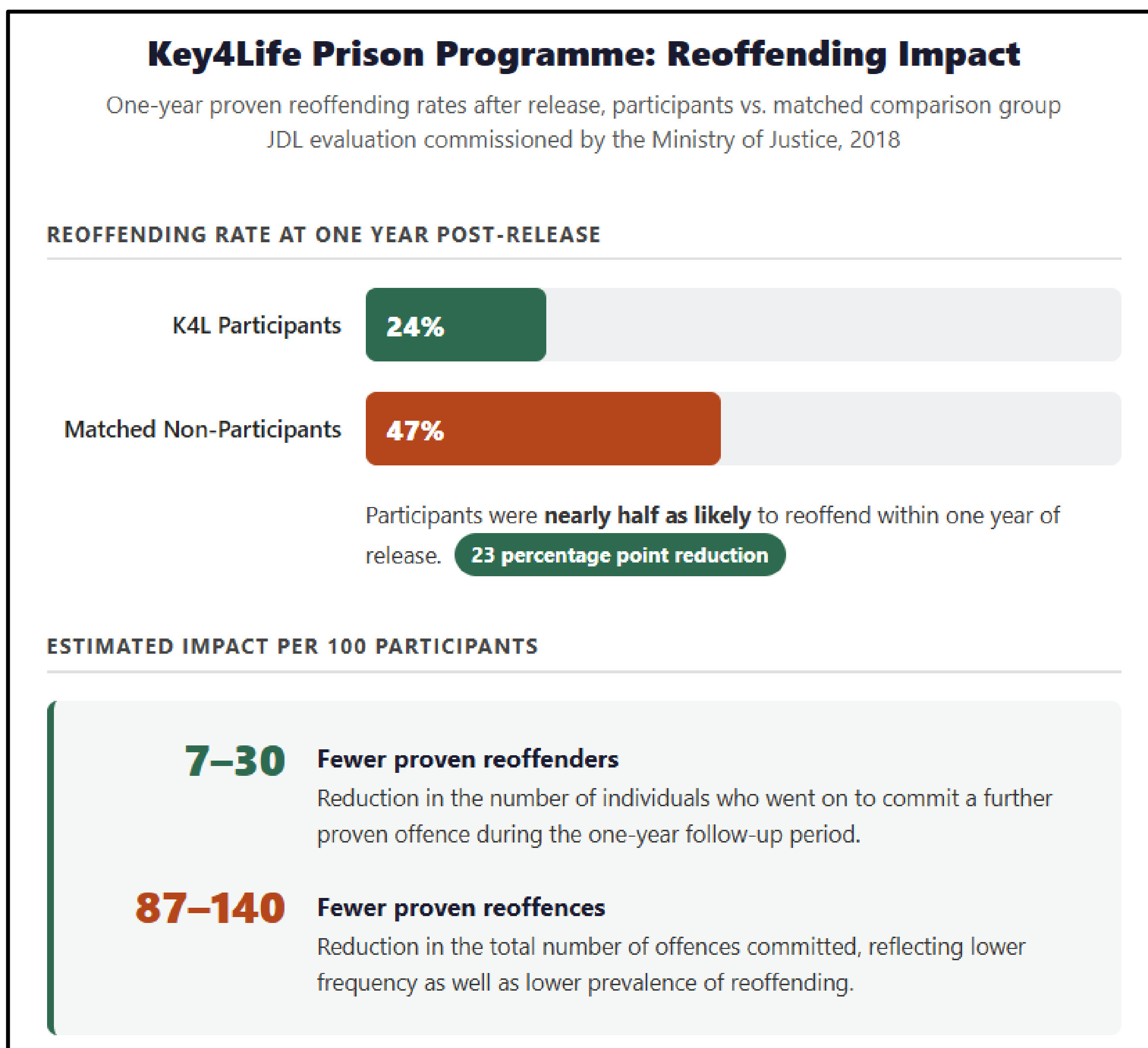
The Seven Pathways framework marked a decisive shift towards holistic and partnership-based rehabilitation. It encouraged collaboration between statutory services and third-sector organisations, recognising that many prisoners' needs extended beyond the remit of traditional correctional agencies (Gojkovic et al., 2011).

Voluntary organisations became central in delivering specialist support across multiple pathways, reflecting a move toward "through the gate" rehabilitation where engagement begins inside prison and continues post-release (Tomczak, 2016).

2.11 Evaluating Impact

The Justice Data Lab, created in 2014, has played an important role in assessing the effectiveness of voluntary and statutory interventions using reconviction data. By 2021, the JDL had evaluated 253 programmes, 79 of which showed statistically significant outcomes (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

The JDL's 2018 evaluation of Key4Life found that participants in its prison-based programme were significantly less likely to reoffend than a matched comparison group. One year after release, 24 per cent of participants had reoffended compared with 47 per cent of comparable non-participants (Ministry of Justice, 2018). The analysis provides evidence that, for every 100 participants, Key4Life may decrease the number of proven reoffenders during a one year period by between 7 and 30 men, and may decrease the number of proven reoffences during a one year period by between 87 and 140 offences (Ministry of Justice, 2018).



2.12 From Pathways to Desistance

Although the Seven Pathways model is policy-driven, it resonates with desistance theory. Each pathway targets core mechanisms of change identified in the literature: social bonds (Hirschi, 1969), employment and skill development (Gendreau et al., 2000), emotional wellbeing (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), and relational support (Weaver, 2015).

However, scholars have argued that its effectiveness depends less on discrete "pathways" and more on the quality of the relational and cultural environment in which they are delivered (Liebling and Arnold, 2004; Bullock and Bunce, 2020). Programmes that integrate emotional resilience, mentoring, and prosocial identity-building within these pathways, such as Key4Life, reflect an evolution from static service categories to dynamic, person-centred approaches grounded in desistance and wellbeing.

2.13 Summary of the Literature and Gaps

The review of literature highlights a long and complex history of penal rehabilitation in England and Wales, shaped by oscillating ideologies of punishment, welfare, and managerialism. Despite recurrent policy commitments to rehabilitation, the evidence demonstrates that progress has been uneven. Persistent issues of overcrowding, staff shortages, and limited purposeful activity continue to undermine efforts to promote meaningful change within prisons (Bullock and Bunce, 2020; Prison Reform Trust, 2023).

At the same time, a strong body of empirical and theoretical research has developed around desistance theory, the Good Lives Model, and rehabilitative culture frameworks, offering insight into the mechanisms that support sustained change. These perspectives converge on several key principles: rehabilitation is most effective when it addresses both internal transformation and external opportunity; emotional safety, trust, and recognition are essential for identity change; wellbeing, hope, and human connection are central to desistance; and support must continue across the prison–community boundary.

Policy models such as the Seven Pathways to Reducing Reoffending have formalised these principles, while the expansion of the third sector has demonstrated how relational, holistic, and strengths-based approaches can operationalise them in practice. Programmes involving creative, sporting, and therapeutic interventions have shown potential to build self-esteem, emotional literacy, and social bonds (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Daykin et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2019; Bachi, 2013).

However, the literature also exposes significant gaps:

1. **Limited qualitative understanding of lived experience** – Much existing research evaluates programmes through reconviction rates or quantitative outcomes. Fewer studies explore the subjective experiences of participants, their emotional journeys, and the ways they make sense of change.
2. **Under-representation of male identity and emotional rehabilitation** – While the literature has expanded on trauma and desistance, there

remains limited analysis of how masculinity, emotion, and self-expression intersect in the process of change among male offenders.

3. **Neglect of prison culture and relational context** – Studies increasingly acknowledge that rehabilitation cannot be separated from institutional climate, yet there is a shortage of research examining how programmes interact with wider prison culture, staff relationships, and peer dynamics.
4. **Scarcity of evidence from new-build or privately operated prisons** – Few studies have explored rehabilitation in contemporary resettlement facilities such as HMP Fosse Way, where design, staffing, and partnership models differ from the traditional estate.
5. **Insufficient exploration of multi-modal interventions** – Programmes that combine emotional, creative, and employability components, such as Key4Life, remain under-examined despite promising early findings from the Justice Data Lab (Ministry of Justice, 2018).

2.14 Rationale for the Present Study

This study responds directly to these gaps by providing a qualitative, empirically grounded analysis of men's experiences of rehabilitation within the Key4Life programme at HMP Fosse Way. It explores how participants describe personal and cultural change, how they experience emotional development, and how the programme interacts with the wider institutional environment. By situating these narratives within the frameworks of desistance theory and rehabilitative culture, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of what rehabilitation feels like from the inside and how innovative third-sector approaches may enhance both individual and institutional outcomes.

2.15 Conclusion

The literature establishes that rehabilitation is a multidimensional process shaped by personal agency, relational context, and institutional culture. Theoretical and policy developments, from desistance theory to the Seven Pathways framework, underscore the need for holistic, relational, and strengths-based interventions that address both emotional and structural barriers to change. Yet significant knowledge gaps remain concerning how such interventions are experienced by men in prison, particularly within newer resettlement facilities and third-sector-led programmes.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the lived experiences of men participating in Key4Life at HMP Fosse Way, exploring how they interpret personal transformation, relational support, and institutional culture through the lens of rehabilitation. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine these questions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction and Research Design

This research aimed to explore the operation and experienced effects of the Key4Life programme delivered at HMP Fosse Way during 2024. The study sought to capture how participants experienced the programme, the processes of personal change it supported, and the contextual factors shaping rehabilitation within the prison environment.

A qualitative design was selected as the most appropriate approach. Qualitative methods are well suited to exploring meaning, experience and process rather than measuring variables or testing predefined hypotheses (Mason, 2018). Key4Life already collected quantitative monitoring data; the purpose of this study was therefore to develop a deeper understanding of how the programme facilitated personal growth and behavioural change. The emphasis was on generating rich, detailed accounts of support, challenge, and transformation as experienced by men engaged in the programme (Charmaz, 2014).

3.2 Philosophical Orientation

The study was guided by an interpretivist–constructivist stance, treating rehabilitation as something people made sense of in their own words and contexts rather than as a fixed state measured only by external indicators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The focus was on how men described support, challenge, and transformation during imprisonment and through their engagement with Key4Life. Knowledge was understood as co-constructed in the interview setting, with participants' accounts shaped by their social positions and by the constraints of the prison environment (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Liebling, 1999).

The approach was inductive: patterns and themes were developed from what participants said and then related back to relevant ideas in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Quality was addressed through credibility, transparency, and reflexivity, including careful line-by-line coding, a documented analytic trail, attention to disconfirming cases, and clear description of the setting and sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

3.3 Sampling and Recruitment

The study adopted a purposive sampling strategy to recruit information-rich participants capable of illuminating programme processes, complemented by pragmatic convenience sampling shaped by prison access and scheduling constraints (Patton, 2002; Malterud et al., 2016). Inclusion criteria were: men enrolled in the Key4Life programme at HMP Fosse Way during the summer 2024 fieldwork period (including Key Mentors and new inductees).

Participants were recruited through a variety of routes reflecting the pragmatic realities of fieldwork in a custodial setting. The resettlement lead, a resettlement red

band prisoner, and on one occasion a prison officer facilitated access to participants depending on availability, and recruitment also occurred informally through peer recommendation among Key Mentors. The small number of community participants were identified with the assistance of Key4Life. It should be noted that the sample does not include men who were not accepted onto the programme or dropped out prior to interview, which represents a limitation of the study.

Prior to fieldwork, the Resettlement Lead disseminated participant information sheets to potential participants. On fieldwork days, researchers introduced the study at a Key4Life workshop, reiterated that participation was voluntary, and explained that involvement (or refusal) would have no impact on access to services or programme progression. Verbal informed consent was obtained immediately before each interview, recognising the practical constraints of the custodial setting (Liebling, 1999).

Sampling proceeded in three streams: programme participants at HMP Fosse Way, with Key Mentors often interviewed first to obtain experienced perspectives followed by new inductees to capture early engagement; Key4Life and Serco staff invited to provide organisational perspectives; and Key4Life programme participants living in the community.

A total of 46 interviews were completed with men who participated in Key4Life. 41 were serving sentences at HMP Fosse Way, of whom 15 were Key Mentors. Five were living in the community having completed the programme; 3 of these were involved in programme delivery.

Participants ranged in age from 21 to 45 years, with a median age of 31. In terms of ethnicity, 52 per cent identified as Black British, followed by White British (22%), Mixed Black and White British (7%), White Irish (7%), and other ethnicities (7%).

The 15 Key Mentors were predominantly serving long sentences of 12 years or more, including two life sentences, while the 26 programme participants were generally younger and serving more varied sentence lengths, with a greater proportion serving under 12 years. The 5 community participants had varied custodial histories. A summary of participant profiles by group is provided in Table 1 below.

Group	n	Age	Sentence Length
Key Mentors (HMP Fosse Way)	15	26-45	8-27 years, including two life sentences
Programme Participants (HMP Fosse Way)	26	20-41	20 months-26 years, predominantly under 12 years
Comunity Participants	5	30-39	Varied, incl. short & longer sentences
Total	46	20-45	-

Table 1. Participant Profile by Group.

Fuller demographic detail, including offence types and sentence length distributions, is provided in Figures 8 and 9 in the findings chapter. This sample provided strong information power by combining in-custody and post-release

perspectives and by including men at different stages of engagement (Malterud et al., 2016).

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Fieldwork was conducted in summer 2024 by researchers from London Metropolitan University, in liaison with Key4Life and HMP Fosse Way. Access and scheduling were arranged with the prison Resettlement Leads to comply with security procedures and minimise disruption to the regime (Jewkes, 2012; Liebling, 1999).

Most interviews took place in a transparent, sound-attenuated room adjacent to the Resettlement Office, providing privacy while allowing visual oversight in line with prison protocols. Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the intended use of data, and participants' rights including confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to decline any question or withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained verbally and audio-recorded. To maximise accessibility, participants were provided with easy-read information sheets written in plain language and including photographs of the researchers; information was also read aloud to ensure informed consent for anyone with literacy difficulties. This approach was recommended by the Serco ethics panel and reflects established practice in prison research (Liebling, 1999).

Interviews followed a standardised topic schedule covering core domains: basic demographics; life before prison; offence circumstances; experiences of imprisonment; engagement with Key4Life; and perceived support, challenges, and transformations. Interviewers exercised discretion to probe, reorder questions, and follow relevant lines of inquiry raised by participants (Ritchie et al., 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews typically lasted around one hour, with several extending to two or three hours.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were manually checked for accuracy and anonymised, with identifying details removed prior to analysis. Anonymised transcripts were imported into NVivo 15 for coding and theme development.

3.5 Data Analysis

Analysis followed an interpretive thematic approach. The lead researcher undertook close, line-by-line coding to label segments of text relevant to the study aims. Codes were developed inductively from the data and iteratively refined through constant comparison within and across interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Related codes were grouped into higher-order categories and provisional themes, which were reviewed against the dataset to ensure coherence, distinctiveness and analytic fit.

To preserve context, coding captured both case-level nuance and cross-case patterns. As patterns stabilised, themes were organised around participants' trajectories and touchpoints with Key4Life: life before prison; prison experiences; engagement with Key4Life; and perceived support, challenges and transformations. Quality was addressed through credibility, transparency, and reflexivity, including

careful line-by-line coding, a documented analytic trail, attention to disconfirming cases, and clear description of the setting and sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Illustrative quotations were selected to evidence each theme, prioritising clarity, diversity of voice and relevance to rehabilitation processes (Mason, 2018). Throughout, the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts while linking, where appropriate, to concepts in the desistance literature (Charmaz, 2014).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the London Metropolitan University Ethics Committee and Serco's research ethics panel (see Appendix A). Fieldwork procedures complied with institutional requirements for research in custodial settings (Liebling, 1999).

Participation was voluntary. Researchers explained the study purpose, data use and participant rights including confidentiality, anonymity, the option to skip questions, and the right to stop or withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained verbally and audio-recorded. To maximise accessibility, participants received easy-read information sheets with photographs of the researchers, and all information was read aloud to avoid excluding anyone with literacy difficulties.

Pseudonyms were assigned and identifying details removed at transcription (Wiles et al., 2008). Audio files and transcripts were stored in a restricted-access workspace compliant with London Metropolitan University and Serco data-protection policies and will be retained for six years before deletion. Only the research team had access to raw data.

The limits of confidentiality were explained at the outset, in accordance with ethical guidelines for criminological research (British Society of Criminology, 2015). If a participant disclosed intentions to commit serious harm, or serious past violence indicating current risk, researchers had a duty to escalate concerns appropriately. No breaches of confidentiality were required during this study.

Given the sensitivity of discussing offending, imprisonment and personal histories, interviews were conducted using a trauma-informed approach (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Participants could pause, skip questions or end the interview at any time. Sources of support were signposted, including Key4Life Mentors, prison Keyworkers, PACT helpline and the Samaritans.

3.7 Research Context

The study was originally designed to explore Key4Life's community programme but was redirected to HMP Fosse Way at the invitation of Key4Life's CEO, providing a valuable opportunity to examine the programme in a custodial setting. As is common in prison research, fieldwork was shaped by institutional gatekeeping, operational constraints, and the need to balance methodological rigour with pragmatic adaptation (Jewkes, 2012; Liebling, 1999).

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from qualitative interviews with 46 men who participated in the Key4Life programme. Of these, 41 were serving sentences at HMP Fosse Way, 15 as Key4Life mentors (many serving long sentences) and 26 predominantly younger men serving shorter sentences. The remaining 5 had completed the programme and were living in the community, with 3 involved in delivering Key4Life as Key Mentors in prisons and community 'at risk' programmes.

The analysis explores three interconnected domains: participants' backgrounds and pathways to custody; their experiences of imprisonment; and their engagement with Key4Life and its reported impacts. The chapter begins with participants' lives before imprisonment rather than the programme itself, an analytical choice reflecting a core principle of desistance scholarship: that meaningful engagement with rehabilitation cannot be understood without first grasping the social, economic, and relational contexts that structure both offending and the possibilities for change (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2016).

The background sections reveal how poverty, spatial marginalisation, normalised violence, familial instability, educational exclusion, and racism operated not as isolated risk factors but as intersecting forms of structural disadvantage that systematically narrowed the pathways available to these young men. Understanding these interlocking conditions is essential context for interpreting participants' accounts of their lives, their pathways into crime, and their subsequent engagement with the Key4Life programme. Subsequent sections trace how participants navigated these constrained environments and chart their criminalisation through racialised policing, gang profiling, and joint enterprise prosecutions, demonstrating how trajectories toward custody were produced through systematic institutional abandonment rather than individual pathology.

The prison life section examines incarceration not as a site of rehabilitation but as a space of social reproduction that reinforces pre-existing conditions and relationships. Against this backdrop, the final section examines participants' engagement with Key4Life and its reported effects, exploring what distinguished it from other prison programmes: relational approaches characterised by genuine care, the credibility of ex-offender facilitators, and culturally relevant pedagogy. It examines the tools and practices participants identified as transformative, emotional development work through NLP and equine therapy, opportunities for authentic communication, employability training, and mentoring relationships that enabled identity transformation. The section concludes by analysing participants' accounts of cognitive and relational shifts: changed mindsets, re-evaluated relationships, and the tentative adoption of prosocial identities oriented toward hope rather than fatalism.

Throughout the chapter, analysis remains grounded in participants' own words while situating their accounts within broader criminological frameworks addressing desistance, rehabilitation, structural inequality, and carceral harm. The findings reveal

both the profound challenges participants faced in contexts of compounded disadvantage and criminalisation, and the conditions under which meaningful change became possible, suggesting that effective rehabilitation requires not only individual intervention but recognition of the structural forces that shape both offending and desistance.

4.2 Participants' background

4.2.1 Demographics and Background

The backgrounds of the 46 participants reflect a broad range of life experiences but are marked by significant commonalities relating to disadvantage, instability, and early exposure to adversity.

Age, Ethnicity and Fatherhood: The 46 men ranged from 21 to 45 years old, with a median age of 31, aligning with national trends showing that men in their thirties comprise the largest age group in prison (Ministry of Justice, 2024c).

In terms of ethnic background (See Figure 1), over half (n=24, 52%) identified as Black British, followed by White British (n=10), and smaller numbers identifying as Mixed Black and White British (n=3), White Irish (n=3), and Other ethnicities (n=3).

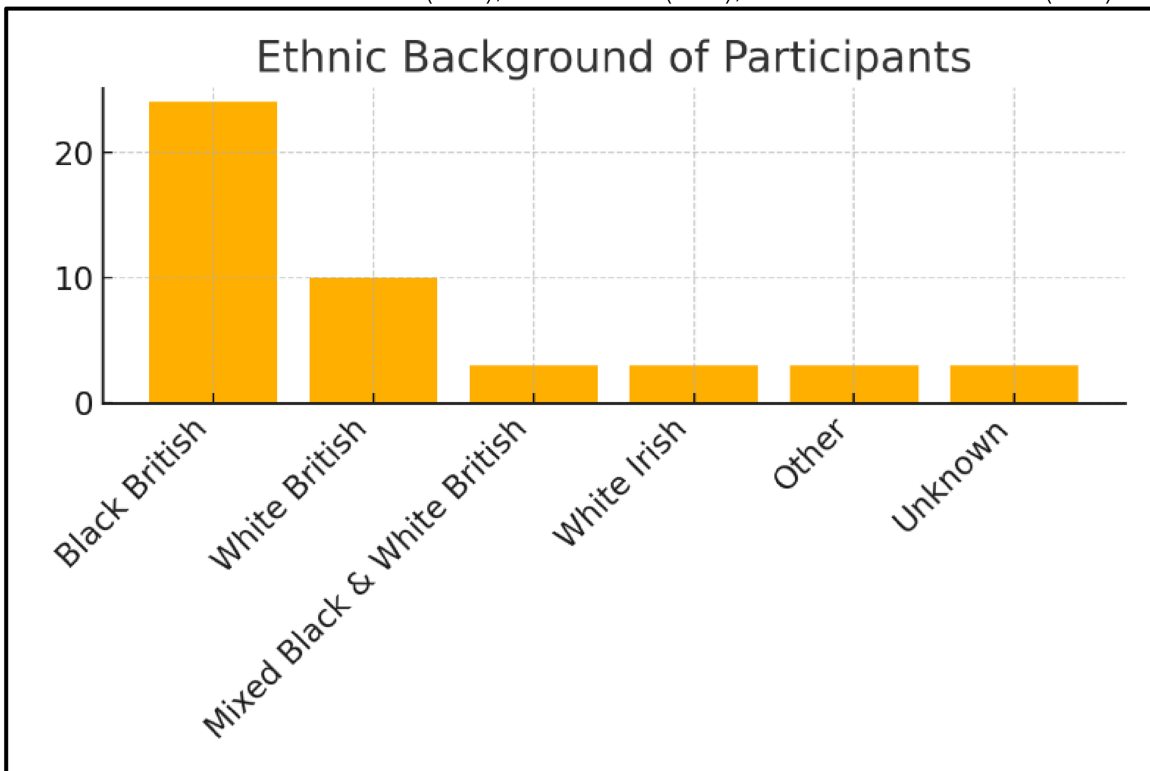


Fig 1. Chart to show the ethnic background of participants.

The overrepresentation of Black British men (52%) in this sample far exceeds both their proportion in the general population (3%) and even their disproportional presence in custody (12%) (Ministry of Justice, 2024e), echoing longstanding concerns about racial disparity and systemic bias within the criminal justice system (Lammy Review, 2017).

Just under half (n=20, 42%) had children, with a total of 43 children across the group. Narratives revealed that fatherhood was often marked by emotional strain, disrupted contact, and legal or custody challenges, echoing wider findings that imprisonment undermines men's ability to maintain paternal roles (Farmer, 2017; Condry & Minson, 2020).

Mental Health and Neurodivergence: Experiences of mental health difficulties were widespread. Half the participants (n=24) reported mental health issues while in prison. These included depression (n=10), anxiety (n=7), PTSD (n=5), anger issues (n=3), sleep issues (n=3), substance use as coping (n=3), paranoia (n=2), suicidal ideation (n=2), bipolar disorder (n=1), and hearing voices (n=1).

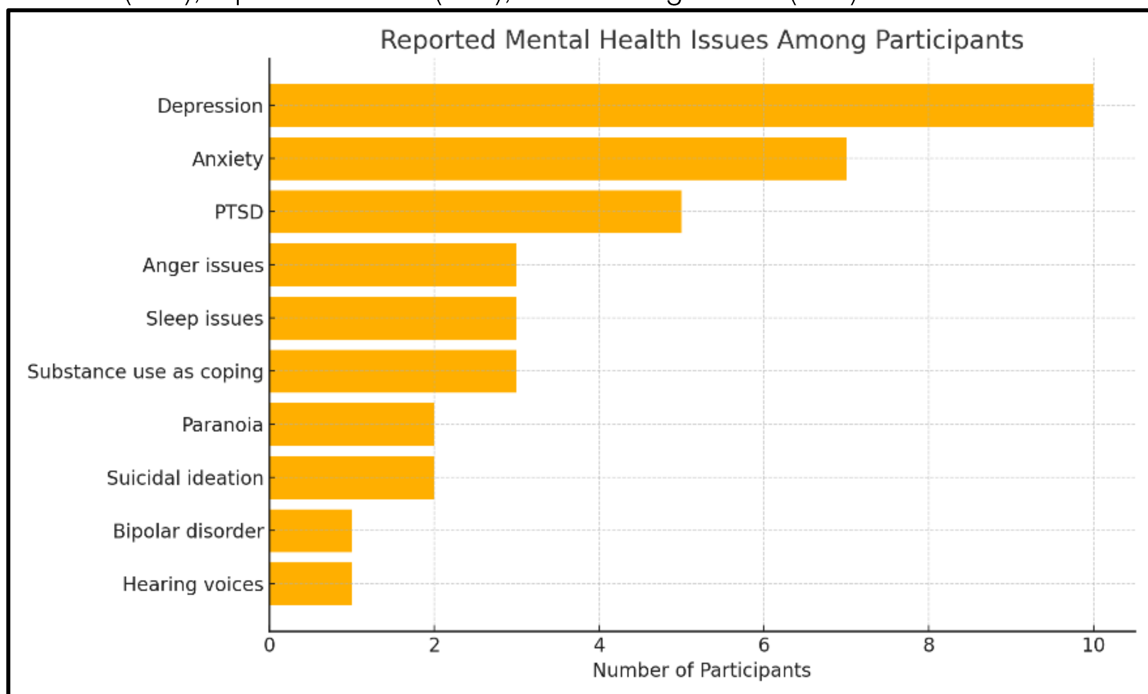


Fig 2. Chart to show reported mental health issues among participants.

Additionally, nearly a third (n=13) identified as neurodivergent, predominantly with ADHD, most diagnosed for the first time while in prison. ADHD prevalence in prison populations is estimated between 8% and 25% (Fazel & Favril, 2024; Young et al. 2018, Young et al., 2015), significantly higher than the 2.5–4% in the general adult population (NICE, 2018).

Only three participants (6.5%) reported living with a physical disability. This figure is notably lower than estimates suggesting that 11% of all prisoners have a physical disability (Prison Reform Trust, 2025).

Family Structure and Adversity: Family disruption and childhood adversity were pronounced. Less than half had been raised in two-parent households (n=21), around a quarter (n=14) were raised by a single parent, while others grew up in blended families or with step-parents (n=5), or were cared for by grandparents (n=3).

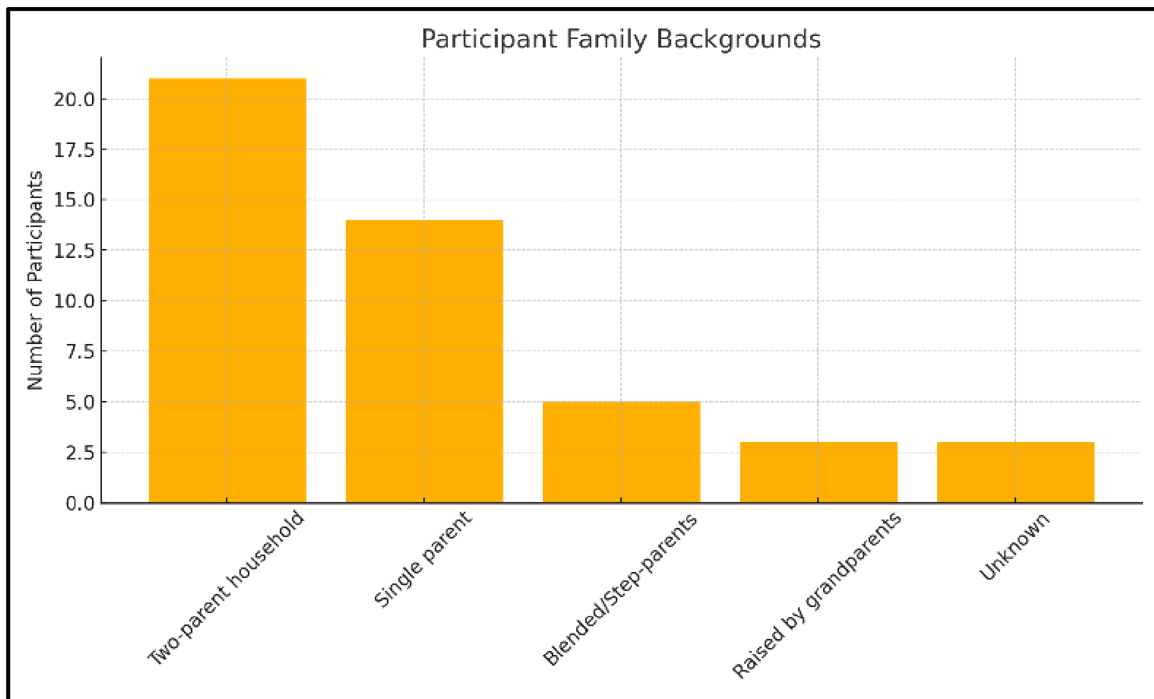


Fig 3. Chart to show participant family backgrounds.

Nearly half (n=23) reported significant familial adversity, including the death of a parent or sibling, parental imprisonment, substance misuse or mental health issues within the home, domestic breakdown, or being thrown out of the family home. Such early adversity is strongly linked to later offending (Farrington & Welsh, 2007; Ford et al., 2019).

Socio-Economic Marginalisation: Participants commonly described growing up in socially and economically marginalised environments. Over a third (n=17) spoke of growing up on council estates and in neighbourhoods many described as 'crime-ridden', marked by poverty, gang activity, and limited legitimate opportunity, and many (n=11) described financial hardship, often linked to lone parenting, housing instability, disability or parental substance abuse. Some (n=7) identified as coming from working-class backgrounds, while one participant had grown up in local authority care, and another identified as from a Traveller community.

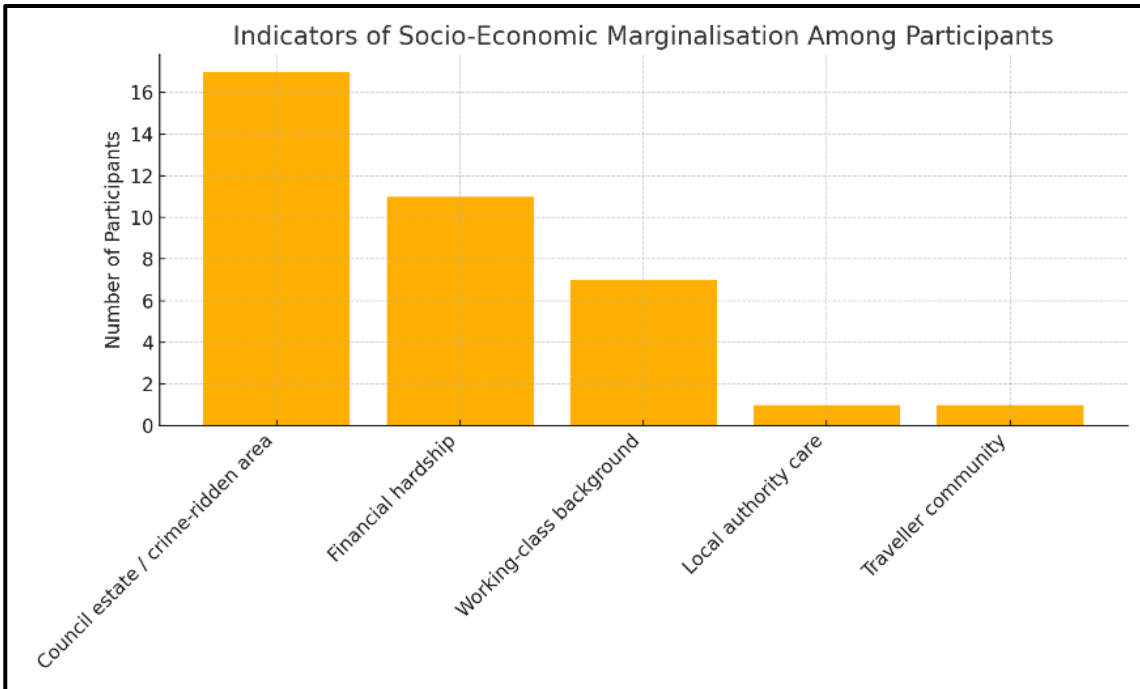


Fig 4. Chart to show indicators of socio-economic marginalisation among participants.

Educational Disruption: More than half the men described serious disruption to their schooling prior to reaching their GCSEs. Educational exclusion was common (n=15) due to disruptive or sometimes violent behaviour. Around 40% of prisoners were permanently excluded from school (Cathro et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2012), and exclusion remains a strong predictor of future custody, with permanent exclusion increasing custody risk by 33 percentage points (Cathro et al., 2023). Participants attributed exclusion to factors such as boredom, undiagnosed neurodivergence, lack of cultural understanding/language barriers, bullying and gang involvement. Almost a quarter (n=11) reported being sent to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). Some participants (n=6) were involved in criminal activity before age 16 and ended up in Youth Offender Institutions.

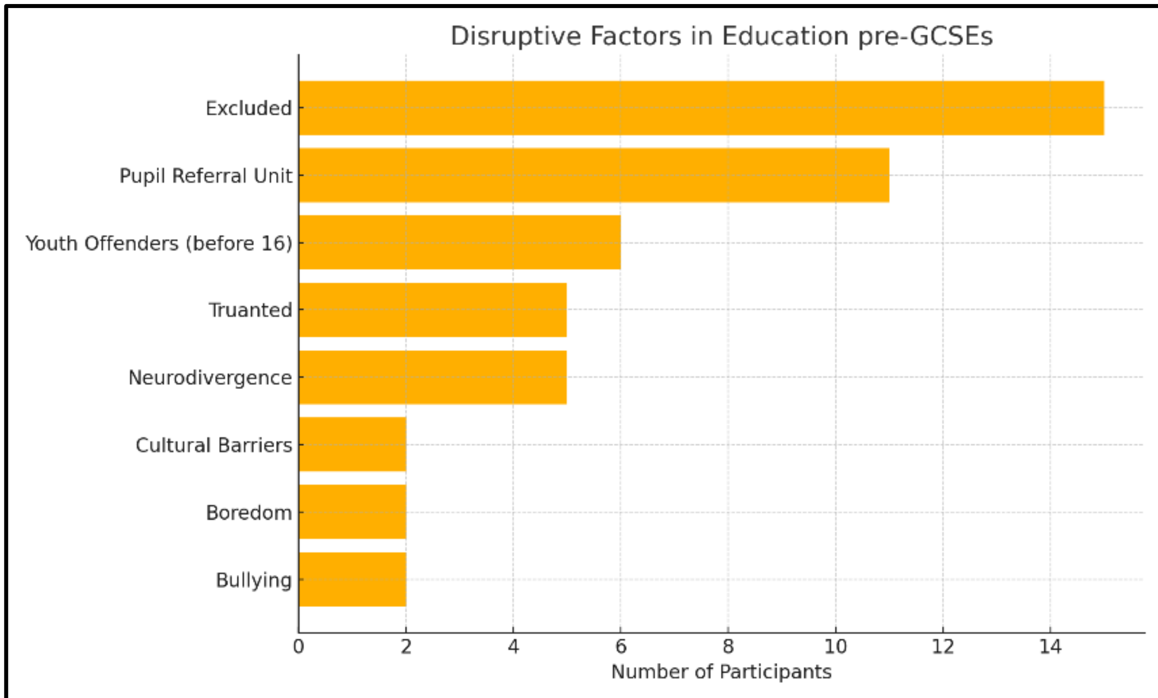


Fig 5. Chart to show disruptive factors in education pre-GCSEs.

<u>Early Criminalisation:</u> Criminal activity began early. Sixty percent (n=29) of participants reported first becoming involved in crime before the age of 16. Several recounted first offences occurring as young as 10-12, a dozen as young teens between 13-14 (n=12), the majority at 15 (n=10) and a few at aged 16 (n=3).

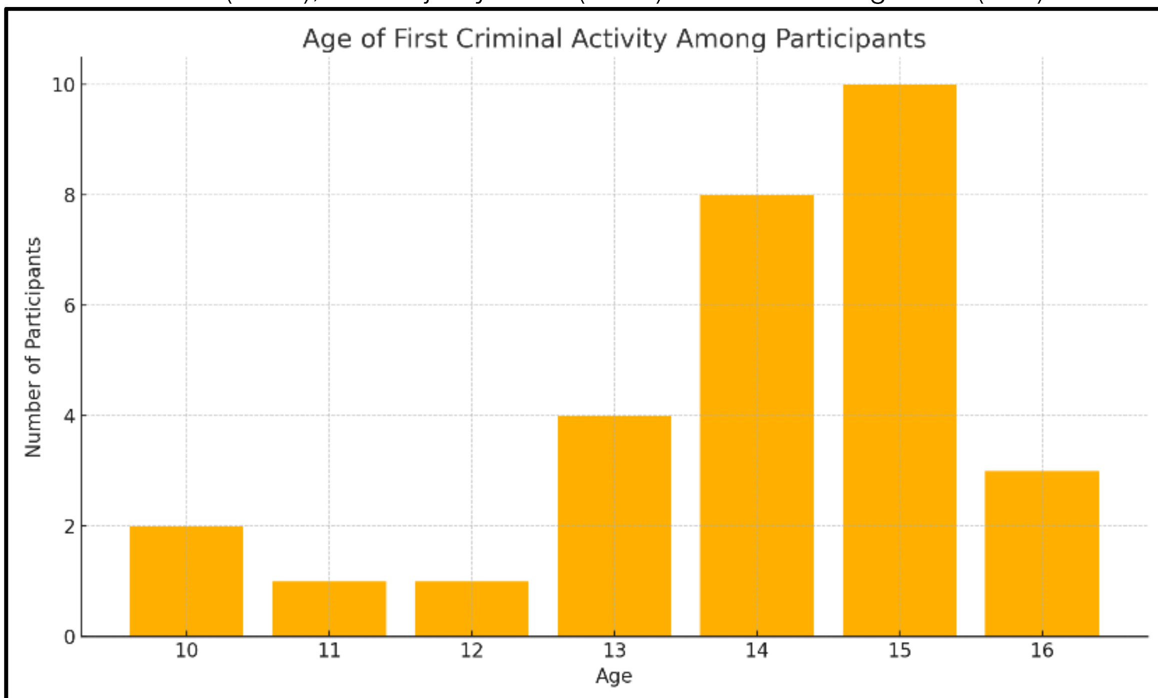


Fig 6. Chart to show age of first criminal act among participants.

Common early offences of the 29 participants who started offending between ages 10-16 included: drug dealing (n=18), robbery (n=11), violent offences (n=10), theft (n=6), burglary (n=5) and gang-related behaviour (n=5).

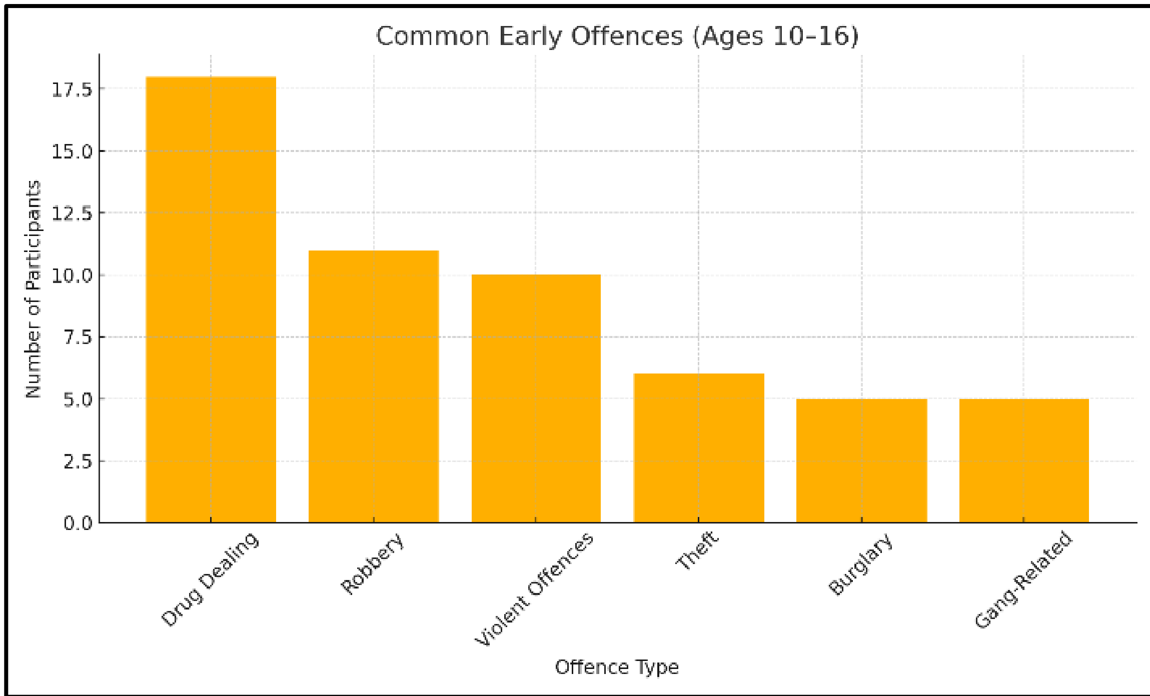


Fig 7. Chart to show common early offences (age 10-16).

This pattern of early-onset offending is consistent with longitudinal studies of criminal careers (Moffitt, 1993), which highlight childhood and early adolescent onset as markers for sustained system involvement. Half (n=23) had spent time in Young Offender Institutions.

<u>Current Offences and Sentences:</u> Participants at HMP Fosse Way (n=41) including both Key4Life programme participants and mentors had been convicted of a wide range of index offences, pointing to a cohort with serious and often violent offending histories.

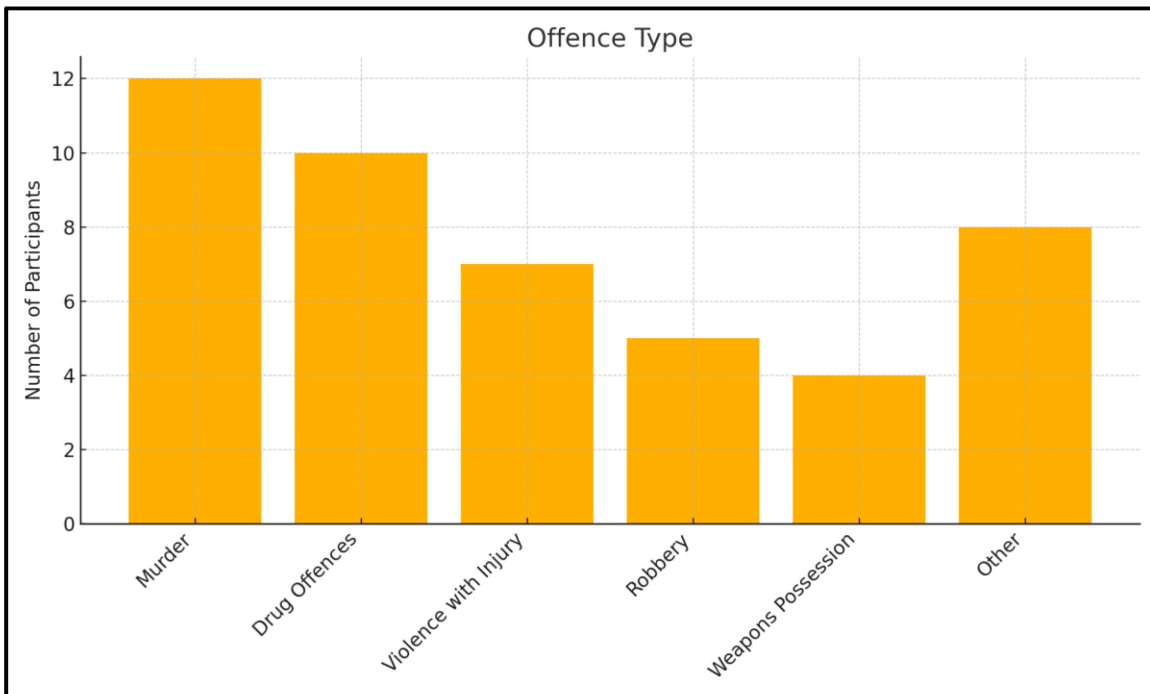


Fig 8. Chart to show offence type.

The most common reported offence was murder, accounting for 26.1% of the group (n=12), including several joint enterprise cases. This was followed by drug offences (21.7%, n=10) and violence with injury (15.2%, n=7). Other offences included robbery (10.9%, n=5), weapons possession (8.7%, n=4), attempted murder, violence without injury, and theft (each 4.3%, n=2), as well as kidnap, domestic violence and rape, each representing 2.2% (n=1).

Among the 41 participants at HMP Fosse Way, 40 provided information about their sentence lengths.

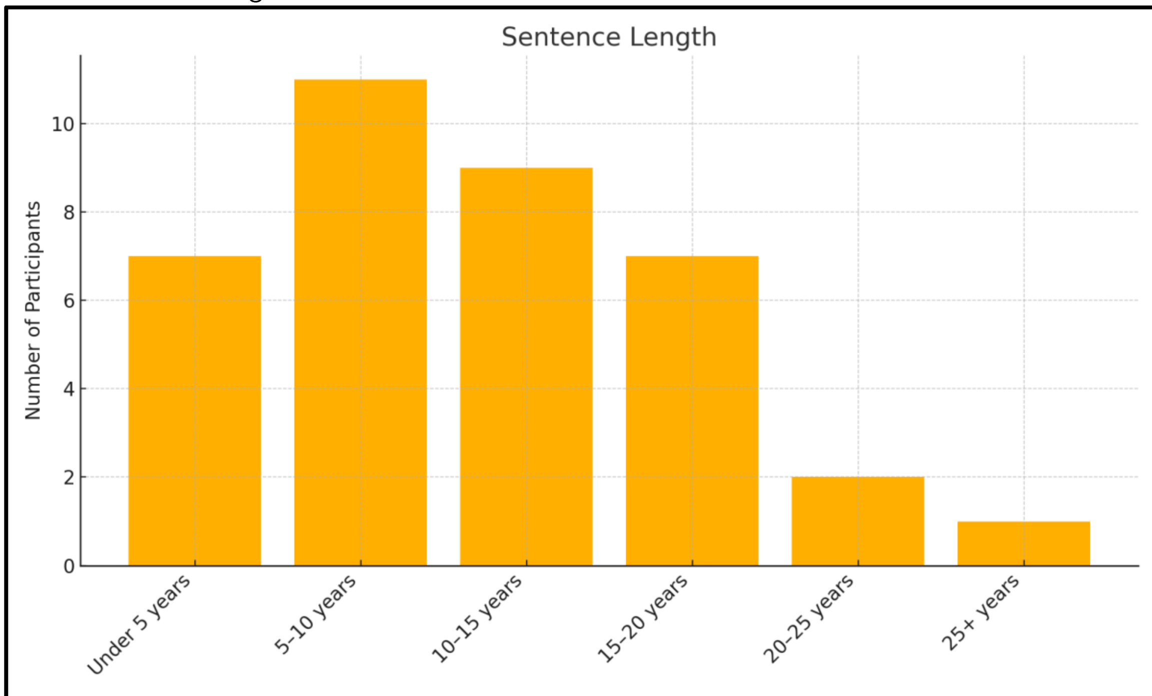


Figure 9. Chart to show sentence length.

The median sentence length was 10.5 years, with a range from 3 to 27 years, highlighting considerable spread in custodial experiences. This is substantially above the national average custodial sentence length of 19.9 months across all offences (Ministry of Justice, 2025d). The largest proportion (31.4%) were serving sentences of 5 to 10 years, followed by 25.7% serving 10 to 15 years, and 20% serving 15 to 20 years. A smaller proportion (17.1%) were serving sentences of under 5 years, while just 5.7% were serving 20 to 25 years.

This distribution reflects a cohort comprising both short- and long-term prisoners, indicating diverse levels of offending severity and a wide spectrum of rehabilitative need, from those early in their sentence to men with over a decade in custody. It should be noted that the median sentence length is skewed upward by the inclusion of the 15 Key Mentors, many of whom are serving long sentences for serious offences. The sentence profile of the 26 programme participants alone is considerably shorter and more varied, more consistent with Key4Life's target population of young men serving shorter custodial sentences.

Gang involvement was reported by just under half the men (n=21, 46%), though many challenged the accuracy or usefulness of the label 'gang' and the assumptions built into gang narratives. Many asserted they were simply part of a group of friends who had grown up together and took issue with the way they had been labelled or

profiled as gang members by authorities. This echoes academic critiques that 'gang' categorisations are often racialised, imprecise, and socially constructed (Hallsworth & Young, 2008), with particular concerns about how such labels become racialised and disproportionately applied to Black youth (Williams & Clarke, 2016; Bridges, 2015).

These statistics illustrate the profound levels of adversity, complexity, and resilience within the Key4Life cohort, forming the backdrop against which the programme's impact is best understood.

4.2.2 Environmental and Familial Disadvantage

The following subsections examine the environmental and familial conditions that shaped participants' early lives, exploring how poverty, spatial marginalisation, familial instability, educational disruption, and racism intersected to produce constrained pathways and heightened vulnerability to criminalisation.

Poverty, Deprivation and Social Comparison: The narratives of many participants were marked by acute material deprivation, where poverty was not only a structural condition but a lived reality that shaped daily choices, aspirations, and ultimately pathways into crime. The absence of basic resources featured heavily in accounts of growing up in households struggling under the weight of financial hardship, lone parenting, parental addiction or disability. These early experiences were not only economically constraining but emotionally corrosive, producing shame, frustration, and a growing sense of social exclusion. Ismail, who grew up with his family of five sleeping on the floor of a one-bedroom flat, recalled how he internalised a sense of inferiority from a young age:

> “Always felt like, underneath people, in anything I done, you know, even, like, going to my friend's house, they've got all the games and clothes but when I go I've got, no..I don't. Even when we had the 3 bedroom, I never had my own room” — Ismail.

This feeling of being left behind shaped what Bourdieu (1986) calls habitus, embodied dispositions formed through social position, which in this case developed in opposition to mainstream values of achievement and delayed gratification. Crucially, habitus operates reflexively: Ismail's sense of inferiority was not simply internally generated but was confirmed and reinforced through the responses of others, whose recognition of his social position reproduced the very conditions that produced it (Bourdieu, 1986; Wacquant, 2008). Such dynamics are well-documented among marginalised youth who, facing blocked opportunities and daily experiences of exclusion, adopt alternative status hierarchies and survival strategies (Willis, 1977; Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2003). For these men, crime was not simply deviance but a rational adaptation to conditions in which legitimate pathways to dignity and material security remained inaccessible.

For some, it was the visibility of that lack, measured against more affluent peers, that seeded criminal aspirations. Jay articulated this dynamic:

Family can never afford what other peoples' parents can afford for them and so it started with odd things, like here and there, trying to make money on the streets. Jay.

Several participants articulated a form of moral ambivalence around crime, where offending was perceived not simply as deviant but as rational, even necessary, under conditions of exclusion. Ismail, who had played football for elite teams including QPR and Southampton, saw his sporting future collapse when his mother could no longer afford to take him to training:

I felt bad about my mum taking me anyway, she'd come out looking so tired. She was looking after my nan as well. She got to look after my brothers, cook, and my dad. And like, I felt like a burden. Ismail.

The shame of poverty also appeared as a recurring theme in the men's relationships with school, often fuelling withdrawal or strategies of concealment. Ismail described how losing access to free school meals in secondary school led him to adopt an elaborate façade:

> "Sometimes I'd like, go into school and I'd have no money. Everyone would be eating and, like, I won't be eating, but then people would be asking, 'Oh, we'll buy you food,' I'd say, 'No I'm not hungry.' Like, you know, just brush it off. Like, 'Don't worry about me. I've got money.'" — Ismail.

What emerges from these accounts is not just economic disadvantage, but a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990), where the men's experiences of deprivation were accompanied by feelings of humiliation, misrecognition, and alienation from institutions that failed to account for their material realities. Many men described their eventual engagement in criminal activity not as a transgression but as a response to need, status anxiety, or protective pride. Nahale traced his entry into crime directly to witnessing his mother's financial distress: "It turned out from seeing my mom struggling... seeing just a big fat red letter and writing talking about court." Luke, who grew up with a grandmother who had no work and described having "nothing," articulated the pull toward crime starkly:

Having no mum or dad around. Having a nan who didn't have no work? We lived in a really shit area. And just the temptation. And we just had nothing. Luke.

These experiences of poverty were not isolated to the household but deeply embedded within the physical and social environments the men inhabited.

<u>Spatial Inequality and the Geography of Entrapment:</u> The spatial contexts in which the men grew up were not merely backdrops to their lives, but active producers of social constraint and criminal risk. Council estates and overcrowded housing featured prominently in accounts, and many participants described growing up in neighbourhoods they experienced as socially abandoned, saturated with violence, poorly serviced, and heavily policed, what Wacquant (2007) calls zones of 'territorial stigmatisation'. It is important to note that such characterisations reflect participants' accounts of their specific environments rather than a generalisation about council estate life more broadly.

Photograph to show poorly serviced street in the UK (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

Barry described the council estate he grew up on as "the roughest estate in London," a place where: “there was many negative influences around me, on TV, in my local environment, local schools, youth clubs”. He reflected with conviction on the deterministic power of place:

If I was in a different environment, I wouldn't have been inside prison because the boy I was then I still feel like I'm still the same person. Always had good morals, a good heart. Barry.

Many men had moved frequently during childhood, often due to poverty, unstable tenancies, or housing policy. Santo, Jay, and Luke all described being displaced by council housing departments from one troubled area to another. These relocations offered no escape from violence or risk, only a shifting of the same conditions across postcodes. As Cole explained after being moved to a new area:

> “To be fair, the circumstances around that as well... bearing in mind I've left my local area to go to an area that is predominately white... but due to me being from my area I don't really know what's going on in different areas. So, when I got to that area, I realized that there's more gangs there. There's more gangs, there's more problems, it's just that they're coming from different areas. Do you get it? So you've got the same issues, just different area” — Cole.

Such reflections resonate with Atkinson and Kintrea's (2001) argument that 'area effects', the spatial clustering of disadvantage, can compound social exclusion by limiting access to networks, services, and opportunities.

Even when physical movement occurred, the men felt psychologically and socially bounded by the reputation of their estates and the territorial politics that governed urban space. Ismail described a violent encounter that occurred shortly

after his family was relocated by the council to a new area. When asked "Where you from?" by local youths, his response, "I'm from here", was immediately challenged:

He said, 'No, you're from X road.' And he came out, and he took out his like, little blade on me, and he's chased me... I was like, a baby like 11 years old. Ismail.

This experience of spatial stigma produces what Wacquant (2007) calls the 'blemish of place,' a powerful form of misrecognition where individuals from marginalised areas are perceived through the lens of territorial threat. As Luke put it starkly: "There's no escape."

Normalised Violence and Crime in the Neighbourhood: For the majority of participants, violence and criminality were not exceptional events but routine features of their everyday environments. While participants were not directly asked about neighbourhood violence, accounts of growing up in areas marked by crime, gang activity, and deprivation emerged spontaneously and consistently across the dataset, suggesting this was a pervasive rather than isolated experience.

Growing up in areas saturated with poverty, gang presence, and heavy police surveillance, crime was understood not as a deviation but as a normalised cultural script, a way of life that shaped how young men navigated their social worlds. As Bourgois (2003) and Hallsworth and Young (2008) argue, in contexts of structural marginality, violence can take on a functional and symbolic role, becoming embedded in identity formation, respect dynamics, and survival strategies.t:

It is important to note, however, that neighbourhood context is not deterministic: the majority of young people from similarly deprived areas do not follow pathways into crime. Rather, it is the combination of structural disadvantage with individual vulnerabilities, fractured family relationships, educational exclusion, and limited legitimate opportunity, that heightens criminogenic risk (Farrington, 2003).

Dean's account illustrates this process of normalisation with striking clarity:

> “When you're there it becomes normalized. So you see guns and shootings and stabbings and people selling drugs, because you see it every day from such a young age, that's all you, not all you kind of know, but you, because you just seen it so, so much, you just think, you know, this is just normal life, this is how things are. Then as I got older, and I started going to different areas and seeing, okay, this area is not like this? Why is this area not like this? That's when I started to question things” — Dean.

This saturation of violence produced a form of emotional numbing and desensitisation that many men carried into adolescence. Zach echoed this when asked if growing up in a rough area had been challenging:

> “No, I didn't notice because this is, this is just normal to me. These type of things, like seeing people getting run down on the street, fighting” — Zach.

Photograph to show Young man with a gun (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

Photograph to show a man being arrested (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

Weapons became both tools of self-protection and markers of status. Luke articulated the instrumental logic of weapon carrying in areas marked by territorial conflict:

> "For you to have that sort of beef on road you have to walk around with a knife or something because if you don't, you might end up dead. All it takes is for someone to see ya pull up in a car, three people jump out. You've got no knife. Where ya running? You've got one person driving behind the wheel, two people chasing, you're fucked. That's what happens in x town" — Luke.

Participants also highlighted the spatial logic of postcode wars, where identity was closely tied to territory and inter-area conflict was a defining feature of youth culture. Jay described an extended period of estate-to-estate violence:

> "Basically, we had problems with an estate... these problems went back and forth over about a year and a half two-year period. They would come to our estate, we would go to theirs, back and forth, back and forth, stabbings, shootings and someone was nearly paralyzed from a gunshot wound to the spine. And it was only a matter of time, only a matter of time before someone died" —Jay.

He went on to describe the visceral hatred that territorial rivalry produced:

> "I hated them with passion, like, if one of them got touched, like, stabbed or something I'd think, good, good. I didn't know why. I don't know why... I used to look at the estate and think we own this. This is ours. This is our like, kingdom. This is our realm here init, like, Game of Thrones" — Jay.

These accounts speak to Wacquant's (2009) analysis of how the hyper-policing of marginalised neighbourhoods produces a climate of mistrust, surveillance, and pre-emptive aggression, where the ever-present threat of incarceration coexists with routine exposure to violence. This normalisation of violence shaped not only behaviour but also worldview, embedding the idea that power, safety, and survival were secured through intimidation or pre-emptive force.

Familial Instability and the Emotional Landscape of Disadvantage: Beyond the external pressures of poverty and neighbourhood violence, many of the men recounted turbulent and emotionally fraught family lives. Their narratives reflect not only the structural fragility of the family unit, due to parental imprisonment, separation, or substance use, but also the emotional disconnection, grief, and unmet attachment needs that characterised their formative years.

Several participants described absent or emotionally unavailable fathers. Sam's matter-of-fact statement captured the normalisation of paternal absence:

> "I grew up with five siblings. We all lived in the house. Mom, no, Dad. He's a bad boy, he's not about like that" — Sam.

Others described how parental strictness or emotional detachment drove them to seek connection elsewhere. Yasin explained that his father's rigid control pushed

him towards older peers and gang involvement, noting that when parents "don't know how to communicate that they care," young people perceive them as adversaries rather than protectors. Naem's experience revealed how emotional abuse could be even more damaging than physical violence:

> “My father made my household very bad for me, so I wanted to be out there... it was emotional abuse, which was even more worse. I would've prefer he hit me” — Naem.

The absence of emotional warmth emerged as a consistent thread. Jose, despite growing up in a large family, described profound isolation, explaining that "in terms of parenting and stuff, it wasn't very apparent." His account illuminated the complex cultural dimensions for families navigating life as migrants in British society:

> “The people [in Libya] were very militant... so they're not very affectionate. But when you live amongst British people and people are very kind to their children... now you have a comparison... So that's why you fall victim to gang culture or whatever” — Jose.

Parental substance misuse added layers of instability and role reversal. Steve described his father's worsening addiction:

> “Growing up, I was around quite a lot of drugs, and my father was a drug addict... his addiction got worse, so then he started selling my stuff to fund his habit” — Steve.

Experiences of bereavement profoundly shaped several participants' trajectories. Liam witnessed the murder of his cousin, whom he referred to as his 'cousin-brother', at age 12-13:

> “One of my brothers basically got killed in front of me... He got shot in his head... that kind of made man go down that path... I still get flashbacks, but as I've got old, it's got worse. Because when I was younger, I never spoke about it” — Liam.

For some, family breakdown led to literal homelessness. Santo was expelled from his grandmother's home at sixteen and unable to return to his mother's overcrowded household:

> “I ended up kicked out and I was homeless. It was sleeping in parks, cars... for like, two months... I didn't want to be homeless because I was scared of what could happen. I could be sleeping and someone could try to hurt me” — Santo.

Photograph to show a homeless man (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

These familial disruptions formed the emotional scaffolding of the men's lives, shaping how they related to themselves, others, and the wider world. The psychological impact of such early adversity aligns with findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences literature (Felitti et al., 1998; Hughes et al., 2017), which links childhood trauma to long-term behavioural and mental health outcomes.

Disrupted Education and Early Disengagement: Compounding the effects of familial instability, many of the men encountered significant disruption within the education system. Education, which might otherwise have served as a protective factor, was instead experienced by many as a site of institutional humiliation that redirected them toward criminalised identities.

For many participants, difficulties began early in mainstream settings. Several men described being bored or withdrawn, often masking unaddressed neurodivergence or trauma. Earl, later diagnosed with ADHD in prison, reflected:

> “Absolutely hated it. I was always constantly bored, so I was making my own entertainment. It wasn't the entertainment I should have been making... with the ADHD, they sort of like clash with each other, so it makes it worse” — Earl.

Teachers failed to recognise underlying needs shaped by poverty or cultural difference, instead interpreting behavioural expressions of stress as defiance. Ismail recalled being publicly shamed by his headteacher:

> “Sometimes I'd be walking in the corridor with my friends, and my shoes would be ripped. [The teacher] would be like, 'Oh, your shoes are torn,

> your family can't get you new shoes?' But he'd say it in front of everyone" — Ismail.

Although Ismail described laughing these incidents off, he admitted they left him 'fuming' inside, a learned performance of resilience that masked the emotional toll of institutional humiliation. Naem's account illustrates how high energy and expressive behaviour were framed as pathology when exhibited by a Black student:

> "Teachers didn't know how to deal with a young Black man with so much energy... I was deemed not intelligent, quite stupid. So they put me in the lowest sets" — Naem.

Photograph to show a School boy in a classroom with his head on the desk (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

Kingston described being racially targeted and misunderstood due to his size and background. He recounted suppressing racist abuse until reaching breaking point:

> "I would take so much shit off people, that it would all boil up and I didn't know how to deal with it... I'd lash out. But then, because I was the big, coloured person in school, it was, "Oh, look at the size of him"" — Kingston.

The culmination of these unmet needs was often formal exclusion. Around half the men described being permanently excluded from school before completing their GCSEs, sometimes as early as Year 7 or 8. Jose recalled the direct consequence:

"Once I weren't in school, I was on the block all day. That's when things started going left." Steve reflected similarly: "It seemed like when I got kicked out of school that that's when this journey sort of started, and that is when I started selling drugs."

Following exclusion, many were referred to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), which were often described as environments where marginalisation was amplified rather than resolved. Jose described PRUs as concentrating rather than addressing problems:

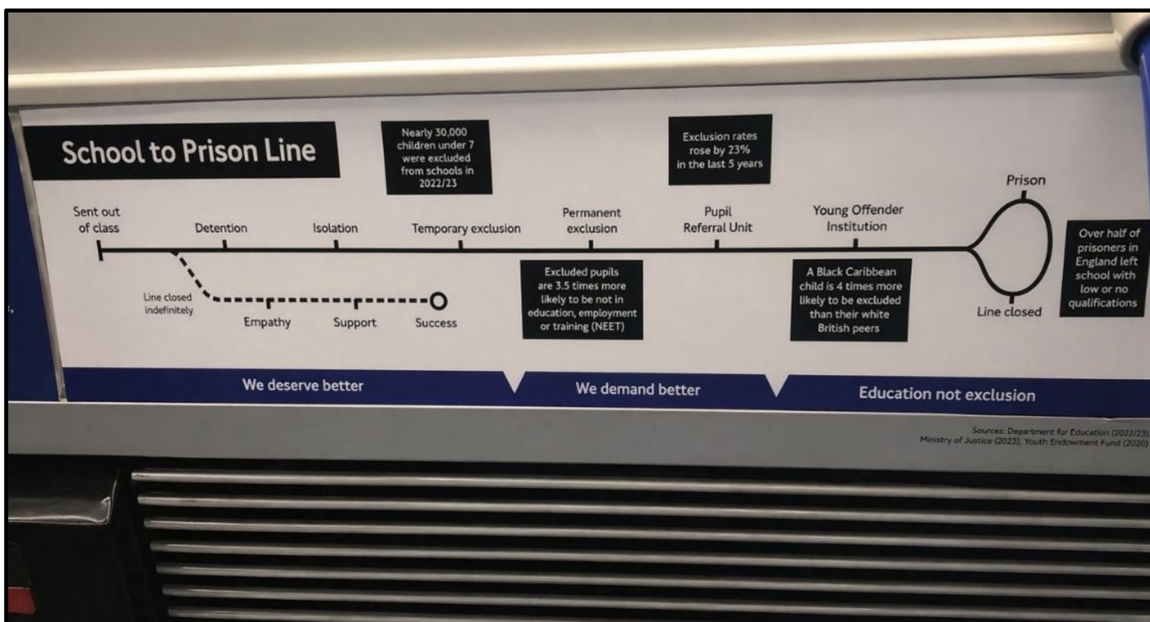
> “You are putting the sick in with the sick... So it is like going to prison; going in as a shoplifter and coming out an armed robber” — Jose.

> Vincent, who spent years in PRUs, offered a stark assessment:

> “It's basically like prison. Like this jail to be honest... All the teachers were saying, we'll see you in jail soon. You're going jail soon... When I started going down the path that I was going down, I knew that was going to happen” — Vincent.

> Ismail described the PRU as preparation for incarceration:

> “I feel like they programmed me for jail. Like gates, cameras, like everyone's smoking in class... I was bright. I was in the top set for everything. My whole primary, I was always in the top set. But when I went there, it's like my brain calibre just went down” — Ismail.



Photograph to show a fly post on the London Underground (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

Rather than acting as rehabilitative spaces, PRUs functioned as holding zones for social exclusion, offering little academic support and serving instead as conduits to street life. Once labelled as 'problems,' participants described a sense that their future trajectories had already been decided. Earl concluded starkly:

> “School didn't prepare me for life. It prepared me for jail” — Earl.

The criminological literature on school exclusion has long warned of the way exclusionary practices disproportionately affect racialised and working-class youth, a phenomenon scholars have termed the 'school-to-prison pipeline' (Gillborn, 2008; Daniels & Cole, 2010; Gazeley et al., 2019; Arnez & Condry, 2021). This systemic abandonment illustrates how education can become a form of institutional neglect, in which marginalised children are not only failed but redirected toward criminalised identities.

Racism, Stereotyping and the Foundations of Exclusion: Running through the experiences of poverty, neighbourhood violence, familial instability, and educational disruption was a pervasive thread of racism that shaped how many participants were perceived, treated, and responded to across everyday settings. Their accounts reveal how their bodies were persistently read through the lens of suspicion, deficit, or danger, shaping not only how others treated them but how they came to navigate the world.

For many participants, racism was not experienced as an occasional disruption but as a consistent and expected feature of everyday life. This normalisation of racial injustice echoes Essed's (1991) concept of "everyday racism," in which repeated experiences of racial discrimination become woven into the fabric of social life. Sam, who grew up in the West Midlands, reflected: "There was a lot of white people round there, and there was racists... Everywhere was racist, back in the day like for me."

For some, the recognition of racism came later, with painful retrospective clarity. Naem described an early ambition shattered by a single encounter:

> “I so wanted to be a policeman until the day a policeman called me a monkey, and I couldn't understand. I didn't know what was going on... my dad's face was in shock because he didn't know how to tell me” — Naem.

He later reflected:

> “I couldn't identify what it was. I didn't know what it was until I got slightly older and then I looked back and thought, oh, that was racism” — Naem.

His account captures not only the violence of the slur but the confusion it produced, the inability, as a child, to make sense of hatred directed at him for simply existing.

Other participants described being racially provoked in school, set up to conform to stereotypes of aggression. Santo explained how peers would use racist slurs to provoke him:

> “People expect to get a reaction out of you so you have to try and not give them a reaction... because I'm mixed, they think I'm more on the black side, so they might call me like, golly wog. Yeah, in my school” — Santo.

Santo's account reveals the double function of such racism: to humiliate, and to bait a response that can then be used to confirm stereotypes. This reflects what

Fanon (1967) described as the "epidermalisation of inferiority," whereby racialised individuals become overdetermined by the meaning's others attach to their bodies. The humiliation of being provoked in school settings placed participants in impossible double-binds: to react was to confirm stereotypes of aggression; to suppress was to internalise dehumanisation. This everyday racism shaped not only how participants were treated but how they learned to navigate social space: suppressing anger to avoid confirming stereotypes, developing "hardened exteriors" as protective armour, absorbing the message that they would be judged not as individuals but as representatives of a racialised type.

This environmental racism did not operate in isolation. It intersected with and compounded the other forms of disadvantage explored in this chapter: poverty that marked them as "other," neighbourhoods that exposed them to violence, family instability that left them without protective buffers, and ultimately their exclusion from mainstream education. Together, these conditions created a social ecology in which young Black men were marked as marginal, suspect, and disposable long before they encountered the criminal justice system as defendants. This early and persistent exposure to racism prepared the ground for later criminalisation, when the suspicion, stereotyping, and differential treatment experienced in schools and communities became formalised through policing, profiling, and prosecution.

Conclusion: What emerges from these accounts is not a collection of isolated risk factors but an interconnected ecology of disadvantage in which poverty, spatial marginalisation, violence, familial disruption, educational exclusion, and racism operated simultaneously and cumulatively to narrow the pathways available to these young men.

These forms of disadvantage did not operate sequentially but intersected and compounded one another. Poverty intersected with spatial inequality to produce concentrated disadvantage. Racism compounded educational exclusion when Black students' trauma responses or cultural differences were pathologised rather than understood. The cumulative effect was a profound constriction of possibility in which legitimate pathways to dignity, belonging, and material security remained structurally inaccessible.

By the time these men encountered the criminal justice system as defendants, they had already been marked as marginal, suspect, and criminal through years of institutional abandonment and environmental adversity. Their trajectories toward criminalisation were not individual moral failures but predictable outcomes of structured disadvantage.

4.2.3 Scripts of Survival

The men in this study were not writing their own life stories from scratch; they were following scripts they had inherited. Far from depicting offending as a freely chosen path, their narratives reveal how structural, familial and cultural constraints narrowed the scope of what felt possible or attainable in early life. Education, employment, and social mobility were not imagined as realistic goals but as distant or unreachable ideals. The scripts available to them, passed down through peers, older men, and

community norms, rewarded toughness, resourcefulness, and rule-breaking over conformity and long-term planning. These were scripts of survival: patterns of thinking and acting learned in contexts where getting by, staying safe, and earning respect demanded strategies that put them at odds with the law.

Structural Constraints and Perceptions of Limited Opportunity: A striking narrative running through many participants' accounts was the acute sense of having grown up in environments that offered little in the way of legitimate opportunity. Rather than experiencing aspiration as a motivating force, many described a felt inevitability about their futures. As Cory put it:

> “You didn't know if you could actually be or do something... Where we was from, see there's probably like a Tesco worker or Sainsbury's worker. I didn't think there was an opportunity to become, not anything, because I knew I could become something, but I didn't think there was like something proper, successful. It was more just like labour work. That's what I think about school anyway, I think school just sets you up to, well my kind of school, it sets you up to become just... There was only a handful of you that passed your GCSEs, then the expectations weren't there of you to do really well and become a doctor or whatever” — Cory.

Though he resisted the idea that he could "become nothing," Cory described how his school seemed to prepare students to become labourers or supermarket workers. These immediately visible workplaces represented the upper limits of success and reinforced a view that higher-level achievement was not for people like him. This sense of being set up to fail resonates with Bourdieu's (1990) concept of symbolic violence, where institutions subtly communicate who is likely to succeed and who is not. MacDonald and Marsh (2005) term this experience of blocked pathways "poor transitions" - conventional success appearing unreachable from an early age.

Others faced more immediate pressures. Santo, who became a father at 16, described trying to meet his responsibilities through conventional means:

> “When I was 16, I ended up getting a girl pregnant. That's when I had my son. So then obviously I needed a way of supporting her and him, and myself as well. So obviously, with my GCSEs, I tried to get jobs. At 16 it's really hard to get a job at 16. So I was just trying to find a way to get actually paid, get wages and all that stuff” — Santo.

With few qualifications and limited options, crime became not a rejection of responsibility but a means of fulfilling it. Geographical immobility compounded these constraints. Cory reflected that he had "probably travelled more in the country while I've been in prison going to different jails than I have when I was out." The contrast between the spatial confinement of his pre-prison life and the paradoxical mobility offered by incarceration underscores the deep entrenchment of social exclusion.

The lure of alternative economies was not a rejection of mainstream aspiration but a pragmatic response to its perceived inaccessibility. Participants' choices can be understood as adaptive responses to constrained environments, what Bourgois

(2003) terms "structural marginalisation," where systemic exclusion from education, employment, and mobility gives rise to an "inner-city street culture of resistance."

Absence of Fathers and Fragmented Family Support: Across many narratives, participants reflected on childhoods marked by the absence of stable family structures, particularly the lack of a father figure. This absence was not simply about physical departure, but about a loss of guidance, identity, and relational security during formative years. Jay articulated this starkly:

> "Belonging is huge, like family, because we ain't got fathers. We don't have fathers. None of my circle had fathers" — Jay.

For Jay, fatherlessness was not an individual misfortune but a collective condition. "I looked around my estate and I didn't see any fathers," he continued. The normalisation of this absence created what he described as "the blind leading the blind really" - a peer group without adult guidance, "angry at the world," lacking role models or direction.

Kingston offered a reflective account of the developmental gap father absence created:

> "You're becoming into a man, but you've not got that actual father figure that is guiding you through life as you're transitioning into the man... so not having that, you kind of look up to the negative sources and what they're doing you deem as cool" — Kingston.

This vulnerability during identity formation left young men seeking male affirmation and guidance from whatever sources were available. Yasin described this dynamic explicitly:

> "We didn't have role models growing up. We didn't have mentors... then we just looked up to the people in the area who are well known, who are doing stuff that, making money... I didn't have much money, I didn't have nothing really going for me; so I looked up to these people... they would take me out for food... There was some of them were doorman at clubs. So they would let me in the club. So I started feeling kind of like, oh, I'm somebody kind of thing. So it gives you the wrong kind of confidence" — Yasin.

The "wrong kind of confidence" Yasin describes captures how the void left by absent fathers was filled with dangerous surrogates who offered belonging and status, but at a price. Murray and Farrington's (2008) research on parental absence in UK contexts shows how father absence increases risk of antisocial behaviour not simply through economic deprivation, but through the loss of supervision, emotional support, and positive role modelling.

Jay offered a powerful reflection on the gendered limitations he perceived in single-parent households:

> "A woman can't teach you how to be a man. My mumsy tried. But my mumsy can't teach me how to handle a fight with another man... there

> wasn't a male role model at home. I don't even look at my dad as a male role model... So I did look for male role models from the streets. And obviously the people from the street that were older, that I was looking up to, they're teaching me different things that my mum can't teach me. They're teaching me how to handle myself. They're teaching me all these stuff... So I was going out and learning through the streets, through violence, through whatever" — Jay.

Jay's account reveals both the gendered limitations he perceived in maternal guidance and the specific skills he sought from male mentors: "how to handle a fight," "how to handle myself" - competencies framed as distinctly masculine and unavailable through legitimate familial channels. Learning "through violence" becomes framed as essential masculine education, a necessary apprenticeship for survival.

For several men, contact with their fathers came too late to redirect early decisions. Kingston, who reconnected with his father while in prison, described it as "bittersweet":

> "It's like seeing how the other side live... I see what they've achieved with themselves because they've had that male role model in their lives…I've had to teach myself these things... I didn't have anyone around me that was actually a positive male figure in my life to tell me kind of right from wrong" — Kingston.

The absence of fathers and reliable caregivers left young men not only without protection, but without tools to regulate emotion, navigate relationships, or resist harmful influences. As Leeroy put it:

> "It was a cry for help... I had a lack of guidance... solace in the older people outside on the street" — Leeroy.

As McNeill et al. (2012) argue, desistance is not merely about rejecting criminal behaviour but about re-authoring the self, and for many of these men, the original story began with loss, absence, and unmet emotional needs.

<u>Replacement Role Models - From Mentors to Manipulators:</u> The void left by absent fathers and fractured families did not remain empty. Older peers, gang members, and criminal associates quickly filled the gap, offering the affirmation, belonging, and guidance the men craved, but frequently with exploitative or harmful consequences. What appeared at first to be mentorship or protection often revealed itself, in hindsight, as manipulation or grooming into criminality.

For some, the path into offending was explicitly exploitative. Luke described his first arrest at age 12 as directly shaped by an older peer:

> "One of the older lads... was like 'yeah how do I get into it?'... he talked me through it... He was about four years older than me. Because I was young and I didn't care, I think he was just 'Now do this..' And I look at it now and I think... he was sort of exploiting you" — Luke.

Though he later recognised this as manipulation, at the time it felt like inclusion. Santo's experience followed a similar pattern. At sixteen, struggling to support his newborn son, he "ended up falling into the wrong crowd... I was just 16, chilling with people who were like 27, 28, 30." The age gap was not incidental, it reflected deliberate targeting of vulnerable younger boys by older men who recognised their need for guidance. This dynamic, where loyalty and care are confused with control and coercion, is characteristic of gang recruitment (Pitts, 2008; Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009).

Others were drawn by what older peers represented. Simon recalled being pulled into gang life at 15:

> "I started to see like the guys from my areas had nice stuff... so obviously we wanted what they wanted" — Simon.

This desire to emulate was bound up with a search for validation and direction. These figures provided what Deuchar (2009) terms street capital: a system of values learned from the street where respect, toughness, and money command status.

Photographs to show displays of wealth (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

In such contexts, older peers offer both a blueprint and an access route into the informal economy. The social networks participants were embedded in made crime not only visible but accessible. As Cory reflected:

> “I was selling drugs to make money... but if I grew up somewhere else, and I had a friend that does this, I could have phoned him to put me on to like a waterworks company” — Cory.

Instead, the peers available to him sold drugs, and so that became his option. This underscores the importance of social capital, not just who you know, but what kind of life they can help you imagine. As Maruna (2001) and LeBel et al. (2008) argue, prosocial mentors can be critical turning points in desistance. But for most of these men, that presence was absent in childhood, replaced by criminal peers who offered identity, income, and inclusion, but not safety.

The "mentors" of the street offered guidance but rarely protection. As Yasin put it, "if I had a person like me... telling my younger age... I would actually listen." What was missing was not simply role models, but the right role models.

Conclusion: Misrecognition, Survival, and the Search for Belonging: These narratives reveal how early involvement in crime emerged not from innate deviance but from profound structural and relational deprivation. Misrecognised by institutions that labelled them as problems rather than understanding their circumstances, participants made choices within highly constrained environments where legitimate opportunity felt inaccessible and adult guidance was absent. Criminal peers offered

what families and institutions had not: belonging, recognition, and models of masculine identity. As Deuchar (2009) and Maruna (2001) suggest, offending must be understood not simply as rejection of social norms but as a search for recognition and agency in contexts that otherwise offered neither. The following section explores how these masculinised codes emerged, were reinforced, and contributed to cycles of offending.

4.2.4 Masculinity, Bravado and Violence

A recurring thread across participants' accounts was the performance of masculinity through violence, emotional suppression, and dominance. From streets to prison wings, masculine identity was constructed and maintained through reputational capital, bravado, and strategic use of violence. In the absence of alternative sources of validation, educational achievement, economic stability, or paternal guidance, toughness, notoriety and control functioned as primary currencies of masculine status.

These narratives reveal masculinity not as an individual trait but as a social project: learned through peer groups, enforced through constant testing, and sustained through the suppression of vulnerability. Violence was rarely random; it was imbued with moral meaning, a defence of honour, a response to humiliation, a means of protection.

<u>Masculinity as Status: Violence, Reputation and Notoriety:</u> For many participants, masculinity was constructed not through emotional maturity or care for others, but through dominance, notoriety, and the ability to command fear or respect. In the absence of alternative sources of status, violence functioned as symbolic capital, conferring legitimacy within a social world that prized toughness and recognition. For some participants, violence offered a route to visibility and respect unavailable through other means. Jay recalled:

> “I started to hang around a guy who was kind of involved in gang culture. One day, he had a problem, and I helped defend him and chased some guys off. And it was fascinating how I was treated after that. Everyone started to respect me. And that was like the turning point for me where I realized like, the violence and that is, back then, is useful when you get respect for it” — Jay.

Jay's narrative captures the seductive logic of violent masculinity: a single act transformed his social position, demonstrating how quickly violence can be validated when it delivers immediate social rewards. His use of "useful" is particularly telling; violence becomes instrumentalised, a rational choice within an economy where respect and visibility are otherwise inaccessible. Leon expressed a similar dynamic:

> “I was known all over for being a bully and a fighter... I had my name, my reputation... I used to get a lot of glory for the stuff that I used to do, you know, the violence and things like that. I used to get praise for the bad stuff that I used to do” — Leon.

Being "known" emerges as a central masculine achievement. As Sandberg (2008) argues, street masculinity requires narrative recognition, stories that circulate and reinforce one's position within violent hierarchies.

For others, the pursuit of status was explicitly tied to experiences of humiliation. Cole articulated this clearly:

> “I think a lot of people they feel insecure for whatever reason and a lot of people actually commit crime because they were made to feel small at one point in their life. They want to show people that despite that, they're equal... they might have felt ridiculed due to poverty. It's not that they want to be a master they just want to be equal... The reason why is that someone made them feel small and do you know what I don't want anyone to make me feel like that again” — Cole.

Cole reveals violence and status-seeking as responses to social and economic humiliation; the desire isn't for supremacy but for recognition as equals rather than invisible or dismissed.

Some participants achieved positions of authority within street hierarchies. Naem used explicitly sovereign language:

> “From about 16 to about, let's say 20, I became dominant in the streets, and then from then on to about 28 I was King... I had my neighbourhood becoming so good at defending itself that it started becoming the aggressor... when I would speak, it would get delivered down... when I'm there, nobody fights. And if I say, stop, they stop... unite people, stop quarrels... ensure safety” — Naem.

Naem positioned himself as a regulator rather than simply a perpetrator, masculine authority expressed through the power to permit, prevent, or adjudicate conflict. Byron described a different apex of street authority, one constructed through material display and orchestrating violence without direct participation:

> “At that time there I was talk of the town... my ego was through the roof... the way the young guys used to embrace me... like... I was like a hero... I used to be the man... And when you're the big man, like people do things for you. Like, I had men around me, like I didn't have to sleep with my gun... I can make them all pick up the gun, bring the gun to me, like I can orchestrate a lot of things... and not even have to do nothing... Yeah, it was a level of status” — Byron.

Being "the big man" meant commanding deference and delegating risk, the apex of street-level masculine authority, demonstrating Anderson's (1999) concept of "campaigning for respect." As Fraser (2015) observes, in contexts of institutional abandonment, hypermasculine authority can serve quasi-governmental functions, even as it entrenches harmful hierarchies.

Several participants reflected on how status-seeking exceeded original intentions. Nahale captured this:

> “The imbalance that got created then was my status, my reputation, the power respect, all of these things ended up counteracting my intentions

> in the first place. So I did end up getting a bit big headed. I did end up, you know, indulging in some sort of power that never existed. However, I was just able to manipulate loads of people" — Nahale.

Nahale's account reveals the ultimately illusory nature of street dominance, power that feels real but remains socially constructed and fragile, requiring constant performance and validation (Bourgois, 1995).

Across these narratives, violence and reputation emerge as structured responses to environments where legitimate routes to masculine recognition have been systematically foreclosed. As Anderson (1999), Connell (1995) and Fraser (2015) argue, in disadvantaged and marginalised contexts, masculine status is often pursued through aggression, visibility, and performance. Yet sustaining this identity demanded the suppression of vulnerability and constant performance of emotional toughness, an exhausting and ultimately unsustainable masculine code. This performance, while protective in hostile environments, ultimately entrapped participants in cycles of confrontation, isolation, and harm.

Bravado, Ego and the Emotional Code of the Street: If violence and notoriety were vital to constructing masculine identity, then emotional detachment, ego defence, and the appearance of fearlessness were the tools used to sustain it. Pride became compulsion, bravado became identity, and emotional detachment became survival strategy. Participants frequently described masculinity requiring the suppression of vulnerability and constant performance of confidence, anger, and control. Within this emotional code, expressing pain, fear or sadness was considered dangerous, a sign of weakness that could invite ridicule or attack. These dynamics mirror Anderson's (1999) "code of the street," where pride and respect must be fiercely protected, and Kupers' (2005) concept of "toxic masculinity": rigid, punitive emotional systems that punish vulnerability and glorify domination.

These masculine codes were learned and enforced through peer culture from an early age. Dean described how hypermasculinity was naturalised within his peer group:

> "I think just growing up around all the lads in the area, that's, you know, how lads are, that's how it was. You have to show a tough stance. You can't let people take you for an idiot. It's kind of bravado type stuff" — Dean.

Dean's phrase "that's how lads are" reveals how peer groups normalise emotional suppression and aggressive posturing as inevitable features of masculinity. The "tough stance" was presented not as a choice but as a social requirement, enforced through collective expectation. This reflects what Messerschmidt (1993) describes as "doing gender," masculinity as an ongoing accomplishment achieved through interaction and constantly subject to peer evaluation.

Several participants reflected on how pride functioned as an internal compulsion, overriding rational judgment. Dean described this explicitly:

> “I think my main issue growing up, which is something I've got out of now, I had a lot of pride issues, like not letting little situations go. Now I can do it. When I was younger, I'd just react to anything. Whereas now, I can take a step back and think that it's not really that serious” — Dean.

Beyond pride and aggression, participants described the ongoing labour of suppressing vulnerability. Jay articulated this most explicitly:

> “I had so much going on in my life, yeah, and so many emotions going through, I couldn't show people them emotions. I just had to cover them emotions, and just put on a front, and just be like, all right, yeah, cool, I'm strong, I'm a man... And you don't feel nothing about nothing. You actually become that person, that persona... you don't realize it at the time, but when you look back at it afterwards, like, you just become that person” — Jay.

Jay's account reveals transformation from performance to internalisation; the "front" becomes the self. What begins as strategic emotional suppression eventually erodes the boundary between persona and person.

Across these narratives, bravado and ego emerge as both protective mechanisms and constraints. They allow survival in violent, unpredictable environments, but also entrap men in cycles of confrontation, emotional suppression, and isolation. Breaking from these scripts requires access to environments that affirm alternative masculinities, spaces where emotional openness is possible without exploitation.

<u>Pride, Honour and Masculine Obligation:</u> Beyond reputation-building, many participants described violence as compelled by codes of honour and masculine pride. In these accounts, violence was not freely chosen but experienced as obligation, a necessary response to disrespect that, if left unanswered, would result in social and physical vulnerability. Dean's narrative is particularly revealing of how confrontations could escalate into serious violence when filtered through honour concerns:

> “At the time, I was 17, the lad that I was arguing with was 26... he'd just come out of prison. He was trying to tell me and my friend, "you ain't selling around here, this is my area." I'm saying, "you're mad, you've been gone for years, this is ours now." So we've chased them, but while we're chasing him he said, "I'm gonna come back. I'm gonna stab you." So I told him, "Look, go get your knife. I'm gonna shoot ya." He came back with his knife. So I just had to, I didn't really have to, I don't think I really had to do that, but in my head at the time, he's an older and he wasn't an idiot. He was quite a known guy for stabbing people. "Look, I told you, you came back, and put me in a situation where I have to."” — Dean.

Photographs to show a Young man with a knife (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

Dean's narrative is structured around reciprocal escalation and masculine obligation. His retrospective acknowledgment, "I didn't really have to," reveals awareness that the violence was not objectively necessary, yet "in my head at the time," it felt unavoidable. Having publicly declared his intention, failing to follow through would have constituted catastrophic loss of credibility, reflecting Anderson's (1999) concept of "campaigning for respect," where public challenges must be met with public displays of dominance.

Beyond street contexts, participants described environments where failure to respond to disrespect threatened their entire social standing. Leon explained:

> “If someone was to disrespect me, like try take the piss out of me or... I would have to do something, innit... because if I never did anything, then I would have looked like a dickhead. So I would have to do something just to be like, you know what I'm saying, like so that that the person knows, yeah, you can't try do that to me” — Leon.

Leon's framing, "I would have to do something," reveals violence as obligation rather than choice. Their narratives align with scholarship on masculine honour cultures, where perceived slights demand visible retaliation to maintain social standing (Cohen et al., 1996).

<u>Violence as Protection and Loyalty:</u> Some participants framed their violence not as self-serving but as protective, undertaken on behalf of others who lacked the capacity to defend themselves. Umar described this explicitly:

> “Most of my crimes aren't really from money making crimes, they are from helping other people; so violence, certain violent things that I've done in my past, etc. It's always from helping other people... Yeah they could ask me, and I would go and sort it out for them” — Umar.

Umar's characterisation of violence as "helping" reveals an alternative moral framework where aggression is justified through loyalty and protection rather than personal gain. Being someone others "could ask" to "sort it out" conferred a particular masculine identity, echoing Anderson's (1999) description of "street justice."

For some participants, carrying weapons was framed as defensive necessity in environments where threat was constant. Dean explained:

> “So when I came to jail in 2014, the city was quite bad, but throughout my years in jail, the city got a lot worse, a lot worse. People were getting shot on a daily. People were getting killed every other day... So when I came home, stupidly, my thinking was, people know me from young for having guns and shootings. So if they are gonna come for me, they are not gonna come with their hands. They're gonna come with a gun, so stupidly my thinking was, I need to have one” — Dean.

Dean's framing, "stupidly, my thinking was," reveals retrospective recognition of flawed logic, yet the rationale felt compelling at the time. His reputation as someone "known for having guns" created a self-perpetuating cycle: past violence

generated ongoing threat, which in turn justified continued armament, reflecting what Harding (2010) describes as "cultural adaptations" to dangerous neighbourhoods.

Conclusion: Across participants' accounts, a consistent pattern emerges: young men developed sophisticated survival strategies in response to environments marked by poverty, violence, institutional abandonment, and limited opportunity. Masculinity was constructed through dominance and notoriety; status was achieved through violence and material display; emotional vulnerability was suppressed as dangerous; and peer groups became the primary teachers of manhood in the absence of legitimate adult guidance.

Participants described violence not as random but as morally justified: a defence of honour, a response to humiliation, a means of protecting others. Within these masculine codes, to show vulnerability was to invite victimisation; to refuse retaliation was to accept social death. Yet these adaptations, while protective in the short term, entrenched cycles of harm. The pursuit of status through violence generated ongoing threat, requiring continued armament and escalation. The suppression of emotion produced isolation, numbness, and disconnection from authentic self.

Understanding offending behaviour through the lens of survival scripts reveals how criminal pathways are shaped by environmental conditions rather than individual pathology alone. The following section examines how participants encountered the criminal justice system, not as adults making singular decisions, but as children and adolescents already embedded within what has been termed "the carceral net."

4.2.5 The Carceral Net: Criminalisation Before Custody

For many of the men interviewed, the path into prison was not a sudden rupture but a gradual entanglement, shaped by cumulative experiences of exclusion, control, and criminalisation from an early age. For many participants, the process of criminalisation did not begin with a courtroom or a formal charge. Rather, it took root through repeated encounters with policing that framed them as inherently suspect. Long before they had committed an offence, they had been positioned as likely perpetrators, watched, stopped, searched, and in some cases actively entrapped. These early encounters established adversarial relationships with authority and reinforced narratives of deviance that participants struggled to escape.

Policing Through Suspicion: Racialisation, Surveillance and Overreach: For many participants, contact with the police began not with acts of wrongdoing but through being seen as inherently suspicious, due to their postcode, peer group, clothing, or race. Early, repeated exposure to stop-and-search, wrongful arrest, and excessive force served not as interventions for safety but as rituals of surveillance. These practices reflect long-standing critiques in critical criminology that point to the disproportionate targeting of Black communities by law enforcement (Bowling & Phillips, 2002; Gabbidon & Greene, 2019).

The most striking pattern was the extent to which racialised surveillance began in early adolescence and, in some cases, primary school. Konrad recalled being stopped by police as early as age seven:

> “You fit the description. Robbery has happened in the area. Burglary has happened. You fit the description… Eight times in a week” — Konrad.

His account illustrates how vague justifications operate as proxies for race. The frequency, eight times in a single week, reveals how routine this surveillance became for Black children.

Photograph to show police officers conducting a ‘stop and search’ (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

For Cory, such encounters became so routine they were initially normalised. Describing his first wrongful arrest at age 13, he recalled:

> “The police had told me to stop, I'm saying "why am I stopping for" so I've just carried on driving my bike. He's grabbed me off my bike, folded me to the floor, he said "you're being arrested for assault"... I'm saying "what assault?"... my mom's in the police station crying. And I'm actually saying to mum, "I have not done anything"... But, as a 13-year-old, that's traumatic. Obviously when I'm growing up, I didn't look at it like that. But as a man now I look back and think that was traumatic... But at the time I'm just thinking "oh yeah, it's normal."” — Cory.

The idea that wrongful arrest was not an injustice but a rite of passage reflects the internalisation of racial criminalisation. From this point, Cory said, "I've had kind of a weird relationship with police," not because of prior deviance, but because of the memory of being wrongfully and violently criminalised.

Others described how proximity to alleged wrongdoing became enough for police intervention. Byron recounted being entrapped by undercover officers:

> “They phoned me asking for a 50-pound deal of drugs… at that time, I won't selling crack… I was just selling weed. But I was around people that were selling crack. So I've gone to somebody, got it, and sold it to the officer. Next day, they phoned me again… That's quick 50 pounds, that's how I saw it. I'm under surveillance… I see it now. They set me up” — Byron.

Rather than addressing drug-related harms through prevention or support, undercover officers fabricated opportunities for arrest. Luke, who had been arrested 75 times, mostly for minor misdemeanours such as truancy, described how his history marked him permanently in police eyes: "They never forget who you are." The logic of guilt-by-history, where prior contact with police becomes evidence of future leadership in crime, reflects a shift from evidential policing to identity-based criminalisation.

In some cases, police contact occurred through participants' victimisation. Usain offered a disturbing account of being arrested after being stabbed while intervening to help a neighbour:

> “I got stabbed… My Nan's called the police… the police officers that arrested me said, 'we don't even know why we're arresting you; we just got a radio from the scene saying, yo, arrest a black kid'… I said, 'Do I match the description?' They said, 'Yes'. I said, 'How?' They said, 'You're wearing black.'” — Usain.

Usain's experience reveals racial profiling in its starkest form: being the victim of a crime and simultaneously treated as its perpetrator. The phrase "mistaken identity" that recurs throughout these accounts is a euphemism for racial profiling that transforms victims into suspects. Nahale captured this systemic misrecognition succinctly:

> “I'm put into a bracket, I'm put into a slot. I'm not seen as an individual. I'm seen as a type” — Nahale.

This reflects what Du Bois (1903) termed "double consciousness," the painful awareness of seeing oneself through the distorting lens of a society that reads Blackness as deviant.

In response to these cumulative harms, many participants developed adaptive strategies: emotional suppression, toughness, and hypervigilance. As Fanon (1967) and Sewell (1997) both note, Black boys are often forced to develop hardened exteriors as a condition of survival in systems that read vulnerability as threat.

Gang Profiling and the Politics of Association: This racialised surveillance was not applied to participants as isolated individuals but was intensified through their association with peers, postcodes, and social networks. The "gang narrative" that Cory described as shaping his arrest was not incidental but systemic, a framework that transformed friendship groups into criminal enterprises and geographic proximity

into evidence of conspiracy. The term "gang" carries significant weight within criminal justice discourse, conjuring images of organised criminality, violence, and territorial control. Yet participants overwhelmingly rejected the label, insisting that what police and courts termed "gangs" were, in reality, neighbourhood friendship networks. This disconnect between institutional categorisation and lived reality reflects what Hallsworth and Young (2008) describe as the gang as an "empty signifier": a term deployed by state institutions to justify punitive intervention, regardless of whether it accurately describes social reality.

Simon described his peer group in terms of continuity and normalcy:

> “Well, we don't call it a gang. So the guys who I refer to, these are guys who came up, we went to primary school together. So we're mates, but because we look at each other as family, that's where the police called it a gang” — Simon.

The transformation Simon describes, from primary school friends to police-designated gang members, illustrates what Smithson et al. (2013) identify as the problematic "definitional slippage" in gang terminology, where ethnic minority youth are disproportionately labelled as gang-involved based on criteria that would not be applied to white, middle-class peer groups.

Ismail challenged the gang label explicitly and touched on how cultural markers are also read as evidence of gang membership:

> “There is a lot of gang culture, but I don't like to label it as a gang... Honestly, the dynamics of where I live, it's like, it's just local residents together. So it's mates who grew up, just mates growing up, like. All my mates who they say are gang members, we just grew up playing football together, going out to eat together, but because we dress a certain way, and we look a certain way, and we conduct ourselves a certain way, just like loud, bubbly” — Ismail.

Photograph to show three young men walking (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

What Ismail characterised as "loud, bubbly" sociability, expressions of youthful energy and camaraderie, he claimed was read by authorities as gang behaviour. This criminalisation of cultural style reflects Gunter's (2017) analysis of how "gang" became racialised code, particularly targeting forms of Black urban masculinity. Being expressive, visible, and collectively social was not neutral; it was interpreted as threatening, deviant, and evidence of organised criminality.

Cole articulated the temporal logic that authorities failed to recognise:

> "The problem is if you've got five or six friends this guy's an associate, this person's an associate, who do you hang around with? Because often you don't know. Before the gang they were your friends. So the friendship existed before the gang emerged. You didn't know them in their capacity in the gang, you knew them in a capacity as a friend" — Cole.

Cole's observation, "the friendship existed before the gang emerged," exposes the retrospective nature of gang labelling. Relationships formed in childhood were later reinterpreted through a criminalising lens that erased their ordinary origins. Gang profiling operated not only through social networks but also through geography. presentation.

Cory described how living in a particular area made gang membership presumptive:

> "Where I come from, [district in South East London], I think there's known to be gangs. So growing up, I think like the first group they see, they know there's always going to be another gang coming up. So the first group they see, 'this must be the new gang' kind of thing... I think it's the area. I'm in the area, must be in a gang" — Cory.

The presumption of guilt operated at the level of place, collapsing individual assessment into territorial association. Living in particular estates, dressing in certain ways, and displaying particular forms of sociability became grounds for gang designation. As discussed earlier, this reflects what Wacquant (2007) terms "territorial stigmatisation": the process by which entire neighbourhoods are marked as pathological, and residents are presumed guilty by association with place. In the UK context, this geographic profiling has been formalised through tools like London's Gangs Matrix, which Amnesty International (2018) documented as disproportionately targeting Black youth, with 78% of those on the Matrix being Black despite Black Londoners comprising only 27% of young people in the capital.

Perhaps the most striking feature of gang profiling was its capacity for expansion through increasingly tenuous chains of association. Cole described this with remarkable clarity:

> “Because it's three degrees of separation. And so, what they were saying in my case was that my co-defendant was a gang member due to being in a gang video, making a gang sign and they were saying my next co-defendant is his associate so he's a gang associate... I know him but I wouldn't say that we're friends. There's no numbers in my phone or anything but they are saying I'm a gang sympathizer. So they are saying gang sympathizer, gang associate and he's the gang member” — Cole.

This expansion reflects what Cohen (1985) termed "net-widening": the process by which systems of social control extend their reach to capture individuals at the margins of, or entirely outside, criminal activity. The presumption of collective knowledge was particularly corrosive. Cole explained:

> “That's when it gets down to association they assume that you're privy to everything that these people have done or that these people are up to, when that's not even the case... What people fail to understand is they think people speak about crime. They don't. For example, my co-defendants on a robbery case, I don't know about the robbery case. Because we are friends, they assume I must know. Like as if people just talk about it willy nilly” — Cole.

The assumption that friendship equals complicity erased the ordinary boundaries of social relationships.

While participants rejected the gang label when imposed by authorities, some acknowledged that gang structures did emerge, but often defensively, in response to violence rather than as freely chosen criminal enterprises. Vincent described being forced to choose sides:

> “I got to a point where I had to choose what side I was on... If I didn't choose a side then I'd be getting cast as fence sitting. And then with fence sitters, basically people look at them as like, instigators... People get hurt for that. I've seen a lot of people die because of that” — Vincent.

His decision was not about embracing criminality but about navigating an environment where neutrality was untenable.

Cole offered a reframing that challenged the gang narrative entirely:

> "A lot of people say it's gang culture when it's actually urban culture or inner-city culture, which spread exponentially. So when people say that's a gang, gang behaviour…it's kind of taking the sting out of the fact that the environment was made before the gang was made. Before the attitude and the police were made the environment was there because people aren't born into gangs" — Cole.

Cole's analysis locates the origins of behaviour not in gang membership but in environmental conditions that preceded any gang formation. His observation that "the environment was made before the gang was made" shifts analytical focus from individual pathology to structural inequality, echoing critiques that highlight how gang discourse obscures root causes of urban deprivation (Hallsworth & Young, 2008). This reinterpretation had profound consequences: friendships became evidence, loyalty became conspiracy, and shared history became culpability.

Joint Enterprise and Procedural Injustice: Geographic profiling marked participants as suspicious; cultural expression was reinterpreted as evidence; and chains of association expanded culpability to capture those with only tangential connections. Once designated as gang members through policing and surveillance, this imposed identity became legally actionable through joint enterprise. Joint enterprise allows multiple individuals to be convicted for a single offence even when culpability is uncertain or unevenly distributed. While theoretically intended to hold accomplices accountable, its application collapses the distinction between individual and group responsibility. The same logics that produced gang labels, proximity, postcode, peer association, became grounds for criminal conviction.

For many, joint enterprise prosecutions felt less like assessments of culpability and more like symbolic punishment for who they were and who they knew. Salman's educational trajectory was derailed not by what he did, but by who he was with:

> "I got myself to the first year of university… I didn't complete my studies because unfortunately, in the first year, I ended up coming to prison under a joint enterprise. So I guess wrong crowd, bad company" — Salman.

Yasin articulated this more explicitly:

> "I didn't take responsibility for the action that the man lost his life… the person died from one injury, and they don't know who that person was. However, we all got done for it under joint enterprise… it's a lazy law… 'we don't care if you were standing there or there, or whether you were the one, you're going down'" — Yasin.

Yasin accepted responsibility for being present and for not intervening but challenged being convicted as if he were the killer. His framing of joint enterprise as a "lazy law" reveals how legal processes collapse nuance in favour of efficient convictions. He added:

> "I know cases where ten kids got done for one person's death. No one's saying losing a life isn't wrong, it's abhorrent, but you shouldn't take ten people's lives away for one… you're all going down for murder… you're all tarnished with the same brush" — Yasin.

Participants found themselves legally redefined as murderers, their identities collapsed into collective guilt. Joint enterprise branded participants permanently with a label many felt bore no relation to their moral culpability.

Ronaldo experienced his sentence as emblematic of racialised collective punishment:

> "It's not about the truth... it's about retribution... using someone as an example... I'm not seen as an individual. I'm seen as a type... this type is a young Black type... we're going to make an example out of him" — Ronaldo.

Ronaldo's observation, "I'm seen as a type," captures how the law responded not to what he specifically had done but to what he represented. His 21-year sentence for murder and conspiracy to rob, prosecuted under joint enterprise, functioned not as proportionate punishment but as symbolic messaging. This racialised application, documented extensively by Williams and Clarke (2016) and the Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association campaign, reveals how legal mechanisms entrench rather than remedy social inequality.

Beyond joint enterprise, for many participants, their initial encounters with the justice system were marked by confusion, coercion, and a lack of informed support. These early experiences, often occurring while they were still legally children, created a sense of betrayal by a system that claimed to uphold fairness but failed to ensure basic legal protections. Rather than receiving guidance or clarity, they felt manipulated into compliance. Cole described the bewildering nature of his first court appearance where he was "kind of bamboozled" and not adequately supported:

> "They changed my solicitor at the last minute, so I didn't know that I had a legal excuse... I was kind of pressured. They said like "you're only going to get a suspended sentence anyway so as long as you don't commit any further offences it's going to be spent"... I thought you know what, better that than jail. But really and truly... what I know now, I'd have ran it" — Cole.

His account reflects a broader pattern of young defendants being encouraged to plead guilty under the promise of leniency, without fully understanding their rights or the long-term consequences. His retrospective clarity, "what I know now", underscores the disempowerment many young people feel when navigating the legal system for the first time.

These accounts speak to a deeper erosion of trust in legal institutions. Participants did not encounter a justice system that listened to their side or advocated for due process; instead, they were thrust into unfamiliar and intimidating environments where their lack of legal knowledge made them vulnerable to expediency and misrepresentation. The cost was not just legal, these moments

crystallised a broader belief that the system was not built to protect or rehabilitate, but to convict and contain.

Conclusion: The Expanding Boundaries of Criminalisation: This section has traced how many participants became entangled in the criminal justice system long before they were formally sentenced. The "carceral net" was not cast through a single mechanism but through multiple, overlapping systems that worked in concert to position young men as criminal long before they entered a courtroom. From childhood, they were marked as suspicious through racialised policing: encounters beginning as early as age seven. This surveillance intensified through gang profiling, which reconstructed friendship groups as criminal enterprises and expanded through "three degrees of separation" to capture those with only tangential connections. Once imposed, gang labels became prosecutable through joint enterprise with informal profiling solidified into formal conviction. Friendship became conspiracy; presence became participation; and the gang label rendered participants collectively responsible for harms they may not have caused or known about. Procedural injustices ensured that even those with defences were pressured toward guilty pleas. By the time participants entered prison, criminalisation had been years in the making.

4.2.6 Conclusion: From Trajectories to Custody

Across the accounts explored in this section, a consistent pattern emerges: participants' pathways into prison were not aberrations but predictable outcomes of lives shaped by compounding disadvantage and institutional failure. From childhood, they navigated environments marked by poverty, violence, fractured families, and racism. Schools failed to recognise their needs and instead expelled them into PRUs that functioned as holding zones for social exclusion. Fathers were frequently absent, leaving voids filled by street mentors who offered belonging in exchange for participation in criminality.

In response to these conditions, participants developed survival strategies: embracing violence as currency for status and protection, suppressing emotion as dangerous vulnerability, performing hypermasculine bravado as social necessity. These scripts were not pathological but adaptive, rational responses to irrational circumstances. Yet they came at profound cost, entrenching cycles of harm and constructing identities that hinged on codes of honour and retaliation.

Simultaneously, the state cast its net. Participants were stopped and searched from childhood, profiled as gang members for living in particular areas or keeping particular company. The gang label, imposed not chosen, provided the legal mechanism for conviction. Custody was not a sudden rupture but the culmination of years of institutional entanglement. The picture that emerges is one of profound structural violence: young men were not simply failed by institutions but actively harmed by them. Schools ejected rather than educated them. Policing targeted rather than protected them. Courts convicted rather than heard them. Their offending, while serious and harmful, cannot be understood apart from these contexts.

It is these men, marked by adversity, shaped by survival, and entangled in criminalisation, who entered prison and, eventually, the Key4Life programme. Understanding what participants brought into custody, the trauma, the adaptive strategies, the identities forged through violence, the distrust of institutions born from repeated betrayal, is essential to understanding both the depth of transformation Key4Life sought to facilitate and the magnitude of the barriers participants faced. The following section turns to prison itself, examining how custody functioned not as rehabilitation but as further harm.

4.3 Prison Life: Why Standard Environments Fail

This second part explores how prison shaped participants' identities, mental health, and prospects for change. Rather than functioning as a rehabilitative space, prison often reproduced the conditions and behaviours it claimed to address: entrenching criminal networks, reinforcing hypermasculine norms, and exacerbating psychological distress. Yet amid these constraints, some participants also described resilience, personal reflection, and efforts to find meaning.

The analysis unfolds across three interconnected dimensions. First, *Prison as a Site of Social Reproduction* examines how youth custody and adult prisons normalised offending, facilitated criminal networking, and demanded performances of masculinity that left little room for vulnerability or growth. Second, *Inside Lives: Trauma, Grief and Survival* considers the mental health crises, unresolved grief, and relational losses that characterised participants' emotional experience of imprisonment. Third, *The Revolving Door* synthesises why standard prison environments structurally prevent rehabilitation, and how release without support makes reoffending a structural inevitability rather than a failure of will.

4.3.1 Prison as a Site of Social Reproduction

Prisons are portrayed as institutions of correction, intended to rehabilitate and reduce reoffending. Yet critical scholarship challenges this narrative, arguing that prisons frequently reproduce the social conditions they claim to transform. This section examines how youth custody and adult prison operated not as breaks from previous trajectories, but as spaces where familiar scripts of masculinity, violence, and exclusion were re-enacted and entrenched.

<u>Youth Detention as Normalisation, Not Deterrent:</u> For many participants, entry into the youth justice system did not function as a turning point or deterrent, but as a formative phase in their criminal socialisation. Young Offender Institutions were framed as extensions of an already punitive system that reinforced carceral norms, intensified mistrust, and legitimised violence. Rather than deterring further offending, they normalised it. Umar, first imprisoned at 15, explained:

> “Because I was so young, I didn't realise until later on that it took a big chunk out of my life... I was in a juvenile prison, it was really like a youth

> club so I didn't really learn my lesson... So I came back out, I was back to the same stuff again" — Umar.

Rather than disrupting the trajectory of offending, YOIs often minimised the perceived seriousness of imprisonment by failing to provide structure, responsibility, or reflection.

Other participants described YOIs as spaces of humiliation and control. Santo recalled:

> "In a young offender's institution they treat you like a kid… like put him in his cage and lock him up… you get your food at this time... it's not what you've ordered… getting told when to shower" — Santo.

This depiction echoes Liebling and Arnold's (2004) and Liebling's (2011) emphasis on the moral performance of penal institutions, where routines assert authority and deny personhood. Santo's longing "just to be treated like a person" reveals how early experiences shaped how participants viewed themselves in relation to society. Despite recognising his need for therapy, Santo was offered no meaningful intervention:

> "I wanted therapy when I was in YOI… they was telling me I should speak to a prisoner... why would I want to speak to a prisoner for him to go and speak my mind... to other prisoners? I'd rather speak to someone that can keep it confidential... someone qualified" — Santo.

This failure of therapeutic care creates a situation where containment occurs without genuine care, reinforcing defensive masculinity and constraining help-seeking behaviours (Cesaroni et al., 2023), while simultaneously deepening mistrust in institutional authority (Vaswani & Paul, 2019).

Emotional suppression was further reinforced by hypermasculine norms. Dean described the violent code:

> "It was just constant lockdowns cause there was constant violence, people getting slashed, hot watered... someone pushes in front of you in the dinner queue, you have to be seen to act upon that... otherwise people think you're an idiot" — Dean

YOIs became performance spaces where masculinity was policed through violence and retaliation. Rather than supporting personal development, these institutions demanded emotional hardening and performative toughness, while also functioning as transitional training grounds for more serious criminal careers. Ismail explained:

> "It can go very left, because you're surrounded by people that just do crime… this is the best environment for you to thrive when you're on release... it's networking… you come out of here like a successful bad guy" — Ismail.

Incarceration became a site of criminal apprenticeship, where exposure to more experienced offenders and the development of reputational capital served to embed criminal identities rather than dismantle them.

Violence was not only peer-generated but institutionally sanctioned. Santo's harrowing account of being violently restrained by officers, resulting in a broken finger, and witnessing another boy's bone protrude from his arm due to officer mistreatment, underscores the trauma inflicted by those tasked with care. "That definitely turns you crazy," he concluded.

The psychological toll was profound. Santo spoke of forgetting how to laugh, of faking facial expressions, of his mother misreading his silence as anger: "I couldn't even laugh... because my laugh wasn't there no more." Such accounts expose the deep emotional erosion produced by long hours in isolation and lack of human connection.

These narratives demonstrate that YOIs were criminogenic: normalising violence, undermining trust, and offering no meaningful route to personal development. Early immersion in institutional life not only reinforced participants' sense of exclusion but also gave crime renewed logic, structure, and community. As participants moved from YOIs into adult prisons, these patterns became more entrenched.

<u>Prison as a Site of Criminal Networking and Institutional Harm:</u> Rather than rehabilitating, adult prisons functioned as criminal finishing schools, sites where networks were forged, reputations solidified, and offending strategies refined. Far from disrupting criminal trajectories, incarceration often accelerated them, while institutional structures systematically undermined any progress participants attempted to make.

Many participants described prison as an environment where criminal connections were strengthened, and tactical knowledge exchanged. Ismail captured this, likening prison to a networking platform:

> “You're surrounded by people that just do crime… this is the best environment for you to thrive when you're on release… I've got his contact number... you come out of here like a successful bad guy... whether it's for firearms, knives. You've lived with people that you could never have the opportunity to do outside” — Ismail.

Prison provided not only tactical knowledge but also strategic connections. His description of mealtime conversations with "multi-millionaire" drug dealers illustrated how knowledge exchange became embedded into daily routines, elevating prison to a site of informal criminal apprenticeship. As McNeill and Weaver (2010) argue, desistance requires new networks of support and meaning; what Ismail describes is the reproduction of pro-criminal capital in a closed, legitimised setting.

Even when participants attempted personal development, institutional structures appeared designed to undermine rather than support change. Jose offered a layered critique:

> “Whatever they build, straightaway the officers, the prison establishment, destroys it within the people. So whatever seeds you plant… the minute you go back to the officers, the inmates… it's demoralising… you're not aided to be a better person, it's not how the prison system works” — Jose.

Cole described how this dynamic was embedded in the fundamental organisation of prison:

> “So a lot of the time in prison they put a divide, "us against them." So what that causes, it causes an adversarial system, an ecosystem of distrust, tit for tat. Instead of it being a symbiotic relationship” — Cole.

Cole's identification of the "us against them" divide reveals how prisons structurally produce antagonism rather than cooperation, making collaborative rehabilitation virtually impossible. This demoralisation was compounded by the apparent futility of self-development. Darren noted that despite doing everything required to move forward, "you're just sat in no man's land." Santo dismissed rehabilitation rhetoric entirely: "a load of cob wash... none of it's true... they don't care." Psychological support was described as non-existent or performative, with officers lacking either empathy or lived experience to meaningfully support change.

Institutional practices could also actively escalate risk. Jose noted how being housed on unfamiliar wings, away from known peers, increased rather than reduced violence:

> “In some messed-up way, they think it's good that a person has no sense of belonging... So the minute something arises you're thinking, 'That's my cue to leave the wing now'... you're more likely to attack a person… But if you are with your friends… you've got something to lose now” — Jose.

His account offers a nuanced view of violence as relational, not innate, escalated by displacement and isolation, and moderated by connection and belonging. Prison management strategies that deliberately isolated prisoners from peers, ostensibly for security purposes, paradoxically increased volatility by removing social anchors that might have constrained violence.

Jose also reflected on how prolonged containment without care could transform the nature of offending itself:

> “You can really destroy people, and we have to fear them for the rest of our lives… What if someone is just down-trodden… they come out, next thing you know you hear that something terrible has happened? Their whole criminal involvement was just to do with materialistic things. Now it's more with spite, anger at society” — Jose.

This shift from instrumental to expressive violence marks a significant warning: rather than reducing risk, prison may cultivate the very volatility it claims to contain.

These accounts reveal how prisons, far from interrupting criminal careers, often entrenched them. Criminal networks it were forged and refined, tactical knowledge exchanged, and reputations built, all within an institutional setting that claimed

rehabilitation as its purpose. Meanwhile, those same institutions systematically undermined any genuine efforts at personal development, creating adversarial dynamics that fostered resentment and destroyed hope.

Masculinity, Violence and the Prison Mask: The adversarial dynamics, criminal apprenticeships, and institutional indifference documented above created not only tactical networks but also a specific social ecology demanding particular performances of self. Within environments characterised by distrust, volatility, and the constant threat of exploitation, participants described having to adopt hypermasculine personas designed to conceal vulnerability and project invulnerability. This "prison mask" operated as both protection and constraint, a survival strategy that came at profound psychological cost.

For some participants, the hypermasculine codes learned on the streets found direct continuity in prison environments. Barry reflected:

> “I was a bit of a naughty boy. A fighter... and obviously, again, I was still facing the same challenges. As I did on the estate, peer pressure. Status. It's mirrored... I went to a boys school. So it kind of felt like going to a boys school kind of prepped me for jail” — Barry.

Barry's observation that the challenges "mirrored" those from the estate reveals how prison represented not a rupture but a continuation of familiar masculine dynamics.

Jay articulated the mechanics of the prison mask with striking clarity:

> “So a prison mask is very straightforward. The prison persona requires an emotionless face, so you can't be read... If I smile, that means I'm happy. If I frown, that means I'm angry. But if I don't display anything on my face, you can't read me, and that disorientates most people... there's predators in here that will bully you” — Jay.

The mask was a deliberate strategy of opacity. Jay learned this performance from an older prisoner serving 36 years for murder who told him: "Stop smiling so much, stop talking so much... you're letting people read you, and that's not good, because you're dealing with hitmen and terrorists." This peer mentoring reveals how the prison mask is transmitted through informal social learning, a pedagogy of survival passed from experienced prisoners to newcomers.

The prison mask was not only about emotional suppression but also about the visible performance of toughness. Dean described how even trivial provocations demanded public response:

> “Like someone would tell you to suck your mum. It sounds so silly, but in prison settings, that's a big violation, and you can't be seen to let it slide. So now you have to act upon that... any little pettiness like that you got to act upon it because, if not, people think you're an idiot. Then they might take you for an idiot” — Dean.

Dean's account reveals the hypervigilance required where minor infractions become tests of masculine credibility. The phrase "you have to be seen to act" underscores the performative dimension.

The prolonged maintenance of the prison mask produced profound emotional numbing. Yasin described how prison environments desensitised participants to violence:

> “When visitors come in, if visitors see a fight, they start panicking, whereas we would just look at it and be like: "that's normal." But prison does that. It makes you numb to some aspects of violence” — Yasin.

Yasin's observation about differing reactions reveals the normalisation that occurs within carceral environments. This emotional flattening represents a profound cost: the erosion of empathy and deadening of affective responses.

For Jay, maintaining this façade for over a decade produced profound psychological costs:

> “I think being in that persona for so long made me lose myself also. You've got to realize that the persona isn't you” — Jay.

The mask, initially a conscious performance, risked becoming habitual identity. The difficulty of shedding it extended beyond the prison gates:

> “When it comes to work now, I have to be very smiley, and that's not normal to me... This social façade, this nice guy. I'm so used to dealing with shitbags. I can only deal with shitbags and bullies. I know how to deal with bullies. I don't know how to deal with gentle. Society is gentle. I realized men are gentle and smiley. "What's he smiling for? Is he up to something?" People are just nice people, man. That's where I realized I was institutionalized” — Jay.

Jay's account reveals the lasting imprint of carceral masculinity. The social skills required for prison survival rendered him ill-equipped for ordinary social interaction.

Kingston described the exhausting duality of maintaining the mask:

> “When that door closes, no one's there... only you know what you're going through, and the pressure... the face that you have to put on, because everyone stereotypes prison, like, "you're weak, you're not gonna survive." So, you have to put a front on, whilst you're going through everything internally... it's draining, man” — Kingston.

Noah described the spatial and temporal rhythms of this transformation:

> “You have to change who you are... you've just got to turn... just be ready... When the doors shut, you can just relax for a bit, relax, watch telly and then when the door opens up again in the morning, it's back to chaos” — Noah.

These narratives collectively reveal how the prison setting amplifies and rewards hypermasculine traits as survival strategy. The mask functioned as emotional armour but came at profound cost: loss of authentic self-expression, difficulty trusting others,

and lasting psychological imprints. What begins as strategic suppression becomes genuine inability to feel. As Jay's reflection on institutionalisation suggests, the emotional habits cultivated in prison often persisted as habitual modes of being, complicating reintegration and desistance. The prison mask, initially adopted as protection, risked becoming permanent.

4.3.2 Inside Lives: Trauma, Grief and Survival

The dynamics documented above, criminal networking, hypermasculine codes, and institutional indifference, reveal how prisons reproduced the social conditions they claimed to reform. Yet these external pressures exacted profound internal costs. Beyond shaping criminal identities and networks, incarceration inflicted deep psychological wounds: mental health crises, unresolved grief, severed family bonds, and emotional erosion in men forced to survive environments that punished vulnerability while denying care.

Mental Health and Psychological Distress: For many participants, the prison environment took a profound toll on mental health. Experiences of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, psychosis, and emotional breakdown were common, often exacerbated by isolation, lack of adequate support, and the need to maintain a stoic exterior.

Several participants described reaching points of profound despair during their sentences. Jay, reflecting on the early years of his lengthy sentence, recalled:

> “At times I've been suicidal and suffering from terrible anxiety and depression. That was at the start of the sentence. I was in a very black hole; I couldn't see the light” — Jay.

Jay's language conveys the totalising nature of prison-induced depression, where hope and future orientation become inaccessible. He elaborated that he had since slipped into another episodes of depression highlighting the cyclical nature of mental health struggles in custody.

Many participants entered prison with pre-existing mental health diagnoses, yet institutional responses were frequently described as inadequate, inconsistent, or actively harmful. Vincent described a complex diagnostic picture compounded by auditory hallucinations:

> “I've got ADHD, PTSD, mixed personality disorder and social anxiety. I was working with the mental health team because I was going through a lot, I was just getting angry. The voices in my head, there were things they were telling me to do. I was hearing voices. I still hear them now, but I know how to maintain it. I'm on my medication now; it's getting sorted, so now it's alright” — Vincent.

His matter-of-fact tone, "I still hear them now, but I know how to maintain it", reveals a coping strategy rooted in self-management rather than therapeutic cure, reflecting the limitations of prison mental health services.

Earl highlighted systemic neglect in medication management, where cost considerations overrode clinical need:

> “Mental health, all they do is mess my tablets up. So I haven't been taking my ADHD tablets now for about two weeks because they took the ones I was meant to be on off me, because apparently, they were too expensive and they were just giving me the generic ones. And the generic ones don't work... Makes me feel like I'm in an earthquake being shook around, makes you just want to go and hide. Makes me feel like absolute shit. I can't take it” — Earl.

Earl's account exposes the institutional prioritisation of cost over efficacy. His description of feeling "like I'm in an earthquake" conveys the disorienting, destabilising effects of medication withdrawal or ineffective substitutes, leaving him less able to engage constructively with prison life or rehabilitative efforts.

A recurring theme was the psychological toll of prolonged isolation, particularly where participants were locked in cells for up to 23 or 24 hours a day. Santo articulated this experience in visceral terms:

> “Being with yourself - that's the biggest challenge of being in jail. I'm high risk so I can't share a cell. After an incident they put me in a high-risk pad, and from then it was just me with my own thoughts. In a YOI you're banged up 23 hours - sometimes 24 - so you're with your own thoughts every day... Sometimes you sit there and you're blank. You don't want to have to feel like that, because when you get out, you don't want to be around your family and just look blank. You become institutionalised” — Santo.

Photograph to show a locked gate in prison (source: Centre for Security Research and Studies).

Santo's repeated emphasis on being "with your own thoughts" reveals the relentless nature of isolation-induced rumination. His fear of appearing "blank" to his family upon release reflects awareness that this emotional flattening was becoming habitual. Barry, who spent significant time in segregation, described similar conditions compounded by existential pain:

> “Many times in isolation... having to be in a block with no sunlight 24 hours a day... knowing that people are living their life, people growing up, people doing well, getting educated, achieving the dreams that I wanted. Because as a kid, I didn't want to come to jail. I didn't want to be a drug dealer. I actually wanted to aspire to be someone positive” — Barry.

Barry's account captures not only physical deprivation but the anguish of temporal dislocation - watching his aspirations recede while peers outside lived the life he had wanted. Beyond personal psychological distress, several participants described the secondary trauma of witnessing others' mental health crises, including suicide. Yasin, who had spent time in Category A prisons, reflected on the cumulative impact:

> “The worst things I've seen in prison were in Cat A prisons - the most vicious assaults. You're seeing prisoners take their own lives. I've seen friends lose their sanity over things they witnessed themselves, especially through the COVID pandemic - no visits, no gym, locked up two, three weeks not coming out of your cell. It was very harsh. A lot of prisoners struggled with their mental health, and a lot of people lost their lives” — Yasin.

Yasin's account reveals layered trauma: not only did he witness suicide, but he also observed peers "lose their sanity" in response to what they had seen or endured. His reference to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights how lockdown conditions intensified during public health emergencies, leaving prisoners with weeks of near-total isolation. The phrase "a lot of people lost their lives" was delivered with resignation, suggesting that death in custody had become normalised within high-security settings. These accounts illustrate how mental health distress in prison is not solely an individual experience but a collective one, with witnessing suffering imposing psychological costs that few formal systems existed to address.

For many, the psychological impact of imprisonment did not end at the prison gates. Kingston articulated this with particular clarity:

> “I try not to concentrate on the negative too much, but honestly it's mentally, emotionally disturbed me for the rest of my… I'm traumatised from the experience of prison, and it's something that even on the out I'm going to think of times inside - it'll just live with me now to the day that I die — Kingston.

Kingston's use of "traumatised" was deliberate. He did not frame imprisonment as a temporary hardship but as a formative wound that would persist indefinitely, echoing findings that long-term imprisonment can produce symptoms consistent with complex PTSD (Haney, 2003).

Collectively, these accounts reveal how prisons operated not as therapeutic spaces but as environments that amplified mental health crises. Pre-existing conditions were poorly managed, with medication withdrawn for financial reasons and therapy delayed indefinitely. As Crewe (2011a) notes, modern imprisonment imposes its weight through psychological invasiveness, control, and neglect. These narratives lay bare the human cost: a daily negotiation between survival and silence, where distress is pervasive but care remains scarce.

Grief, Loss, and the Denial of Care: Imprisonment severed participants from the people and responsibilities that anchored their lives. The inability to care for aging parents, witness children's milestones, attend family funerals, or maintain romantic relationships produced profound grief and guilt. These losses were compounded by institutional failures in healthcare provision, where chronic conditions were poorly managed and medical complaints dismissed.

For many participants, one of the most painful aspects of incarceration was witnessing their mothers age without them. Barry captured the emotional weight of this:

> “Biggest challenges, just accepting that I'll have to do a long time... My parents, who I also love dearly, now growing old. See my mom, the challenges for me are more so my mom, seeing her when she was younger, and now she's got grey hairs, she's aging. Inside, it's heartbreaking. It kills. But for me, it was more the challenges for my mum, just knowing I wasn't there. I felt like at her most crucial years I wasn't there... I felt like I've let her down” — Barry.

Barry's focus on "the little things," being present for daily life, reveals how incarceration denies not grand gestures but the mundane acts of care that constitute familial love. Salman made explicit the moral injury inflicted on families:

Salman made explicit the moral injury inflicted on families by mass incarceration:

> “Family, having missed out on spending a lot of time with them, that's going to be very important. Because at the end of it, they are also victims of me being in prison. My mom, she didn't do anything wrong, but she became a victim of losing one of her sons to the prison system for the last decade and a half. It's a lot to make up for” — Salman.

Salman's framing of his mother as a "victim" shifts moral responsibility from individual failure to systemic harm, reflecting what Comfort (2008) terms "secondary prisonisation," where families bear the emotional burdens of a loved one's incarceration.

If the pain of watching parents age was acute, the grief of missing children's development was perhaps even more devastating. Usain's reflection captures this with particular force:

> “She wasn't even, she was in the room. I came out ten days after she was born. That was June. Then, when she was ten months old, I came back

> to jail... When I'm on that visit for two hours, I forget where I am, but then you get that shout, "five minutes left!" and my daughter is asking, "Are you gonna come in the car with us?" And I'm saying, "I gotta go back to my room." She doesn't understand that... I went to jail when my daughter couldn't even crawl, and now she can run and talk and speak different languages" — Usain.

Usain's account reveals the painful paradox of prison visits: they provide brief connection but intensify awareness of separation. The developmental leap from crawling to running and speaking multiple languages underscores how much he had missed, formative years that cannot be reclaimed.

Byron, a Key4Life mentor, recalled a moment that catalysed his desire to change:

> "I was in jail, no one was there for me. No one really did shit for me like that. I had to do for myself in prison to survive and make sure I was good. But no one was there for me. My son came to visit me, started crying at the end. He was 12. That's my second oldest son. I wasn't used to that. And that triggered something in me, this guy is yearning for his dad" — Byron.

Byron's repetition, "no one was there for me," conveys isolation, but his son's tears broke through that emotional fortress, marking a moment of recognition that his absence was emotionally wounding his child.

Several participants described losing family members during their sentences without being able to grieve properly. Kingston articulated this:

> "It's a bit of everything, to be fair. The hard reality of it is the amount of people that have died since I've been in prison, and I've not been able to... I don't think I've been able to grieve properly. I don't think I've been able to actually take it in and acknowledge it" — Kingston.

Kingston's hesitation reveals how incarceration disrupts the social and emotional rituals that structure mourning. Unable to attend funerals or be physically present with grieving family, he was left in a state of suspended bereavement.

Long sentences also strained or severed romantic relationships. Santo described how his child's mother moved on entirely:

> "It's affected it a lot. One of my baby mums doesn't want anything to do with me... She's saying I'm selfish. Obviously, I want to repair it, but she's moved on. She's got a new partner. He's like a father figure now. I don't want to come back in the scene and destroy all that, because obviously it will affect my daughter... I just want her to have the best life she can, even if that means me not being in it" — Santo.

Santo's decision to step back, "even if that means me not being in it," demonstrates painful self-awareness. Rather than disrupting his daughter's stability, he accepted permanent estrangement as the cost of his incarceration.

Yasin articulated the broader existential pain of watching life continue without them:

> "You become so distant and cut off from society. If you don't have a visit for a month or two months, or a year or two years, that person becomes a stranger because you don't know what's going on in each other's lives" — Yasin.

The gradual estrangement from family reveals how absence erodes intimacy, transforming once-close relationships into hollow rituals of phone calls and visits.

Beyond relational losses, participants described how physical health needs were systematically neglected. Bembe, who relied on a prosthetic leg, described the failure of prison healthcare:

> "I think having a prosthetic in prison is very difficult, only because…the health care system is atrocious... I have to get like, a renewal, like a new prosthetic leg or at least a check-up every six months to a year... So it'd be like, "Oh, we can't take you to this appointment." And then you'll end up behind basically. And that will have an adverse effect on the rest of your health... You start feeling all down because you want to do stuff, but you can't because your leg's not fitting properly" — Bembe.

Bembe's repeated use of "atrocious" emphasises the severity of institutional failure. Despite clear medical protocols, appointments were routinely disrupted, with cascading consequences for his physical and psychological wellbeing.

These losses were not incidental to incarceration but structural features of it. The prison system systematically denied care, emotional, relational, medical, while expecting individuals to emerge "rehabilitated." As Comfort (2008) has documented, the harms of imprisonment radiate outward, affecting not only those confined but the families and communities who bear the costs of their absence. These narratives reveal that cost in intimate detail: the grey hairs on a mother's head, the daughter who can now run and speak different languages, the prosthetic leg that no longer fits. Together, they expose how prisons function not as sites of rehabilitation but as engines of compounded suffering.

4.3.3 The Revolving Door: Barriers Inside, Abandonment Outside

The preceding sections documented how prisons reproduce criminal identities while inflicting profound psychological harm. This section examines why these conditions systematically undermine rehabilitation within custody, and how release without support transforms freedom into renewed risk.

<u>Why Standard Prison Environments Undermine Rehabilitation:</u> Navigating prison required more than emotional detachment or toughness; it demanded adaptation to unwritten codes that prioritised survival over personal growth. Cole described prison as a self-organising ecosystem with fixed structural roles:

> "It's a microcosm of the world, an oppressive regime. They put a divide, "us against them," which causes an ecosystem of distrust, tit for tat. There has to be the lion, the tiger, the tadpole, the dealer, the informer, the gym guys. Everyone has to fill a position. If you get rid of the informer, they will

> just be replaced. Each person has to make an equation where everyone can co-exist" — Cole.

Cole's ecological metaphor reveals a crucial barrier to rehabilitation: prison social organisation operated as a closed system where roles were structural rather than individual. Regardless of an individual's desire to change, the environment itself reproduced the same dynamics and hierarchies.

Vincent described how this system enforced specific performances of masculinity and power:

> "There's literally a hierarchy to who's considered the king. It doesn't matter about age, it's who's up for it, whose name's out there. Some people are violent, some sell drugs for money, some want the status. In terms of the hierarchy, what are the qualities they have to show as men? Masculinity, to be able to delegate and people listen to you. And money" — Vincent.

Vincent also emphasised the relentless pressure:

You have to hold your own. Once one person finds you're a pushover, everyone will start pushing you over.

This predatory logic created an environment where vulnerability, essential for genuine personal change, was systematically punished.

Participants described learning these survival rules through immersion. Zach explained:

> "You learn what not to do, what to do, who to speak to, who not to speak to, when to keep your mouth shut. You get institutionalised without even realising it" — Zach.

This institutionalisation was not merely behavioural adaptation but a fundamental reshaping of identity. Yet some participants actively resisted, only to discover how profoundly the daily regime worked against them. Salman described the dehumanising mechanisms embedded in routine prison life:

> "I try and stay away from activities of becoming institutionalised as much as possible, so I can keep some form of normality. Often you won't see me on exercise, because the guards let you out just like they would do in a zoo or a farm. They unlock the doors, let the animals out of the cage. They stand there, and they observe you walking round and round in a circle. I almost feel dehumanised by it. A person who is in control of you is giving out commands or barking out orders, making you feel like this subservient human being, or even an animal. You don't feel like a man." — Salman.

Salman's zoo metaphor exposes how everyday prison routines systematically stripped autonomy and human dignity. Most significantly, he identified how these mechanisms actively produced dependency rather than readiness for release:

> "It all institutionalises you and it makes you not ready for release but opposite to that, dependent. And then there's the dependency on them,

> just to even ask for a toilet or "Boss, can you open my door?" Or "I need to go here."" — Salman.

The institution claimed to prepare men for autonomous citizenship while systematically training them in dependency and learned helplessness.

Perhaps most significantly, even when prisoners actively tried to change themselves, the unchanging environment created a disorienting paradox. Jay captured this:

> “Prison has a way of making you forget who you are. I was alone. And life's all about victories, isn't it? You set a goal and then you accomplish it. But when you're accomplishing goals but staying still, it is very confusing, because outside if I was to accomplish things, my social circle would probably change, my financial system would change, my job would change. But in prison, you read all these books, you do all these courses, but you're still sitting with the same people and doing the same things. So you don't realise it and you lose yourself in that, especially with the negativity that you're surrounded by” — Jay.

Jay described engaging in exactly the activities officially promoted as rehabilitative: reading books, completing courses, setting and achieving goals. Yet these accomplishments produced no tangible change in circumstances. The disconnection between internal growth and external stagnation created existential confusion that ultimately undermined progress.

Release into Risk: Reoffending and the Failure of Aftercare: For many participants, release did not mark a clean break but a precarious re-entry into conditions making reoffending likely. Byron, released early for good behaviour, explained how quickly reoffending resumed:

> “So I come out, on tag, I started doing what I know, selling weed, building back up my line. This time is different. I've bought a gun now, I'm making money, I'm saying this ain't happening to me again” — Byron.

The logic of reoffending was bound up with both survival and self-protection. Others described reoffending as near-automatic. Marcus admitted: "I went back straight to it. A month later. Yeah. County lines again." Nate explained prison had done little to affect his outlook:

> “You have to make positive choices yourself and change yourself, the prison's not going to. If anything, it makes you worse. My last sentence didn't do anything for me. I just wanted to get out to carry on doing what I was doing” — Nate.

Several emphasised that change required more than moral willpower, it required credible alternatives. Yasin noted:

> “A lot of people don't want to change. They openly say: "I've got a few more sentences in me." You can't just say to them, stop selling drugs.

> You have to say to them, there's the alternative. It might not be as lucrative, but it's something you can work towards" — Yasin.

Without tangible support, housing, employment, mentoring, calls for desistance remain abstract and ineffective.

For others, the failure of aftercare was felt as betrayal. Jose expressed anger:

> "They gave me nothing. There's no such thing as aftercare basically. They say there is but the actual people, they're not what they used to be. They're more inclined to recall a person than to work with them. If you recall a person, it's not going to change them. You have to actually listen" — Jose.

Housing was a recurrent vulnerability. Jose recounted:

> "They say, "We're gonna put you in a hostel," and the person says "What? I'm trying to stay away from drugs. I want to start afresh." It doesn't matter. You have to go into these housing situations where you are more likely to fall back into the old ways" — Jose.

This institutional placement into high-risk environments generated a paradox of supervised entrapment: intensive monitoring combined with placement in precisely the criminogenic settings that probation purported to help them avoid. As Mears et al. (2008) show, release into contexts shaped by deprivation and segregation situates individuals within a social ecology that amplifies recidivism risks and narrows pathways out of offending. Research shows that 63% of those in unsettled accommodation were recalled or resentenced within a year, compared to just 35% with settled housing (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020).

Even when programmes like Key4Life intervened positively, their impact was fragile. Jose summarised:

> "Everything that they can build and work towards, the prison system can destroy in one day. Just one transfer, one wrong wing, all of that progress, it's all gone in the wind" — Jose.

For some, the aftermath of imprisonment did not merely perpetuate risk; it deepened emotional damage. Jose warned:

> "What if a person has an episode... they come out, next thing you know you hear something terrible has happened... Now it's more with spite, anger at society" — Jose.

The shift from economic to emotional motives suggests the failure to support re-entry can have dangerous consequences.

The men's accounts present a coherent picture: release without resources is not liberation, it is exposure. The revolving door is sustained not by individual failure but by systemic neglect. Until credible, tailored, and humane support becomes the norm, prison will continue not only to fail in its rehabilitative mission, but to guarantee its own perpetuation.

4.3.4 Conclusion

The accounts presented in this part of the chapter reveal how prisons function not as sites of rehabilitation but as engines of harm. Rather than disrupting criminal trajectories, incarceration often consolidated them, forging criminal networks, reinforcing hypermasculine codes, and deepening social marginalisation. Participants described learning to survive through emotional suppression, adopting "prison masks" that concealed vulnerability but eroded authentic selfhood. Mental health needs went unmet, grief remained unprocessed, and family bonds frayed under the weight of separation and institutional neglect.

The adversarial relationship between staff and prisoners, what Cole termed an "ecosystem of distrust, tit for tat," precluded meaningful support. Meanwhile, the daily regime itself, spatial control, constant surveillance, infantilising commands, systematically stripped autonomy and trained dependency, making prisoners, as Salman observed, "not ready for release but opposite to that." Those who attempted personal development found their efforts systematically undermined by institutional structures designed for control rather than change.

Upon release, participants faced a familiar absence: no meaningful aftercare, no relational anchor, no alternative to the life they had known. Reoffending was not a failure of individual will but a predictable outcome of systemic abandonment.

Yet participants' accounts also revealed what they needed: not another superficial prison programme delivered by disconnected staff, but something fundamentally different. They needed support that recognised their humanity rather than reducing them to security risks. They needed relationships built on genuine care rather than institutional suspicion. They needed interventions rooted in cultural understanding rather than middle-class assumptions about rehabilitation. Above all, they needed someone to believe that transformation was actually possible.

It is into this context that Key4Life entered.

4.4 Key4Life Programme Experiences

4.4.1 Introduction

This section examines the men's experiences of the Key4Life programme, organised around five thematic domains: engagement in a transformative challenge, the development of emotional resilience and self-regulation, employability and future orientation, the role of mentoring, and the adoption of a prosocial, non-offending identity.

The Key4Life programme operates through a seven-step model spanning custody and community. Steps 1-3, delivered in prison, comprise Unlock, an intensive emotional development phase addressing trauma and destructive patterns; Mentor, pairing participants with trained volunteer mentors; and Work Preparation, comprising employability sessions and employer engagement. Steps 4-7 take place post-release and encompass work tasters, family engagement, residential experience, monthly workshops, and graduation into the alumni network.

As this research focused on the in-custody phase of the programme, the analysis necessarily centres on Steps 1-3. While the post-release steps fall outside the scope of this study, the qualitative interviews generated rich accounts of how the in-custody programme engaged with the structural and emotional conditions that shaped participants' pathways into crime. Participants spoke directly to how the programme addressed emotional dysregulation, relational disconnection, and limited future orientation, themes that map onto the risk factors explored in section 2 and which are examined thematically in the sections that follow.

It is important to note that this analysis does not evaluate the programme against a linear model of risk factor reduction. Desistance scholarship consistently demonstrates that change is a non-linear, emergent, and relational process rather than a sequential progression through discrete stages (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). What participants describe in the following sections are not completed outcomes but the early conditions of possibility for change: shifts in self-understanding, emotional regulation, relational reconnection, and future orientation that desistance theory identifies as foundational to sustained behavioural change. These internal and relational shifts are not peripheral to rehabilitation but central to it, and they are most clearly visible through qualitative, participant-centred methods that attend to meaning, narrative, and lived experience rather than reconviction rates alone.

Drawing on rich narrative data, the section explores how the design and delivery of Key4Life supported individual transformation. Whether through the cultural relevance of its workshops, the lived credibility of its facilitators, the corporate engagement opportunities, or the emotionally honest spaces for reflection and growth, Key4Life's unique model was repeatedly described as both distinctive and effective. Collectively, these findings offer insight into the multi-dimensional nature of desistance and the ways in which structured, compassionate interventions can help men reconstruct their lives and sense of self.

4.4.2 Engagement in Change: A Unique and Engaging Programme

Many of the men described Key4Life as unlike any other programme they had encountered in the prison system. The themes that constituted this uniqueness were: genuine care from facilitators, ex-offender credibility, cultural relevance, and being pushed out of their comfort zone.

<u>People who actually care:</u> A recurring theme was the authentic commitment demonstrated by Key4Life facilitators, distinguishing the programme from other interventions. Yasin highlighted the warmth of Eva, whose energy stood in stark contrast to other programmes where staff appeared detached:

> “Eva was a big part of it, her energy, her warmness and her willingness to help. I feel like that kind of shone through. More so compared to other courses, where they're just there to do a job. She was more invested in the lads” — Yasin.

Salman described the support from Key4Life as unlike anything he had experienced:

> "The support the people, the group, the Key4Life group give to candidates and the mentees is quite special. They take a real interest in you" — Salman.

Unlike conventional prison courses such as offending behaviour programmes, vocational qualifications, and mandated resettlement modules, which were often described as procedural or impersonal, Key4Life's approach was perceived as deeply invested in the individuals themselves. Bembe emphasised that the programme was unique in actively listening to participants and helping them pursue their goals:

> "Yeah, they actually invest their time in you and what you want to do. If they can help you, they will…All the other programs I've done, they haven't done that" — Bembe.

Nahale echoed this sentiment, appreciating that the facilitators were non-judgmental and focused on providing practical tools and resources:

> "They're a bunch of people that are non-judgemental. They allow you to… they actually ask you what is that you want. And yeah, they just help you put in the tools and resources needed to take those steps moving forward. And being in prison for as long as I have, we do get loads of people that come in that act like they know it all. There's something different about Key4Life" — Nahale.

As a result of this perceived authenticity, the men said they genuinely wanted to engage. Yasin was particularly insightful about the significance of this:

> "Then what happens when you feel people want to help you and are genuine, what do you do? You invest, you're invested. So we all become invested in Key4Life. So, we all, as the first cohort of Key mentors, we loved it" — Yasin.

This shift in emotional investment is particularly significant in a prison setting, where institutional distrust is high and many prisoners feel forgotten or neglected. Yasin articulated how this sense of care could transform prison culture itself:

> "It creates that culture of you're cared about as a prisoner. You're not just a number, a name that's forgotten about. We care about you. There're people outside that care, that want to help. So, when prisoners feel, like some prisoners they haven't got family and friends or anyone so, when they feel like people are actually invested in them, you'll get the best out of prisoners" — Yasin.

Photograph to show the Key4Life CEO with members of the staff team and Key4Life mentors.

Beyond care, participants emphasised the importance of belief. Jay reflected on how prison environments typically frame prisoners through a deficit-based lens, where intelligence is viewed with suspicion rather than encouragement:

> "It's like, in prison no one believes in you. If anything, people look for the darkness in you. If I go up to an officer and have a conversation about intellectual stuff, they'll say I'm a manipulator. However, when I sit with people like Eva and that, they'll say "You're an intelligent young man, you need to put this to good use." So, this stuff made me realize that you can believe in humans because I'd even lost hope in humans being in prison because we're surrounded by such negativity and mental health and drug abuse and people that are lost and, and so this course made me believe in humans, and believe in myself" — Jay.

Jay's testimony highlights how effective rehabilitation challenges internalised stigma and restores hope by recognising strengths rather than fixating on past mistakes. When prisoners feel both cared for and believed in, it creates conditions for genuine engagement and transformation. This aligns with research emphasising the importance of relational desistance: individuals are more likely to move away from crime when they develop positive, meaningful connections with others who support their transformation (Weaver, 2015; McNeill and Weaver, 2010).

Ex-offender facilitators: A significant factor contributing to Key4Life's perceived authenticity was the involvement of ex-offender facilitators who brought lived experience and credibility that professional staff often lacked. This addresses a fundamental critique of prison rehabilitation: programmes led by individuals without

direct experience of incarceration struggle to establish legitimacy with participants. Cole articulated this demand for authenticity succinctly:

> “Men want role models, but a man doesn't want to be something he's not. He doesn't want a role model who's portraying something he's not” — Cole.

Ex-offender facilitators served as living proof that desistance was achievable, embodying the transformation participants aspired to reach. Yasin emphasised how this generated hope and inspiration:

> “So for me, that was inspiring, the first time in prison I've seen prisoners allowed back into prison to teach prisoners that anyone can change...ex-prisoners, if they can change, and they can be where we was then we can do it...That, in essence, gives us the hope” — Yasin.

This peer credibility challenged the fatalistic narratives many prisoners held and normalised the possibility of change through tangible evidence of successful transformation.

Beyond modelling transformation, these facilitators communicated in culturally fluent terms that broke down barriers. Cory explained:

> “He talks the same language as me...He speaks to me” — Cory.

This linguistic and experiential alignment allowed facilitators to meet participants where they were. Cory emphasised that authenticity required maintaining connection to one's roots while demonstrating change:

> !A lot of people come into prisons and say, "I used to do this, I used to do that." It might be true, but I don't believe you. He's successful and not on the streets anymore, but he's still himself, his heart's the same” — Cory.

Crucially, ex-offender facilitators also demonstrated emotional authenticity through vulnerability. Cory recalled a powerful moment when a Key4Life facilitator became deeply emotional during a workshop:

> “There was a time when I think he got passionate, he was speaking for about a good twenty minutes about his life. And he kind of got emotional but he was just basically saying, "I'm not here to kind of lecture you, but like I've been there, done that. I've been there, I'm here, and I've changed, because of this, my kids, my family members."” — Cory.

For Cory, this sincere message felt genuine precisely because the facilitator shared his own journey openly, including his emotional struggles. His willingness to express vulnerability demonstrated authentic leadership: he did not present himself as someone with all the answers, but as someone who had walked the same path and found a way forward (Brown, 2015). Research on peer mentorship consistently shows that individuals with similar lived experiences are uniquely positioned to help others set aside dangerous lifestyles, offering empathy, validation, and practical strategies for overcoming shared challenges (Davidson et al., 2006; Buck, 2020).

This combination of credibility, cultural fluency, and emotional vulnerability proved crucial for engagement, reducing defensiveness and creating space for honest dialogue that professional-only delivery often cannot achieve.

Cultural relevance: Another dimension of Key4Life's uniqueness was its cultural relevance and alignment with participants' lived realities. The programme's relatability stemmed partly from ex-offender facilitators who understood street life intimately: survival mentalities, codes of respect and loyalty, normalised violence, and the hustle. Yasin emphasised that lived experience determined whether participants would truly engage:

> “For me, hearing something from someone like [Key4Life facilitator mentor], hit me way more than hearing it, from someone who's got no experience in what they're talking about. You've never gone through the pain, you've not gone through that struggle...So, a lot of the guys, when you're talking to them, they want to see if you've been through what you're talking about, if you're the real deal. And if you are, they relate to you, they listen to you” — Yasin.

This credibility extended beyond personal testimony to programme design. Key4Life's role play exercises replicated real-life street dilemmas: choosing between £50K from illicit economy or £20K legally; leaving prison gates with mother or co-defendant; moving a package for £5K during the first week of legitimate employment. These scenarios acknowledged that rehabilitation involves managing competing influences and resisting deeply ingrained patterns. Ismail reflected on the role play exploring quick wealth versus stable legal income:

> “When they asked us to pick between 50K from the road or 20K legit, I ain't gonna lie, my first thought was, 'That's easy, I'm taking the 50.' But then we started breaking it down- what comes with that money? Stress, paranoia, always looking over your shoulder” — Ismail.

These exercises also addressed identity conflicts. Daniel recognized the role play challenged where he saw himself fitting:

> “That role play wasn't just about money, it was about who I wanna be. Do I wanna be that guy still stuck in the cycle, or do I wanna build something real? You can think you owe loyalty, but when you really look at it, half of them ain't even checking for you when you're inside. My real people are the ones that want me to do better” — Daniel.

The "Meet the Rapper" workshop exemplified cultural relevance through engagement with rap music, which resonated deeply with participants' experiences of struggle, survival, and transformation. Meeting successful rappers who had turned their lives around after similar struggles provided tangible examples of transformation. Naem noted:

> “The music session is the one day where you see everyone buzzing. Even guys who don't usually engage in courses turn up because it's something they actually connect with” — Naem.

The opportunity to write and perform with professional artists gave participants a platform for creative expression. Usain contrasted this empowerment with prison's silencing effect:

> “In prison, you feel like you're just a number. No one listens to you. But when you step in that studio, suddenly your words matter. You get to tell your own story, and that's powerful” — Usain.

Having skills validated by professional artists helped reshape identity from 'offender' to 'artist' or 'creator'. Liam reflected:

> “I've been writing stuff for as long as I can remember, but I never thought I could actually do something with it. Having that positive feedback and being told I've got real potential was a great boost for my self-esteem. Yeah, it felt good” — Liam.

The ‘Sport for Thought’ football coaching session provided another cultural touchpoint. Football connected strongly with communities affected by crime and socioeconomic disadvantage. Many participants grew up playing football and had previous aspirations before life circumstances intervened. By incorporating a familiar sport, the programme removed engagement barriers while using football as a metaphor for life decision-making. The sessions reframe street culture values like physical strength, resilience, and reputation positively: strength as endurance and leadership and resilience as pushing through challenges rather than surviving streets.

Photograph showing a Key4Life Sport for Thought football coaching session.

The cultural relevance of Key4Life emerged as one of its most powerful assets. The programme's capacity to reflect the realities, interests, and language of the men

it served enabled resonance that conventional interventions failed to reach. By meeting men where they were, linguistically, emotionally, and culturally, the programme laid groundwork for deeper engagement and reflection.

A transformative challenge: While Key4Life met participants on familiar cultural ground, it also challenged them by pushing them into unfamiliar situations that fostered personal growth. The programme strikes a balance between cultural relevance and challenge: it meets men where they are but does not leave them there. Instead, it gradually stretches their boundaries, encouraging them to try on new roles, engage with unfamiliar environments, and imagine different versions of themselves.

Kieran described the anxiety of facing novel situations and how repeated exposure built resilience:

> “Believe it or not even with anxiety at certain times it's been being thrown in the frying pan. And yeah, when you're in that frying pan, and it's a bit hot, sometimes it takes you out of your comfort zone, and you can just get the real you across...Situations you'd normally try and avoid, they're putting you in them…It's helped to be honest with you, because it then brings you into a natural relaxed state because once you've been put in the frying pan once or twice, you can kind of feel like, oh, I can handle this and be the real me” — Kieran.

Kieran's metaphor illustrates the programme's transformative power through discomfort. While initially challenging and anxiety-inducing, he recognizes it as a path to self-discovery. Discomfort becomes not an endpoint but a doorway into self-efficacy.

Earl reflected on how Key4Life helped him confront one of his greatest personal difficulties - interviews:

> “I've always been rubbish at interviews, and they've helped me be able to figure out how to have an interview. Because normally I don't think I'd be able to do this, because of them that I feel comfortable doing this, cos I normally would have been too nervous… So obviously they put you in front of a load of people in a load of companies and that. So obviously they've put you out your comfort zone to help you adapt to that sort of thing. And obviously they've helped a lot with that” — Earl.

The shift from being "rubbish at interviews" to feeling comfortable reflects a broader psychological transformation: Earl begins to perceive himself as someone who belongs in these spaces.

Dean reflected on how structured challenges reframed his assumptions about what was possible:

> “Key4Life, they actually brought, um, employers, after sitting down and speaking with a lot of them, it could change my aspect of it…It's good. It puts you out of your comfort zone. I mean, we're coming from backgrounds we never come to job interviews and things like that, so, putting us out of our comfort zones, like that I believe, is a good thing. It's

> teaching us "Look, there are other things out there for you and there are opportunities"" — Dean.

Dean's insight highlights how deeply entrenched limiting beliefs, particularly around employability and belonging in mainstream society, are challenged through programme encounters. Practical exposure to employers functions not only as preparation but as affirmation: it sends a symbolic message that these men are seen as employable and capable of change.

Cory described his intense anxiety around public speaking and how the programme helped him overcome it:

> "I forgot to tell you. I hate public speaking, with a bloody passion. And I've never really, I've never really dug deep into myself before Key4Life. So you kind of get to know yourself as well more. So on the last day of the Key4Life mentor thing, we had to do like a speech, everyone had to say something, so I'm just dreading it. I'm sweating, everything, I'm thinking all my days. After I did it, I was actually calm. I was amongst my peers" — Cory.

Cory's testimony underscores the dual role of challenge and safety in Key4Life's structure. Public speaking, an activity he "bloody hates," becomes not only achievable but empowering when scaffolded by peer support and shared vulnerability. His experience reflects a "zone of proximal development" moment (Vygotsky, 1978): the challenge was hard enough to stretch him without overwhelming him.

These reflections point to the programme's ability to stretch participants into the zone of proximal development, where learning and transformation are most likely to occur. This aligns with desistance research emphasising the importance of both providing opportunities for change and ensuring individuals are positioned to grasp them (Giordano et al., 2002). Key4Life's structured challenges foster the agency and self-belief central to identity transformation (Maruna, 2001), while peer support ensures these "hooks for change" are accessible rather than overwhelming. Growth, in this model, is not incidental to discomfort, it is dependent on it. For men who have often been written off, learning to tolerate and even embrace unfamiliar environments is a powerful act of identity reinvention.

<u>Conclusion:</u> The narratives in this section reveal that Key4Life's impact rests not simply on the content of its interventions, but on the way it engages men in meaningful and transformative ways. The programme draws participants in by meeting them where they are, emotionally, culturally, and socially, while gently challenging them to imagine and embody a different future.

Participants consistently described Key4Life as unique among prison programmes. Unlike interventions that felt impersonal or performative, Key4Life was perceived as real: real people who cared, real-life mentors who had walked the same path, real talk that reflected their lived realities, and real-world challenges that required them to grow. This combination of authenticity, relatability, and constructive

discomfort proved central to the programme's ability to engage men who are often wary of formal systems and resistant to change.

Through the presence of ex-offender facilitators, Key4Life established an emotional and social credibility rarely found in institutional rehabilitation. These mentors not only offered hope by modelling desistance but were also able to communicate in ways that resonated deeply with participants' identities and histories. Key4Life also disrupted established narratives and limitations. It exposed men to unfamiliar situations, interviews, public speaking, corporate settings, that initially evoked anxiety but ultimately served as catalysts for growth. These moments of challenge, scaffolded by emotional safety and peer support, helped men discover new competencies and reimagine their potential. Key4Life engages men not just by reflecting who they are, but by encouraging them to become who they might be. Its power lies in its dual strategy: affirmation and transformation, cultural familiarity and personal stretch.

4.4.3 Tools for Change: Building Emotional Resilience and Self-improvement

Many of the men on the Key4Life programme had emotional support needs due to mental health issues, traumatic adverse experiences, or neurodivergence. Key4Life aims to provide participants with techniques and tools to build emotional resilience, one of the three pillars underpinning the programme. They do this through teaching NLP techniques and life-decision making exercises, equine therapy, football coaching with Sport for Thought, and a music day with mentoring from a well-known rapper.

<u>Tools to manage mental health and improve wellbeing: NLP and personal development exercises:</u> Many men stated that Key4Life had helped them by providing NLP tools and personal development exercises to manage their mental health. Key4Life integrates techniques including perceptual positioning, cognitive reframing, visualisation, and breathing techniques to unlock and manage emotional trauma, sadness, fear, guilt, and anger.

Earl described how Key4Life helped him learn to deal with his emotions:

> “They helped a lot with, the way that I deal with my emotions as well, because I had a one to one and they turned around and helped me realize, they told me "Your mind could be closed with all those bad thoughts, you're locking those bad thoughts in but if you just open your mind and release those bad thoughts and let them out, then you can lock in the good which will help a lot" [N: "And you found that to be the case?"] Yeah.”
> — Earl.

Earl's imagery of a "closed mind" and "locking in" bad thoughts reflects how many participants initially experience their internal world as constrained and difficult to manage. Rather than dwelling on past experiences, this technique empowers participants to see themselves as capable of letting go and choosing a new emotional trajectory.

A key element identified as especially impactful was the perceptual positioning exercise. This technique invites participants to reflect on a past conflict by mentally and physically shifting between three roles: their own perspective, that of the other person involved, and a neutral observer. Participants literally move between three chairs, reinforcing a physical and psychological shift in viewpoint. Dean's reflection demonstrates its relevance to prison life:

> “It does teach you to look at things from a different angle. Sometimes we're stuck in just seeing it from our point of view. Sometimes we can be in the wrong but not even realize it, because we're so adamant in ourselves. And men, especially in a prison setting, we're prideful. Sometimes it's hard to let it die down. "No, I'm right. This is that", but when you actually take time and sit back and see it from the other person's point of view, that's when you kind of start to realize, okay, I'm in the wrong. I could have handled that a bit differently” — Dean.

Dean articulates how pride and entrenched viewpoints can dominate in custodial environments. The exercise provides a structured opportunity to interrupt automatic defensiveness, allowing space for reflection and emotional maturity.

Konrad's account highlights the emotional intensity of the exercise:

> “There was one guy sitting down saying, "Oh, that's why I shot you in your face". And it was like, "Whoa!" And then he has to turn around and be the victim and explain, "Put yourself in his shoes". And he found it hard. I think that was the most powerful thing. That bit was the most powerful thing out of all of it. If they stuck with that and developed that, it would change a lot of people” — Konrad.

This anecdote underscores the visceral, disarming nature of the technique, forcing participants to confront the impact of their actions in ways that standard discussions might not achieve. Konrad's emphasis on how "hard" it was for the man to embody the victim illustrates the moral and emotional dissonance that the exercise can provoke. Such cognitive-behavioural techniques have been shown to improve self-control, impulse management, and self-efficacy among offenders (Lipsey et al., 2007; Bandura, 1977).

Another recurring theme was cognitive reframing and mental regulation techniques. Salman articulated a core principle taught in the programme:

> “One of the things that really resonated with me that they taught was change the meaning, change the feeling, so yeah. If something, for example, if something's really bothering you, if you can change the meaning of that thing, you can change how you feel about it. And then I've tried to implement that in my life. And you know what it is actually a very powerful thing” — Salman.

His phrase "change the meaning, change the feeling" encapsulates the essence of cognitive reframing. Salman's comment suggests strong internalisation, moving beyond abstract understanding to real-world application.

Leeroy similarly described how Key4Life's tools helped him interrupt negative spirals and develop self-regulation:

> “The skills and the techniques that they've taught me in order to calm myself, relax myself, and to change my thought process, you know, like the chain reaction to the thought, the feelings, the thoughts, and then the consequence to the actions” — Leeroy.

Leeroy is learning to become more reflective and less reactive, an essential foundation for behavioural change and for navigating both interpersonal conflict and life beyond custody.

Nathan provided a concrete example of grounding during heightened anxiety:

> “And another thing that they really helped me was with my emotional state, and my mental health at the time, they gave me some tools that I could use to ground myself. If I find my mind racing, count back from two hundred” — Nathan.

That Nathan remembers and uses this tool during moments of distress suggests Key4Life's techniques are not just theoretical but embodied and accessible under pressure, offering an alternative to more harmful coping strategies such as aggression, withdrawal, or substance use.

Earl described how learning to track his emotions gave him the ability to step back from escalating situations:

> “She told me basically how to assess every situation as a thought and always assess the situation as the situation is going on. You can see that some things aren't going in the way that it's meant to go, and you can track that and remove yourself away from that to stop that from going too far” — Earl.

This highlights how mindfulness was not just an abstract concept but a practical tool Earl actively applied. The ability to "track" emotional cues and "remove yourself" from potentially harmful situations reflects a clear shift toward self-awareness, self-regulation, and behavioural control.

The sustained impact of these techniques is evidenced in accounts of ex-prisoners interviewed years after completing the programme. Noah, who described living with long-term depression and a history of suicidal ideation, credited Key4Life with equipping him with essential tools:

> “I still do meditation and use the NLP techniques I learnt with Key4Life. It helps to maintain my mental health, and when I've forgotten to do it, I notice it starts to slip” — Noah.

Noah's account adds a longitudinal dimension to the testimonies. His comment underscores the preventative value of these techniques: meditation and reframing are not just reactive tools for crisis management but are used proactively to keep emotional distress from escalating. This pattern of men internalising and continuing to practise techniques highlights a key strength of Key4Life's methodology: its emphasis on self-led emotional responsibility. Rather than creating dependence on

external support systems, the programme nurtures an internal shift, enabling men to monitor and manage their own emotional states well beyond the programme itself.

Equine Therapy: emotional resonance, authenticity and embodied freedom: As part of its unique approach to rehabilitation, Key4Life incorporates equine therapy to build emotional resilience. Key4Life brings horses directly into the prison environment, an intervention that many participants described as both emotionally impactful and symbolically powerful.

Yasin recalled the collective sense of anticipation when prisoners heard that horses were being brought to HMP Fosse Way:

> "Like it's something unique, it's exciting. No matter how old you are or how young you are, everyone was excited" — Yasin.

In a context where emotional openness is often constrained by hypermasculine norms, the arrival of horses created a shared emotional response and sense of wonder that transcended the emotional armour so often worn in prison. Issam saw the therapeutic potential of this encounter in a broader sense:

> "This was about trying to reach the prisoners in a different way, to connect them with nature and help them realise there is more to life - more to life than their estate" — Issam.

For men whose lives have been shaped by cycles of poverty, trauma, and violence, often in urban estates disconnected from nature, the presence of these animals offers a tangible representation of another world and perhaps another way of being.

For some participants, the horses represented first-time interactions with animals of any kind, illuminating the depth of their social and environmental deprivation. Barry described how powerful this was:

> "Horses was a big thing for me because I've never seen a horse in my whole life. I'd just see them on TV. Just understanding how horses react to us, how I would react to a horse, just fascinating. It was a really good experience and something I want to do again" — Barry.

Barry's sentiment that he wanted to experience this again suggests genuine emotional engagement and a spark of intrinsic motivation, the kind of response crucial for long-term personal development and rehabilitation.

Nahale's account captures the non-verbal and intuitive nature of emotional connection that horses facilitate:

> "It's upsetting to say my first engagement and interaction with horses was in prison. So, yeah, that's one thing that stood out for me. Most definitely. And getting the knowledge that they sense your, what is it called, they pick up your different emotions and fears without you communicating it to them. So that was something that stood out" — Nahale.

For many men in prison, where emotional expression can be difficult or unsafe, the idea that a horse can "pick up on your emotions" without words can be startling

and validating. It allows participants to explore vulnerability in a non-threatening way, and to begin recognising and naming emotions they may have previously suppressed.

Image x. Photograph showing Key4Life participant connecting with Carlos during an equine session on a Key4Life 'at risk' programme.

Horses possess a limbic system similar to humans and are especially sensitive to emotional energy through limbic resonance (Panksepp, 1998; Lewis et al., 2000). This enables them to attune closely to a person's mood, body language, and internal state. When a participant is carrying tension, fear, or anger, the horse may instinctively retreat, becoming uneasy or defensive in response. Unlike humans, the horse does not respond to social masks, bravado, or verbal justification. As Dean explained:

> "Everyone was scared of the one horse, Carlos or something like that. He was biting a lot of people. For me I found him alright. I think obviously with horses, especially, you have to approach them in a calming manner. If you're going to them paranoid, the horses pick up on it" — Dean.

Scott's experience echoes this shift in perspective:

> "See, I used to think I was a bit tough. Then, obviously, when you have to walk the horses, you know they're a lot bigger than you, so you have to, they control you type thing" — Scott.

This moment of realisation, confronting the limits of control and the need to attune rather than dominate, captures how equine therapy offers a gentle but powerful challenge to hypermasculine posturing. Instead of commanding respect through force, participants learn that calmness, presence, and emotional honesty are what foster trust and cooperation.

Several participants spoke about how the horses helped clear their minds and provide space for emotional reflection:

> “I've done horse riding before but with the horses now, they've done it in a therapy way. It cleared my head space. It helped me just to take a step back when I'm angry and think of the broader aspects of things” — Vincent.
>
> “That therapy, a lot of us come from cities, we're not close to horses, and that's something that brings you close to nature, and then brings your barriers down” — Jose.

For individuals shaped by urban environments and constant exposure to threat or instability, horses offer a non-verbal and somatic form of regulation that is deeply grounding.

For others, being around horses evoked powerful memories and emotions tied to freedom, childhood, and connection:

> “When I was working with horses it felt like I was free. I was daydreaming in my head, thinking that I'm back with my sisters. It was like a massive release of stress, thinking I'm out” — Earl.
>
> “It was very powerful, very emotional. That essence of being free, walking an animal, talking to animals. You don't get that in prison” — Yasin.

These reflections speak to the imaginative and therapeutic potential of equine therapy: not only does it help participants regulate their emotions in the moment, but it also opens up symbolic and embodied experiences of freedom, memory, and future possibility.

Through these encounters, participants not only find temporary relief but also begin to develop new relational capacities: to self-regulate, to connect authentically, and to lower defensive barriers. Equine therapy encourages emotional authenticity, humility, and connection, critical capacities for desistance and long-term personal change.

Effective communication is a core pillar of rehabilitation, and Key4Life places strong emphasis on helping participants develop the confidence and capacity to express themselves constructively. For many men on the programme, prior experiences of marginalisation, trauma, and survival-based environments have shaped communication styles rooted in defensiveness, aggression, or emotional withdrawal. Through structured workshops, role play, and reflective group work, Key4Life creates a space where participants can practise new ways of speaking and listening, learning to articulate thoughts, recognise others' perspectives, and respond with emotional intelligence rather than reactivity.

Participants' accounts have offered compelling insight into how the prison environment shapes and constrains interpersonal communication. Prison is not merely a spatial separation from society; it also imposes a set of behavioural codes and emotional norms that make authentic dialogue both difficult and risky (Crewe, 2009; Sykes, 1958). Cole articulated:

> "Prison life is about accountability. It's not a community hub. There's people with serious problems, people are in here for serious stuff. People have got different temperaments, low tolerance, different tolerance levels. So yeah, like I said, it can never be a kumbaya moment" — Cole.

Cole's description points to the intense emotional volatility of prison life, where men are expected to regulate and contain strong feelings not through expression or dialogue, but through stoicism, detachment, or aggression. The absence of a psychologically safe space means that vulnerability is rarely afforded and often penalised.

Key4Life's intervention introduces a counter-narrative to these dominant forms of carceral communication. Naem observed:

> "Whatever they're doing, here I commend, and I stand by and I'm happy they're doing it, because what they don't know is that the ripple effect of this is you're taking kids out of this, so you're allowing them to interact with each other based on positivity. Usually, they interact with each other based on how much drugs they can sell, who they stabbed up. Now they're having positive conversations" — Naem.

This change in tone is profound. It reframes not only how the men communicate but what they communicate about. Positive dialogue becomes both a relational tool and a form of re-socialisation.

Kingston's account underscores the emotional labour involved in this transformation:

> "I like having deeper, meaningful conversations, which a lot of people try to avoid nowadays, I think. And I just like it raw, open and honest, and you just say how it is to get a better understanding of yourself and other people. And when you do, you tend to get a lot of people's attention, because either people don't do it, or they can relate to you, because they're going through the same thing, but they just hide it, and they just keep it to themselves. It's not a normal thing to open up, especially as a male, you suffer in silence" — Kingston.

Kingston's insight affirms the idea that honest communication, though rare in carceral settings, is deeply resonant when it occurs, providing mutual recognition, connection, and validation. Key4Life functions as a space where men can lower their guard, share openly, and be heard without judgement.

Konrad observed that when individuals are given "no option but to talk," space is created for reflection:

> "It's opened up my eyes to like, gangs, violence, getting people in a room, getting people to talk about their differences and what's gone on, because a lot of people in jail and on road probably, if they saw each other, they would probably attack each other or stab each other. In prison, in that moment, you got no option but to talk and talk about their feelings, what's going on, on the road. Talk about what they want to do" — Konrad.

His remarks point to the deliberate design of the programme as a conflict-reducing space: an intervention not only targeting the individual but fostering dialogue across boundaries that would otherwise be marked by hostility or threat.

Sam described the group dynamic of Key4Life as a uniquely open forum:

> “You can get down here, talk with people who you don't know, we're all in the jail together. Half of us don't even talk to each other. We all get together with Key4Life, and you're standing in this big circle where there's a lot of grown men, there's a lot of people who's got big egos, you know, personality disorders and whatever else, just talking openly. And it got me speaking to people more and trying to share the positivity that I had” — Sam.

This unusual configuration gave him the confidence to speak more openly, both inside the prison and in his personal life:

> “I'm speaking back to my children. I'm speaking back to my missus. Even with the screws” — Sam.

His account powerfully illustrates the ripple effect of improved communication: when emotional expression is modelled and practiced in a safe space, it can generalise to other relationships and environments.

These accounts show how Key4Life alters the emotional architecture of prison life, softening its edges, building trust between unlikely peers, and making room for hope, honesty, and relational growth. This is not just about speech; it is about connection. And for many of these men, that connection represents the first real step toward lasting personal change.

<u>Finding a voice: Emotional expression and communication in prison:</u> Effective communication is a core pillar of rehabilitation, and Key4Life places strong emphasis on helping participants develop the confidence and capacity to express themselves constructively. For many men on the programme, prior experiences of marginalisation, trauma, and survival-based environments have shaped communication styles rooted in defensiveness, aggression, or emotional withdrawal. Through structured workshops, role play, and reflective group work, Key4Life creates a space where participants can practise new ways of speaking and listening, learning to articulate thoughts, recognise others' perspectives, and respond with emotional intelligence rather than reactivity.

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Photograph to show a Key4Life workshop in progress

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<u>Growing confidence through emotional and interpersonal development:</u> Because of their social and economic backgrounds, many men in prison feel inadequate and lack self-esteem and self-confidence. Participants described prison as a "lonely" place of "suffering," "trauma," and "heartache," where "no-one believes in you," "no-one cares about you," and "the system will break you."

Yasin, who had received a joint enterprise sentence as a young person and had already spent over a decade in prison, articulated the deep damage to self-worth that long-term incarceration can cause:

> “They literally beat the confidence out of you. They've just sucked any energy, any kind of self-belief, over these years. You get damaged as a person. I might not come across as damaged, but there's a lot of trauma that goes with a long prison sentence that you've had to carry that with you” — Yasin.

Yasin's account reflects what Crewe et al. (2017) describe as the "gendered pains of life imprisonment," wherein the cumulative psychological toll extends far beyond physical confinement to fundamentally reshape individuals' sense of self and capability.

Key4Life's programme directly addresses this erosion of self-belief. Through its focus on emotional resilience and communication, the programme provides participants with tools to reflect, release suppressed emotions, and reconnect with their own potential. These practices support internal transformation and the rebuilding of positive identity, processes that align with desistance scholarship emphasising the centrality of identity change in moving away from crime (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). Yasin later reflected on this shift:

> “I feel like confidence was the essence of what Key4Life's done for me. It gave me that confidence to believe in myself and help others. It's something that's really helped me in life. It's equipped me with the skills needed to take on my life in my future roles” — Yasin.

This quote encapsulates how confidence, once restored, can become the foundation for a new, prosocial identity. The emphasis on helping others reflects a key element of desistance theory: that individuals begin to desist from crime when they start to see themselves as capable of contributing positively to others and society (Maruna, 2001). This shift from a 'condemned' self to a 'redemptive' self represents a fundamental reorientation of identity that underpins sustainable change.

For Santo, too, the process of interacting with others had a cumulative effect on his self-image:

> “Being able to speak to others, interact with others, helped me be more confident in myself and understand that I should never doubt myself, because I doubt myself a lot. They made me understand, don't ever doubt yourself. Always go through what you feel like is good and it will benefit you” — Santo.

Many of the men described overcoming shyness and a fear of public speaking through group exercises. Santo explained:

> "Because before I was shy, I couldn't speak in front of a lot of people. So, when you first come to Key4Life they ask you who you are, what you're in for, when you're getting out, what you want to do, and you do that in front of like 20 or 25, to 30 people. So, it's kind of like putting you in an uncomfortable space, to feel more comfortable. So that's one major thing that has helped me with being more confident and less shy, and more interacting with people and not being afraid to say certain things" — Santo.

These activities encourage personal exposure in a non-judgemental setting, allowing participants to experiment with vulnerability and authenticity.

Two photographs, both showing Key4Life participants presenting to panels of business professionals, capturing the programme's work taster element in which young men develop employability and communication skills in real corporate environments.

At the end of the programme, on "graduation day," all the Key Mentors are encouraged to make a speech in front of their peers, fellow mentors, and visiting families and partners. Yasin recalled how he felt when it was his turn to speak:

> “Remember, I've been in a cage for 13 years. No one has told me to get up and speak in front of 100 people. Who's ever done that? People outside don't do that. And I felt confident. I felt strong. I felt like I had a voice because in prison, I feel like prisoners feel voiceless. Our voices are lost. Our voices are not heard. We're not allowed to vote. We become the lost people, the voiceless people. But what Key4Life graduation does is it gives us prisoners a voice and visibility. Listen to us. Let us speak and then we speak. It's given us a platform to voice our opinions, our feelings. It's given our families, our families are forgotten about, society has turned their back on them, society has turned their back on us, but in essence family sees "Oh, he's not the same person that went in prison."” — Yasin.

Yasin's powerful testimony speaks to the restoration of agency and voice, elements that Maruna (2001) identifies as essential in the narrative reconstruction necessary for desistance. The visibility of transformation, particularly in front of families who have shared the burden of incarceration, validates the emerging prosocial identity and reinforces the possibility of redemption.

Photograph showing Key4Life programme graduates sharing their accounts of personal change at a gala dinner.

These accounts illustrate how the combination of emotional resilience work and open, group-based communication helps lay the foundation for increased self-confidence. This confidence in turn supports identity change, promotes prosocial thinking, and enables the development of healthier, more respectful relationships with

others: essential steps in the journey away from crime and towards sustainable rehabilitation.

Building bonds: Connection, vulnerability and relational growth: A central theme to emerge from participants' reflections was the deepening of interpersonal connections within the prison environment. As they began to understand themselves better, regulate their emotions, and communicate more openly, they found it easier to form meaningful connections with peers, mentors, and family members. The sense of trust and mutual respect fostered through group work and shared experiences allowed for more positive interactions within the prison environment and beyond.

For many, the unique structure of Key4Life workshops, which brought together men from across different wings and social groups, was instrumental in dismantling barriers and breaking through the social fragmentation that often characterises prison life. Sam shared how participating in breathing techniques, seemingly incongruous in the hyper-masculine world of prison, created unexpected spaces of solidarity:

> “It seems mad when you're doing it, you know what I mean? Because we're all in prison, like criminals and robbers and drug dealers and that... But this is the thing here, I seen the biggest and the baddest guys, doing all of this and breathing nice like” — Sam.

This account illustrates how activities rooted in emotional regulation can puncture hardened social roles and invite an alternative way of relating, grounded not in bravado or survivalism, but in calm, mutual presence.

Issam emphasised how the programme facilitated cross-wing interactions and unexpected social bonds:

> “It brings different cells together, different wings, different groups that maybe wouldn't talk to each other normally... you build relationships, you make friendships, things like that, it's good” — Issam.

This enables men to encounter one another not as threats or strangers but as individuals with shared experiences and emotional common ground:

> “In a setting like this, you get to meet people, hear people's stories, and you might find something in common. So, it's a lot of icebreaking, and it helps, and then now, when you see each other out around the prison, "Oh what's happening", you know...” — Daniel.

The importance of storytelling and narrative expression emerges as a key theme in fostering these new connections. In allowing men to reflect on their lives and express their identities beyond the criminal label, these exchanges create empathy.

Beyond peer relationships, many participants described how Key4Life contributed to repairing and strengthening bonds with family members. For Cory, the emotional impact extended to his mother, who witnessed the men giving Key4Life programme graduation ceremony speeches and was visibly moved by the authenticity and remorse they expressed:

> “Before she used to worry…then I invited her to Key4Life.. She was like 'oh is this actually a prison?'... People were talking sense up there. There's one guy that's apologized to his mom on the stage in front of everyone” — Cory.

These comments point to the power of public, emotionally honest moments to shift long-standing perceptions held by family members and to offer a renewed image of the incarcerated individual. When family members witness and validate transformation, it reinforces the emerging prosocial identity and strengthens the relational foundations necessary for sustainable change (Maruna, 2001; Weaver and McNeill, 2015).

Yasin described how the graduation ceremony helped mend long-fractured bonds with his younger siblings:

> “They've never seen me speak... for them to see... My little brother was saying to me, like, "after all these years, we're proud of you and it's lovely the changes you've made…We look up to you still."” — Yasin.

This testimony encapsulates the intersection of personal transformation and relational repair. It affirms the potential for rehabilitative programmes to reach beyond the prison gates, altering not only the self-perception of participants but the narratives held by others about who they are and who they can become.

These accounts show that improved relationships in the Key4Life programme are not incidental outcomes but central, consciously constructed features. They reflect a deeper shift in how participants come to see themselves in relation to others: no longer as isolated or adversarial figures but as connected, communicative, and accountable individuals capable of love, remorse, leadership, and change. This collective and relational reorientation is crucial in moving away from criminogenic networks and towards reintegration into communities and families.

<u>From reaction to reflection: Emotional regulation and conflict transformation:</u> Building on the foundation of increased emotional awareness, many of the men described how Key4Life had a marked impact on their day-to-day behaviour, particularly in relation to conflict and violence. Within prison environments where status, respect, and survival are often negotiated through aggression, the ability to manage emotional responses and resolve conflict without violence represents a significant behavioural shift. For men whose early lives were shaped by fighting, gang affiliation, and exclusion from mainstream education, such changes signal a profound break from entrenched patterns of hypermasculinity and reactive behaviour.

Key4Life's emotional resilience tools helped participants develop greater self-awareness and the ability to express emotion in safer, more constructive ways. The programme also integrates structured personal development activities such as conflict resolution, time management, and perceptual positioning: exercises that go beyond reflection and equip participants with the cognitive tools needed to interrupt automatic or aggressive responses.

Vincent described how the programme helped him pause and reassess situations that would previously have triggered anger:

> "It taught me to step back when I'm angry and look at the broader aspects of things" — Vincent.

Similarly, Earl explained:

> "I get agitated, I am able to stop and realize that I'm getting agitated, so I can pull myself away from the situation before it goes too far" — Earl.

These comments highlight the role of emotional literacy and self-regulation in behavioural change. Rather than relying on external discipline or punitive measures, Key4Life cultivates internal control, encouraging participants to take personal responsibility for their reactions. Earl elaborated:

> "I've been managing to control my behaviour quite well since doing [the Key4Life programme]…because they've opened…they made me open my mind up to realize the possibilities. And that I can't just brush everything off. I do have to take responsibility for my actions, to look at, assess the situation as it's going on, to make sure I don't get to that point where on the out, and that I could put myself back in this situation" — Earl.

Earl's account reflects a growing capacity for self-awareness, emotional regulation, and personal responsibility, all central to desistance theory and sustained behavioural change. His use of the phrase "open my mind up to realise the possibilities" suggests not just a shift in behaviour but in cognitive framing: a reorientation of how he interprets situations, options, and consequences. Rather than defaulting to impulsive or defensive responses, Earl is learning to pause, reflect, and apply a broader perspective.

Bembe offered a striking example of how emotional maturity reshaped how he interpreted social interactions:

> "Usually, you might see someone around, and think why is this guy looking at me... But now it's like yeah, OK, it's fine. You're actually a cool person" — Bembe.

Such reframing is deeply significant in a prison culture where eye contact, body language, and perceived disrespect can easily escalate into violence. The tools offered by Key4Life equip participants with a new interpretive lens through which to read potentially threatening situations.

Yasin provided a powerful account of how Key4Life enabled reconciliation after a physical altercation:

> "There was a situation here where there was a fight, outside Key4Life. I don't know if you heard about that. And we got the lads back on the course. They apologized; they mediated through Key4Life… The lads became friends… that is a perfect example of how it can work and it will work but it's about people giving it that chance" —Yasin.

Yasin's account highlights the rare and transformative potential of reconciliation within the rigid and often punitive context of the prison system. In most institutions,

such incidents would trigger automatic disciplinary procedures such as segregation or exclusion from programmes. But Key4Life treated the incident as an opportunity for growth, mediation, and reintegration. By facilitating reconciliation rather than removal, Key4Life communicates a powerful message: you are not defined by your worst moment.

Vincent's account provides a real-world example of how these tools can be applied in high-stakes interpersonal encounters:

> “I had an altercation with someone after the session, actually. We was arguing, arguing, arguing. My first instinct would be to say, 'Yo, step in the pad and let's scrap'… but I seen that they didn't want to. So, I was like "Alright then cool", told everyone to go, and then me and him was just chatting. I said, "All right, cool. Look, my bad, I shouldn't have spoke to you like that." Then he said, "I understand, this, that and the other" and then we just shook hands after that” — Vincent.

Vincent's narrative captures a transformative moment in which instinct was overridden by reflection. His ability to de-escalate, recognise the other person's reluctance, apologise, and ultimately shake hands marks a powerful departure from ego-driven, reactive masculinity. The handshake itself is significant: in prison culture, it represents a powerful act of disarmament, marking the transition from adversaries to equals. This example can be understood through the lens of desistance theory: Vincent is not only refraining from violence but actively practising new forms of identity and social interaction, reflecting what Maruna (2001) describes as the development of a "prosocial self-concept."

These accounts suggest that Key4Life plays a significant role in helping men move away from automatic, violence-based responses to conflict and towards more considered, emotionally intelligent strategies. The programme's emphasis on practical tools, internal reflection, and peer support works not only to reduce violence but to foster a more humanised and relational prison culture, laying a critical foundation for long-term behavioural change and sustainable desistance.

<u>Reshaping prison culture: From containment to care:</u> In discussing their experiences of prison culture, participants described it as defined by suspicion, routine dehumanisation, and a lack of meaningful engagement. Many described an environment in which prisoners were viewed primarily as risks or numbers, rather than as people. These conditions often fostered hostility, hopelessness, and a survivalist mindset.

The disconnection between frontline prison staff and rehabilitative work was particularly striking. Tim explained:

> “So then they went to a job centre, they signed up and they got a job as a prison guard, even though everyone said it's the most dangerous job in the world. And they're on not a lot of money. So, then they're working in a jail. Now the officers there, the most thing they will see is they lock us up on a wing, and they lock us. So they don't see any rehabilitation. They

> don't see any probation. They don't see any of this. So, they don't see this side of these lads" — Tim.

Many officers perform highly routine custodial tasks without exposure to transformative prisoner engagement. As a result, they rarely witness change or interact with prisoners outside disciplinary contexts, contributing to a culture of detachment. This echoes Liebling's (2004) argument that when prison environments lack moral performance and opportunities for positive relational encounters, they foster emotional distance and dehumanisation.

However, Key4Life's presence created opportunities for staff to witness positive change firsthand. Tim explained how mentors advocated for rotating staff through the programme:

> "This is the part that I'm bringing in. So, me and [another mentor] have been advocates now to try and make sure these staff change every day. So we don't just get two members of staff here through the whole three-week period. Because when these staff leave here, and they see these lads in a different realm and a different thing of learning a bit of rehabilitation, "Oh my god yeah, we are helping."" — Tim.

This direct exposure challenges negative stereotyping and promotes what Crewe et al. (2011b) call a "softer" culture of imprisonment, characterised by mutual respect and interpersonal trust. One officer's response illustrated this shift:

> "I randomly picked an officer who was just in there. And I said, "What do you think?" and she said, "Oh it's great. I took this job because my brother had been sent to jail, I wanted to help. And this has shown me that we are helping."" — Tim.

Yasin commented on the broader cultural implications:

What we did really when we did the first cohort, having horses in prison, having Queen's Park Rangers in, it creates that culture of you're cared about as a prisoner. You're not just a number, a name that's forgotten about. We care about you. There're people outside that care, that want to help. So, when prisoners feel like people are actually invested in them, you'll get the best out of prisoners. And this worked. Yasin.

This reflects a shift from institutional indifference to a culture of care. The introduction of external visitors and symbolic activities signals prisoners' value as individuals. Feeling cared for enables prisoners to reciprocate with prosocial behaviours and renewed motivation for change.

This change was felt not only individually but in the collective atmosphere on the wings. Cory described how programme participants intervened in a potentially violent incident:

> "There was an incident, and I think if it wasn't for the course, it probably would have escalated because there was a few people involved. I saw it escalate. It probably would have continued on to another day but because it was the course, a couple of people that's level-headed got all the guys that was involved and kind of deaded it between them and brought them

to the course the next day. They apologized to everyone. I was there, apologized to Eva." — Cory.

Cory's reference to "level-headed" peers as de-escalators suggests new leadership emerging among the men, based not on dominance but on calm authority.

Tim offered a vivid example of this collective restraint in action:

> "We had a guy on Saturday, he got up and smashed every microwave... one guy spoilt it for 59 lads. So then the other 59 lads want to punch his head in. But we're mentors, so even though we might want to punch his head in, that can't happen on our landing, because it looks bad on us. So we've got to then calm down 59 lads and explain the guy's mentally ill... That's why he's done what he's done" — Tim.

Rather than escalating into violence, the incident was contained through explanation and collective restraint - a stark departure from the reactive aggression that often characterises prison life.

Earl observed that people on his landing who had completed Key4Life were walking away from arguments rather than fighting:

> "I know that a lot of people that have done the course, they've not been getting into trouble as much now, and I've noticed that. So, on my landing, there's quite a lot of people that have done Key4Life. And I've found there's hardly any things going on. Because, if there's an argument or something, people are just sort of like, "Yeah, right, whatever, blah, blah, blah," but then they will disperse and walk away. They won't get into like a fight or anything. So, I feel like it does help. I feel like they've talked and they're using their initiative from what Key4Life has taught them and are being ambitious with it" — Earl.

Earl describes a collective shift: men literally turning their backs on confrontation. His repeated reference to "they" underscores peer diffusion, behavioural change is not isolated but contagious.

Tim described how a single participant could shift group norms on the wing:

> "Instead of them three people saying "go hit him," the three lads around him are now saying, "Listen, mate, no, no, don't worry about it. It's nothing."" — Tim.

Tim's comment illustrates how the programme contributes not just to individual desistance but to the cultivation of prosocial microcultures within prison wings. This reflects Crewe's (2011) notion of "soft power": influence not imposed by staff or rules but generated through horizontal social bonds.

Being associated with Key4Life also carried social meaning, becoming a marker of positive identity and commitment to change. Earl articulated this:

> "If you keep showing what you're doing and progressing and moving forward, people can see it. They'll start to know, "He's part of the Key programme, you know, he's different."" — Earl.

The phrase "he's different" marks a shift in identity attribution: no longer simply "prisoner" or "offender," but "someone who is working on themselves." Key4Life creates new social categories and peer norms within prison culture.

Together, these narratives suggest that Key4Life fosters a nascent prosocial culture within prison. Drawing on Liebling's (2004) concept of moral performance in prisons, we might understand these accounts as evidence that Key4Life enhances the ethical tone of the prison environment. Rather than cultivating obedience through fear or coercion, the programme supports moral agency, where men take ownership of conflict resolution, accountability, and relational repair. These narrative moments mark a shift in what counts as admirable or masculine within the prison context: not domination, but restraint; not retaliation, but reflection. It is within these seemingly small moments, a handshake, a dispersed argument, a nod in the corridor, that prison culture is renegotiated and reshaped.

<u>Conclusion:</u> Participants consistently described how the programme enabled them to access emotions they had long suppressed, regulate their impulses, and communicate more honestly and constructively. For many, this marked a radical departure from earlier patterns shaped by trauma, exclusion, and survival-based environments. Activities such as equine therapy and public speaking not only disrupted emotional numbness but also created opportunities for embodied reflection and self-discovery. These interventions, delivered in culturally relevant and psychologically safe ways, helped men reconnect with parts of themselves that had long been buried, curiosity, vulnerability, hope, and begin to imagine alternative identities rooted in self-worth and accountability.

As men began to speak more openly and listen more deeply, their relationships with peers, mentors, staff, and family members shifted. Trust and mutual respect, scarce commodities in prison, were nurtured through shared experience and honest dialogue. This laid the foundation for conflict de-escalation. Men who once defaulted to violence described learning to pause, reflect, and respond differently. The result was not only reduced incidents of aggression but the emergence of a new social script: one in which apology, reconciliation, and restraint became viable, even respected, forms of action.

Key4Life's model demonstrates that even within restrictive, punitive systems, it is possible to cultivate emotional intelligence, prosocial identity, and hope. By meeting participants where they are and gently pushing them beyond those limits, the programme facilitates growth that is both personal and collective.

4.4.4 Employability

Employability is another of the three core pillars underpinning the Key4Life programme. Many of the men in the study had limited education and work experience before incarceration. A large proportion were excluded from school and left before the age of 16, without completing formal qualifications. Employment histories prior to prison were often sporadic, shaped by early involvement in crime, gang cultures, and contact with the youth justice system. Despite this, during their time in prison, many had gained qualifications and engaged in prison work in trusted,

responsible roles including mentoring other prisoners. Several had gone on to become Key4Life mentors themselves, demonstrating growth and capacity for leadership. This progression is consistent with the findings of Maruna (2001), who highlights the importance of "making good" through prosocial contributions as a key component of desistance.

A new sense of legitimacy: An element of the programme that the men really appreciated was the access to real employment opportunities and employer engagement workshops. As Hakim explained:

It's exceeding anything that I would have had anyway because of the people that I'm meeting and the conversations that I'm getting involved in. It is different to what I've been used to for the last 15 years, ya know actually talking about employment. Hakim.

Whereas most employment support in prison is limited and often theoretical, Key4Life provides participants with real, face-to-face interaction with employers. Through a structured, immersive format, corporates are invited into the prison to observe, engage, and mentor participants. On the first day, men prepare and pitch business ideas in a Dragon's Den-style format with immediate feedback from corporate mentors. On the second day, participants write or update their CVs and engage in mock interviews dressed in suits provided by the programme, which elevates the experience and sense of occasion. Issam highlighted the uniqueness of these encounters:

> "Some of the young men in prison, they'll never have met someone who's self-employed or someone who does certain jobs" — Issam.

The encounters provide more than professional insight: they act as identity interventions. Cole explained that meeting employers was momentous, because for many of the men, the corporate world had always seemed unattainable:

> "Seeing the corporates as well, it allowed people to see what people of their own age were doing with their lives as well. See, the thing is, a lot of the time when it comes to prison culture it's a bubble. You think that those corporate people are remote from you. I didn't think that, but I can see that my peers do a lot. Due to a lack of education and other social and economic reasons you are made to feel inadequate" — Cole.

This aligns with Farrall and Bowling's (1999) emphasis on the importance of legitimacy and inclusion in desistance pathways. Encounters that provide validation and recognition from mainstream society can act as catalysts for positive identity change.

Several men reflected on how the workshops helped them rethink how money could be earned legally. Dean said:

> "They kind of teach us that there is more out there for us than just selling drugs and things like that" — Dean.

Konrad framed this learning as potentially life-changing:

> "They brought in a lot of people from working backgrounds, managers, CEOs, businesspeople. This opened up a lot of people's eyes, because a lot of people are in jail for like drugs or fraud and stuff like that, trying to make money. If they see ways of making money legit, then they might turn their life around" — Konrad.

Photograph showing Key4life Participants and employers engaging in structured speed networking at a Key4Life employability event, illustrating the programme's active approach to building real-world connections between programme graduates and potential employers.

The mock interviews were particularly impactful, not just as rehearsal for employment, but as psychological turning points. Cole spoke with insight about how being offered suits helped participants imagine themselves differently:

> "When they offered the suits, I found that resonated with me, the reason being because with the background we're from the last times we probably wore suits, or the majority of the time when we've worn suits is when someone's dead or to court. So, to put a suit on in an environment that was aimed to uplift us and show us that we can transcend the boundaries and constraints of prison, it kind of created some sort of renaissance in the mind, some enlightenment or awakening. Because I could see from a lot of people that it was a new experience for them. It allowed us to forget that day that we were in prison" — Cole.

These embodied experiences, dressing differently, being taken seriously, being looked in the eye by professionals, matter profoundly. They mark a break from prison identity and allow for a new sense of self to emerge. Such identity shifts are consistent with Giordano et al.'s (2002) emphasis on the importance of "hooks for change" and exposure to opportunities that offer an alternative self-concept.

Building Confidence for the Future: Employability and Public Engagement: Once participants began to rebuild self-worth and find their voice, they could access opportunities that would previously have felt out of reach. While some had gained qualifications or taken on responsible roles during their sentence, for others Key4Life represented the first meaningful engagement with employment-focused support. Through Dragon's Den pitches, mock interviews, and networking with employers, participants described significant increases in confidence, particularly in how they were perceived by others. Speaking to professionals created new experiences of validation, opportunities to reimagine themselves as people with potential. These structured, high-impact interactions were often described as marking a turning point.

Photograph showing Key4Life participants meeting corporate representatives and stakeholders

Kingston, who had spent over a decade inside, explained the rarity and impact of being positively recognised by someone outside the system:

> “It was generally a morale boost because being in prison for so long, and it's like you're genuinely trying to sell yourself to these people. And the fact that they said, like, "Oh, we see something in you," you don't get that. I've been in for 11 years. I've not had that within the 11 years that I've been in prison. So, for someone to say, we see something in you, that's powerful…Yeah, no one said that in such a long time. Like, we can see some value in you. Like…it makes you feel like, okay, I have got some kind of purpose on this earth” — Kingston.

These moments helped participants see themselves through different eyes: as capable, employable individuals who could leave the label of "prisoner" behind. Nathan reflected on a moment of revelation triggered by the validation he received during the Dragon's Den session:

> “And Meet the Employer, the Dragons Den helped me express myself. Just to reach out and speak to them and have them look at me and validate me, made me think "Hang on you're smart, what are you actually doing with your life?"” — Nathan.

Yasin expressed disbelief, and eventual gratitude, at the idea that professionals would take time to invest in them:

> “You meet people. Like, why are these companies coming in to talk to us? We're just prisoners, why would they do that and open opportunities? Why is this person coming to talk to us? Why is QPR football coming to do this? Why is this? So, you think, okay, people are actually interested in helping you” —Yasin.

The ability to engage with corporate visitors and professionals challenged internalised ideas about who would invest in them. These encounters helped reframe participants' sense of possibility and formed the basis of new, prosocial networks. Santo summed up the cumulative effect:

> “Being able to speak to others, interact with others… speaking to other people, building a network and, networking and building that spider web” — Santo.

Such accounts align with McNeill and Weaver's (2010) emphasis on the relational dimension of desistance, where social capital and network-building are vital to constructing a new identity. These external connections symbolise the possibility of a different life. This is not simply about building job readiness; it is about internalising a new social identity and sense of legitimacy.

Earl explained how the mock interviews pushed him beyond what he believed was possible:

> “So, they helped me. I've always been rubbish at interviews, and they've helped me be able to figure out how to have an interview. Because normally I don't think I'd be able to do this. Because of them, I feel comfortable doing this. I normally would have been too nervous” — Earl.

Some of the men still serving longer sentences said that the idea of future opportunities gave them hope:

> “I feel like it's the first time I thought you know what, there's opportunities here. There're things that I can do. Before all you see is barriers but what Key4Life does it opens doors. You meet people” — Yasin.

Santo explained that before Key4Life, he did not know what he wanted to do:

> “It actually helps you to become someone. Before I'd done Key4Life, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Then when I started doing it, I actually thought, I want to own my own business” — Santo.

Dean explained that men approaching release were given concrete opportunities and contacts: "People were going home with ready-made opportunities."

Issam highlighted Key4Life's post-release support:

> “Their unique thing is when a person comes out on the other side, they can help them and get them into jobs. That is brilliant” — Issam.

Dean shared an example of tailored networking:

> “There was a lad on there, I think he used to do roofing. And that roofing business guy came in. They were speaking, talking about this project when you come home” — Dean.

This demonstrates the programme's ability to generate highly relevant, industry-specific introductions that align with participants' skills and aspirations.

The employability strand functions as far more than vocational training: it operates as a profound identity intervention. By providing real opportunities for participants to be seen, heard, and validated by professionals, the programme disrupts internalised narratives of exclusion and inadequacy. Confidence becomes both the outcome and engine of rehabilitation.

<u>Motivation and purpose:</u> Motivation and renewed purpose are essential catalysts for lasting change. Through employability activities, inspirational encounters, and emotionally resonant experiences, many participants found themselves energised to take control of their lives. For some, the course reignited dormant aspirations; for others, it introduced for the first time the idea of a purposeful, law-abiding future.

Tom explained how the programme had increased his motivation to seek employment:

> “Since I've been doing Key4Life I've got a lot more motivation to look for work. Eva's been helping me to get the mentality for when I get released so I can get into a good work frame. Given me confidence really” — Tom.

Tom's account illustrates how hope and self-efficacy serve as critical subjective factors in desistance (LeBel et al., 2008). Santo discussed how without clear plans, men often return to prison shortly after release:

> “It's like, you get out of jail, you see your family, you see your kids. What now? You have to actually sit down and think on what you actually want to do with your life. I'm speaking from seeing other people. Saying they're going to do this, and then literally in the next two months, they're sitting in the next cell next to me. Key4Life definitely helped me with that” — Santo.

This theme of planning and reflection is consistent with McNeill et al.'s (2012) concept of narrative reconstruction. Kingston emphasised how the programme combines encouragement with practical positioning:

> “It's all about positivity, pushing people in the right direction, motivation, and just giving people the courage and actually lining them up and putting them in positions so they can have a legitimate income and a chance of surviving when they get out of this place” — Kingston.

Witnessing others from similar backgrounds who had turned their lives around was frequently cited as inspiring. Ulysses explained that initially he was listening but not truly taking it in:

> “I only ever took it in when I saw other people change. I had to see the change before I could change as a person” — Ulysses.

This echoes the power of peer-led transformation in building motivation and trust. Jose was certain Key4Life could help people find their vocation:

> “100%. They've got good examples of people that had similar starts, and they've shown you the results. If you see someone that hasn't got much and went on to do something with themselves, then brilliant” — Jose.

These testimonies reveal how Key4Life fosters psychological groundwork for desistance by nurturing motivation and instilling renewed purpose. Participants encountered role models, reflected on aspirations, and were challenged to consider life beyond prison. Motivation became both a product of the programme and a sustaining force for continued transformation.

Corporate investment: The active involvement of corporate partners plays a crucial role in supporting participants' employability and reshaping employer perceptions of people with convictions. By bringing businesspeople into prisons and connecting prison leavers with real opportunities, Key4Life builds bridges between two worlds rarely connected. This process enhances participants' confidence and challenges the stigma preventing people with criminal records from securing meaningful employment (LeBel, 2012).

Yasin recounted a comment made by a businessperson with experience employing ex-prisoners:

> “Some of our most successful people who work for us are ex-prisoners, because we believed in them when no one else did. They are so loyal and so grateful for the chance they were given that they actually go above and beyond to be good at what they do” — Yasin.

This highlights the hidden potential of those with convictions and supports research emphasising how social capital and belief in the individual can catalyse desistance (Maruna, 2001; McNeill & Maruna, 2007). Recognition from socially valued outsiders such as employers plays a central role in fostering desistance-supportive identities (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; McNeill & Weaver, 2010). For men used to being devalued, being seen and taken seriously by professionals created a cognitive shift, reframing them not as offenders but as potential colleagues and contributors.

Importantly, these workshops also functioned as consciousness-raising experiences for employers. Cory described how one visitor's perception was fundamentally altered:

> “She was like, she cannot fathom the amount of sense that's in here. She can't actually fathom what type of people are in here” — Cory.

This process of mutual humanisation, where both parties revise their assumptions, is central to Key4Life's approach.

Key4Life works with corporate partners including Universal Music, Sony Music, KPMG, Acorn Recruitment, Bouygues, QPR Football Club, and Gymshark, encouraging companies to employ ex-offenders through the YOUNITED FLAG award scheme.

Many employers offer real pathways into work and help develop high-impact workshops, dismantling barriers that individuals with convictions face when re-entering the labour market, a major factor in preventing reoffending (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Uggen, 2000).

Yasin emphasised the importance of providing genuine alternatives:

> “You can't tell someone to stop selling drugs if that person hasn't got any alternative. I think Key4Life can, not in all cases, but most cases, give you a job, give you some kind of direction, put you in contact with certain people. That's what's unique about Key4Life, they are very well connected. And that's a credit to Eva. Like, she's spent years building that network that she's using to help people in prison” — Yasin.

Yasin's observation echoes research showing that employment provides not only economic resources but also strengthens social bonds and conventional attachments that support desistance (Berg & Huebner, 2011). Through these engagements, participants gain more than skills: they gain legitimacy in the eyes of the wider world. This external validation reinforces internal transformations, helping men see themselves not as the sum of their past actions but as valued members of society. As Bottoms and Shapland (2011) argue, such shifts in social identity are crucial for sustained desistance.

However, the Key4Life CEO warns that without effective lobbying and structural leverage, employer engagement too often becomes a tick-box exercise driven by superficial compliance rather than genuine hiring commitment. Lacking tangible incentives such as social value scoring, procurement obligations, or tax relief, many companies remain risk-averse and unwilling to recruit ex-offenders earnestly. For Key4Life's employability work to maximise impact, broader systemic support is needed. With appropriate incentives such as mandatory employment targets or public recognition for "second chance" employers, programmes like Key4Life could shift corporate practice from symbolic engagement to strategic, socially embedded partnerships.

Photograph showing representatives from Sony Music celebrating their awarding of the YOUNITED flag, in recognition of their commitment to hiring ex-offenders.

Conclusion: The employability strand of Key4Life functions as far more than a job-readiness initiative; it serves as a transformative mechanism for identity reconstruction, social reintegration, and long-term desistance. These findings resonate with Maruna's (2001) redemptive script, Giordano et al.'s (2002) hooks for change, and Uggen's (2000) evidence that employment can serve as a critical turning point in the criminal life course.

The employability element extends beyond the individual, actively challenging societal stigma through corporate engagement. The programme's ability to broker connections and invite professionals into prisons fosters mutual humanisation: participants are seen as capable and employable, while employers re-evaluate entrenched assumptions. However, meaningful employer engagement remains too often dependent on symbolic compliance rather than deep commitment to inclusion. Without structural levers such as tax incentives or procurement targets, many companies remain hesitant. Yet where corporate partnerships are genuinely

embedded, outcomes are remarkable: men leave with new skills, hope, real job leads, and pro-social connections.

Key4Life's employability work demonstrates how combining emotional rehabilitation with practical opportunity can alter life trajectories. Employability here is not the end goal; it is the mechanism through which men reclaim agency, rewrite their stories, and re-enter society as valued contributors.

4.4.5 Mentoring

Another important element of Key4Life's work is the mentoring programme. Once a prisoner has graduated from a Key4Life programme, they can choose to participate in mentoring training and become a Key Mentor, mentoring younger men in prison. Men released from prison can also become Key Mentors in the community, helping deliver programmes for young men 'at risk' as well as programmes in prisons around the country.

Earl explained:

> “If they do the course again before I leave, I'm going to be a Key Mentor, in the prison. And then once I've done that course, then it means I can, when I get out and everything, she said that I can go and, like, help be a Key Mentor on the outside as well which would be nice” — Earl.

This provides a longer programme of personal development for men who wish to pursue it through mentoring prisoners and young men 'at risk' after completion of the initial programme.

Peer mentoring allows mentors to take on positive leadership roles, make independent decisions, engage in personal development and contribute to a more positive prison environment (Buck, 2020; Devilly et al., 2005). Taking part in activities that allow prisoners to positively contribute to social and community life can provide them with a sense of fulfilment and purpose (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). The transformative power of this role shift was evident in Yasin's account:

> “I've gone from being looked at as a bad prisoner, being put in segregation, to looked at as a prisoner who can make a difference and as a role model prisoner. A role model to others. So when you get given that responsibility and that trust put in you, it feels like you have to live up to that, and it gives you something too, you know, people believe in me. People want to actually see me progress, rather than: 'Oh, you're just a prisoner. You're never going to amount to nothing.'” — Yasin.

Many lifers stated that thinking about life after release was daunting, especially those who entered prison as young people. Salman, who entered prison as a teenager on a joint enterprise conviction with no prior criminal justice involvement, said he was anxious about how he would 'fit into society' upon release, but Key4Life helped him clarify his aspiration to mentor and coach disadvantaged people:

> “It gives you opportunity to think about your future, about opportunities, about things you want to go into. So for me, I would like to continue with mentoring and coaching when I get out and working with people who

> have not had the best chances in life. And that's in essence what Key4Life does. So it's kind of right up my street" — Salman.

This vision of becoming a mentor reflects desistance literature's emphasis on the transformative potential of generativity and 'giving back'. The men who were Key4Life mentors stated time and again that through mentoring others, they heal and develop themselves. Being a positive role model and helping others was rewarding, improved their confidence, and gave them purpose.

Lived experience as credibility: Many men saw mentoring as only effective when grounded in shared lived experience, where the mentor had "been there, done that" and could relate on a level that went far beyond professional training (LeBel, 2012). As Naem put it:

I don't even need to speak. I go there. They recognise me because they have the same scars as me… they see themselves. Naem.

For Naem, the scars, literal or metaphorical, of a life shaped by violence, trauma, or survival lent him a credibility that required no justification. This dynamic reflects what Maruna (2001) describes as a redemption script, where former prisoners demonstrate transformed identities that mentees can recognise and aspire to embody.

Jose's reflection reveals how mentoring relationships, when grounded in mutual respect and lived experience, can create space for deeper self-expression and connection:

> "We haven't had the pleasure of mixing with educated people much in our life… So yeah, we wasn't the most articulate… It's like, 'How are you?' 'Yeah, man, just here'. What does that mean?… Oscar Wilde says the rarest thing in life is living, because most people just exist. And this person just confessed, I'm just here" — Jose.

The distinction between "just existing" and "living" becomes a metaphor for the emotional deadness many men described as characterising prison life. When someone who once "just existed" demonstrates they are now living with purpose, the message carries different weight than it would from a professional with no direct experience of incarceration.

For some, the authenticity of mentors was even more powerful because they had once shared the same social spaces before prison. Scott spoke about how a fellow prisoner from his area became a role model:

> "He's from my area, kind of took me under his wing, showed me how to behave and how to present myself to other people respectfully" — Scott.

The right to speak into someone's life was earned through mutual experience, not hierarchy. Luke described more informal but equally powerful mentoring relationships:

> "Half an hour with Jay works wonders, man…I firmly believe he could honestly change someone's life tomorrow" — Luke.

What matters is the cumulative emotional impact of the mentor's presence.

Lived experience also helps counteract the deep scepticism many men held about conventional authority figures. However, several participants reflected that lived experience alone isn't always enough - it must be paired with relational skill and humility, and mentoring's impact depends heavily on how it is implemented within the wider prison structure. Sam emphasised that mentors must approach others as genuine peers rather than adopting staff-like authority:

> "You gotta approach people on the level. Because some… younger folks, OK, you go talk to them and they just brush you off… 'I don't care about your life story. I don't care if you've been in jail for 20 years.'... If you're doing the officer's job… then it's not always that good. Anyone who's a mentor needs to level with me on a prisoner-to-prisoner level" — Sam.

Mentors must meet people "on the level", avoiding the trap of acting like staff. Mentoring cannot become a proxy for institutional control, or it loses its power. Research supports this, showing that the authenticity of mentoring relationships, including non-judgmental approaches and the fact that mentors lack authority to impose sanctions, contributes to openness and opportunities for behavioural change (Timor et al., 2023; Buck, 2018).

Several men expressed how these shared journeys of pain, survival, and self-reinvention bonded them together. Yasin described how the first cohort of Key Mentors were predominantly lifers with "10, 20, 30 years" inside, men whose sentences had taken a profound toll:

> "As the years go on… you suffer with pain, darkness, misery… there comes a time when you reflect… and the only way to mend that broken part of you is by helping others – one person at a time… That in turn heals us" — Yasin.

Yasin's account reframes mentoring not just as a way to support others but as an act of survival and redemption for the mentor himself. This embodies what Riessman (1965) termed the "helper-therapy principle", the idea that those who provide help often benefit as much as, or more than, those they assist. It is through the credibility of his own journey, marked by suffering, reflection, and growth, that he earns the right to guide others. And it is because others know the cost of that journey that they are willing to listen. As Toch (2000) observes, peer programs in prison create opportunities for personal transformation through the act of helping others, turning painful experience into a resource for positive change.

Transformation Through Giving Back: While credibility through lived experience was key to gaining trust, many men described how becoming a mentor initiated a deeper, more personal transformation: a shift from self-focus and survival to purpose and contribution. This process of giving back was not seen as an obligation but as an opportunity, often the first meaningful one many had encountered, to repair past harm, redefine their identity, and experience growth through service. For Byron, mentoring was about reclaiming his own humanity and moral agency:

> “I've…the stories I can tell you, I can tell the guys, and I can change their lives with it. So, I can relate to them, I've been there, done it. Now…I'm preaching positivity. I want them to do good now… I've done a lot of fuckeries, I've done a lot of good, now I just wanna do good, good. I'm just giving back all the good” — Byron.

Byron's repetition of "do good, good" expresses an almost urgent desire to tip the moral balance, suggesting that mentoring allows him to actively redress his past. Giving back becomes a form of atonement on his own terms (Maruna, 2001; Farrall et al., 2014).

Key4Life created structured roles such as "Key Mentors" that allowed participants to formalise this sense of purpose. Yasin explained how being selected shifted his identity:

> “It made me give, give, give that something back. And it got that fire in me to be able to, you know what? Let me not just change myself, but want to change other people… So helping others who are 18, 19, 20, telling them, 'Listen, I've been through what you've been through, and this course will help if you let it.'” — Yasin.

Yasin's language of "fire" and repetition of "give" reflects an internal drive sparked by being trusted with responsibility. The identity of the Key Mentor becomes a badge of trust, a call to leadership, and a channel for empathy. This identity transformation through structured roles illustrates how subjective and social factors interact in the desistance process (LeBel et al., 2008).

Umar reflected on how his role had shifted:

> “It's just helping the other inmates… Help them out with CVs. Point them in the right direction… and because I work for resettlement again… I can push them in the right direction” — Umar.

Yet the men were also aware that this work is not always met with enthusiasm. Sam observed:

> “Some of the lads, they just brush you off… 'I don't care if you've been in jail for 20 years.'… But once you can level with someone… then you're okay” — Sam.

Sam recognises that giving back through mentoring requires resilience and patience. Credibility may open the door, but connection still needs to be earned through genuine engagement.

The credibility of ex-prisoner facilitators enabled a depth of connection that conventional interventions often fail to achieve. The dual dynamic, being helped by someone relatable, then becoming someone others can relate to, created a cycle of personal growth and community-building.

<u>Skills, Structure and Self-Belief:</u> While authenticity and purpose were vital foundations, participants also spoke extensively about how the course gave them tools, both practical and psychological, that empowered them to envision and enact

change. These included tangible skills such as public speaking, mediation and CV writing, as well as gains in self-confidence, emotional regulation and problem-solving. Several men described how stepping into the mentor role offered them the chance to develop new capabilities and responsibilities (South et al., 2015). As Yasin reflected:

> "It gave me confidence, got me out of my comfort zone… it made me get that fire in me to not just change myself, but to want to change other people" — Yasin.

For Yasin, this wasn't just a shift in attitude; it was growth in capacity. He became more articulate, more able to communicate with younger men, and more able to intervene in conflicts. Research confirms that peer workers commonly experience enhanced listening and communication skills, improved relationships with staff, and increased self-esteem (South et al., 2015; Sells et al., 2020).

The skills taught through the programme also included formal techniques rooted in coaching and therapeutic approaches. Yasin highlighted concepts like perceptual positioning and cognitive reframing:

> "You learn stuff like perceptual positioning, cognitive reframing… you can put yourself in other people's shoes. It gives you those skills where, OK, if I was in that situation, I can react differently" —Yasin.

This was not only beneficial for his own self-management but also enabled him to de-escalate tensions among younger men.

For some participants, these new competencies helped shift how they saw themselves and their future. Steve shared:

> "It's helped me tackle my own problems… What I've never been able to see, I can see now. It's not just a small world… there's a lot bigger, better things out there" — Steve.

Steve identifies an often-overlooked element of prison rehabilitation: imagination. The ability to see life beyond prison walls, to conceive of a different kind of self, is a necessary precursor to change (Healy, 2014).

In several accounts, men described how their involvement in Key4Life gave them a professional identity. Umar described how mentoring had become "a trusted position" that he took seriously, helping younger prisoners with interviews and CVs while de-escalating tensions on the wings. Similarly, Yasin was undertaking a degree in coaching and envisioned mentoring and life coaching as part of his long-term plan. This reflects broader findings that identity construction and transformation are central to desistance, with structured programmes helping prisoners develop a sense of self that encourages them to think about their future (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Giordano et al., 2002).

In short, the Key4Life programme gave men a scaffold for transformation through the development of practical skills, supportive roles, and new ways of thinking about themselves and others. By cultivating structure and self-belief,

Key4Life helped participants do more than stay out of trouble: it enabled them to lead.

Mentors as cultural change agents: The introduction of peer mentors through Key4Life did not only impact individual participants, it began to shift the cultural fabric of the prison itself. Mentors were often described as respected figures who could de-escalate tension, inspire action, and build bridges where staff had struggled. Unlike traditional authority figures, these mentors operated with informal legitimacy rooted in shared experience, uniquely positioning them to influence both peer behaviour and prison norms. They were seen as "credible messengers" with lived experience granting them authority and trust that formal institutional actors often lack (Weaver & McNeill, 2015).

This influence extended to formal prison initiatives. Salman described how mentoring was increasingly recognised across the prison:

> "Mentoring is the kind of new thing - peer-led initiatives, mentoring -they use it in every kind of area of prison life now, because it really does work. People that you can relate to help you engage and better yourself" — Salman (aged 35).

The widespread uptake of mentoring reflected growing recognition of its utility not just for personal change, but for improving institutional culture as a whole. Umar echoed this when asked if mentoring reduced disruptive behaviour:

> "It definitely helps... A lot of the mentors in this prison have done quite a lot of time... so a lot of people would look to them for help. So I think mentoring in this prison is working well so far" — Umar.

Many described a ripple effect, where their efforts inspired those around them to take part in courses, open up, or simply act differently. The idea that mentors were not only changing themselves but influencing the attitudes of others emerged strongly. Nate noted how his visible engagement encouraged others:

> "Me doing it was inspiring others, especially people that was around me... witnessing me doing it, they started to do it. Especially people that were younger than me - that inspired them to do the courses" — Nate.

Tim's earlier account of de-escalating conflict on his wing, when a mentally ill prisoner smashed all the shared microwaves and 59 men wanted to retaliate, illustrates how being a mentor meant taking responsibility for the tone and behaviour on his landing, even in highly volatile situations. His acknowledgement that "we might want to punch his head in" reveals an honest reckoning with his own impulses, while "it looks bad on us" shows how mentors internalised accountability for the collective wellbeing of their wings. Tim's role was to contain conflict, model restraint, and explain complexity in chaotic and emotionally charged environments, calming 59 angry men while helping them understand the individual responsible was mentally ill. Rather than enforcing order through power or punishment, mentors modelled and facilitated restraint and understanding, shifting behavioural norms from within. In

doing so, Tim became a stabilising force on the wing, reinforcing a culture of emotional maturity. This emotional labour reflects the complex demands placed on those in peer mentoring roles (Buck, 2020) and aligns with therapeutic community principles that emphasise participant leadership in creating rehabilitative environments (Visher & Eason, 2021).

These examples show how peer mentors acted as cultural change agents, shaping the social environment through relational credibility, example, and emotional influence. Research on peer mentoring confirms that such programmes can have broader impacts beyond individual participants, contributing to cultural shifts within prison environments (Buck, 2020). Through consistent presence, credibility, and emotional intelligence, these men didn't just participate in change, they became the drivers of it, embodying a new kind of power based not on force, but on connection.

<u>Limitations, Tensions and Realism:</u> While the Key4Life programme was widely praised by participants for its authenticity, relational power, and rehabilitative impact, interviews also revealed limitations and tensions in how mentoring operated within the wider prison environment. One common theme was the lack of structural clarity and support for the mentoring role itself. Yasin pointed out a lack of guidance on how the programme should operate after the initial training phase:

> “We now are mentors, Key Mentors. Okay, what does that consist of? What do you want us to do? What is our role? How do we carry on in supporting the mentees that have just graduated and keep the ball rolling?” —Yasin (aged 30).

This ambiguity about roles and expectations left some mentors unsure of how to sustain the momentum of their work. Without clear frameworks or formal recognition, their efforts risk becoming isolated or undervalued.

Tensions also emerged in how mentoring was perceived by other prisoners. When mentors are seen to align too closely with staff, they risk losing the peer credibility that makes them effective (Matthews, 2021). Sam illustrated this tension:

> “I'm in the maths class… I'm asking the teacher for help but the teacher's sending the mentor, but I'm looking at the mentor as just a prisoner. I'm saying, 'Why are you doing his job for?' That's when the mentor team is not always that good. If you're doing the officer's job…” — Sam (aged 35).

For mentoring to be effective, it needs to retain peer-to-peer integrity. Mentors are only credible if they are seen as walking alongside, not above, those they aim to help.

Other participants acknowledged the limits of mentoring's reach. Some prisoners simply do not want to change. As Yasin reflected:

> “We can't save everyone. Some of the issue is there's lads that don't want to change… all you can say is, 'Okay, fair enough'. We're not forcing change. We're advisors” — Yasin (aged 30).

This pragmatic approach reflects mature understanding of behavioural change and helps protect mentors from burnout by recognising that success is not measured by universal transformation but by offering credible alternatives.

Moreover, the rigid and risk-averse nature of some prison environments can actively obstruct mentoring. Yasin described a situation where a fight broke out between two mentees, and rather than punish them, Key4Life facilitated mediation and reintegration:

> "In other jails, that would never happen… But everyone was on board… In the end, the lads became friends. And that is a perfect example of how it can work, but it's about people giving it that chance. Let the mentors be mentors" — Yasin.

This example underscores that cultural and structural buy-in from prison authorities is essential. Where institutions remain overly punitive, mentoring loses its capacity to act as an alternative approach to conflict resolution.

Finally, mentors highlighted the emotional and psychological labour of the role (Nixon, 2020; Walby & Cole, 2019). Tim's earlier account of managing conflict on the wings illustrates the significant emotional restraint and leadership required, managing not only his own emotions but also de-escalating others, all while maintaining composure because "it looks bad on us" if they fail. Research on peer support roles in prisons confirms that this emotional burden can lead to burnout and requires proper support systems (Bagnall et al., 2015; Nixon, 2020).

These limitations do not undermine the programme's success but reflect necessary realism about the challenges of implementing peer-led interventions in carceral environments. Navigating institutional resistance, interpersonal tensions, and emotional strain requires not just commitment from mentors but also sustained structural support, ongoing training, and cultural alignment at all levels of the prison.

Conclusion: The mentoring element of Key4Life was experienced as transformative, with participants describing mutual growth, emotional development, and authentic leadership rooted in shared lived experience. Ex-prisoners acting as mentors brought credibility that traditional authority figures often lacked, while mentoring responsibilities gave participants a sense of purpose and belonging that contributed to their own rehabilitation.

Despite the challenges, many participants came to see mentoring not only as a role but as part of a deeper transformation in how they saw themselves and their place in the world. For several, it marked the beginning of a commitment to change that was not just behavioural but deeply personal and future-oriented, laying the foundation for a pro-social identity rooted in care, accountability, and hope for a different life beyond prison.

4.4.6 The Adoption of a Pro-Social Non-Offending Identity

A key strand running through narratives in this study was the gradual but powerful process of identity transformation: the emergence of a more prosocial, emotionally attuned, and future-oriented sense of self. For many, Key4Life provided one of the

first spaces in which they could reflect not only on their behaviour, but on the deeper beliefs, relationships, and life stories that had shaped who they had become. This section explores how participants moved away from entrenched criminal identities toward more constructive and hopeful self-concepts, drawing together four interrelated themes: the development of hope for the future, the adoption of a changed mindset, the re-evaluation of significant relationships, and the construction of a prosocial identity.

Hope for the future: The report has already highlighted the profound emotional and psychological strain that prison imposes. For many, imprisonment is not simply the loss of liberty but the gradual erosion of hope. Hope is essential to wellbeing in prison settings. Without it, individuals struggle to find meaning or purpose (Crewe et al., 2020), and lack of hope has been linked to elevated rates of depression, self-harm, and suicide (Styles, 2019; Vannier, 2025). These outcomes point to systemic failures: when prison environments fail to nurture the emotional conditions necessary for rehabilitation, hopelessness becomes entrenched. Research has consistently found that hope and motivation are strong predictors of desistance, with individuals who express determination to change being significantly more likely to succeed (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; LeBel et al., 2008). Beyond internal motivation, the relational dimension matters enormously: when someone believes in a person's potential, it strengthens their resolve to change (Rex, 1999). Hope becomes more than an emotional state when anchored in concrete possibilities (Crewe et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, Key4Life's intervention appears particularly powerful. Many participants described the programme as giving them a renewed sense of possibility, restoring their faith in humanity, and introducing them to mentors and professionals who believed in their capacity to change. Crucially, it offered concrete post-release support, something the men were often sceptical of, yet deeply reassured by once experienced.

Nathan explained that he was not in a good state when he met Key4Life, struggling with mental health, a relationship breakdown, and cocaine use:

> “I was in a very, very bad place. And I had met Key4life and, you know, they helped me a lot, because it gave me hope. They gave me hope and they kind of came at a time where, I always describe, when Eva walked on the wing, it was like an angel had walked on the wing. And she was like, "We've got this course coming, come on this course"”— Nathan.

Nathan's description of Eva entering the wing "like an angel" signalled a turning point in his belief that something different was possible.

Yasin described how he was one of the first to do Key4Life at HMP Fosse Way. Having received a joint enterprise sentence as a teenager, he had experienced difficult times in prison, rebelling and fighting. Though he had decided to change after spending 11 months in segregation, he described Key4Life as helping him see the 'light at the end of the tunnel':

> "It was really, really powerful, really intense. Really, I felt like we all got a lot of time spent on each person and that we all felt important. We all felt heard. We all felt we could be helped. The important thing was everyone left that course feeling optimistic for the future... There is light at the end of the tunnel, everyone can be helped in some way. And this is what Key4Life has done for me" — Yasin.

For Yasin, Key4Life was a space of visibility, belonging and collective hope-building.

Jay said that through Key4Life, he realised it was possible to have faith in people again:

> "This stuff made me realize that you can believe in humans because I'd even lost hope in humans being in prison because we're surrounded by such negativity and mental health and drug abuse and people that are lost. And so this course made me believe in humans and believe in myself" — Jay.

Immersed in a carceral culture that eroded trust, reinforced alienation, and validated hopelessness, the course signalled a recovery of self-belief and faith in others. This restoration of personal agency is essential to desistance; Maruna (2001) argues that successful desisters tend to develop a "redemptive self" narrative, seeing themselves as capable of making meaningful contributions.

Many men seemed anxious about how they would fit into 'normal' society. Jose, who arrived in the UK as a refugee and had experienced racism living on different council estates, stated that 'society and environment makes you feel like you just don't belong'. He likened this to a domestic abuse relationship where the victim 'feels so broken that she feels like this is how you are supposed to live'. However, when he met corporates and professionals on Key4Life, they didn't view him as strange or out of place, which he commented was 'refreshing'. Meeting professionals who treated him with dignity allowed him to imagine a place for himself beyond the margins.

Damian described a similar experience. Having been 'dealt some hard cards', he was sceptical about whether anyone actually cared enough to support him:

> "I was very sceptical. I had a 'I'll believe it when I see it' kind of attitude to the programme and any kind of support. But what I found is that now I've got a lot of people that believe in me and I believe in them now as well. And that's quite a refreshing thing to feel if I'm being honest with you, because I didn't have it before I got banged up" — Damian.

Damian's comment signals a profound change in his relational orientation, and demonstrates a restored capacity for trust and connection.

For some, hope was tied to practical concerns: resources, guidance, and post-release support. Several men highlighted the programme's post-release support as particularly significant. Vincent explained that other programmes felt "fake" because they offered promises without follow-through:

> "They say, 'Oh yeah, we'll be there for you when you get out', but they're not there… but with Key4Life… they were there. They're actually there" — Vincent.

Key4Life's continued involvement after release made their investment feel genuine and their promises credible.

Key4Life fostered hope by combining emotional validation, visible commitment, role modelling, and structural support, creating what Styles (2019) and Brownlee (2021) describe as conditions necessary for a "hope standard" in penal environments.

Changed mindset: For many men in this study, desistance began not with new behaviours alone, but with a fundamental shift in how they saw themselves and their place in the world. Growing up amid poverty, trauma, and social exclusion, they had come to define their identities through the narrow lens of survival, crime, and hyper-masculine toughness. Key4Life challenged these deeply ingrained narratives by inviting participants to question long-held assumptions about worth, belonging, and possibility.

A significant aspect of acquiring a changed mindset for some men was the rediscovery of a more 'authentic' self and identification of former pre-crime identity. As discussed earlier, many men described having to put up emotional barriers and conceal vulnerability as a means of self-preservation. In contrast, many described how Key4Life enabled them to remove this mask and reconnect with parts of themselves that had long been suppressed.

Kingston reflected on how the role plays and job interviews with Key4Life provided the space for him to open and expressive and more like his authentic self.

> "You just say how it is to… a better understanding of yourself and other people…Yeah, just be myself, my authentic, honest, genuine self. Like, that's the person I want to be and I'm trying to be" — Kingston.

His testimony signals a transformative shift and reflects an experience that stands in stark contrast to the identity armour worn in prison.

Daniel provided a particularly rich account of how Key4Life facilitated a return to an earlier, perhaps more authentic version of himself:

> "This course is good. I'm enjoying it. You know what it is? This course, it's like my personality, I like to be myself…I'm a kinda, quiet, gentle person, caring person, just like to help people. On this course you can be that. And I'm at a stage in my life when I can actually be who I am, and everything like when I was a kid before the streets. Gentle, quiet…I'm just embracing this person. It's all right to be quiet and humble, kind of thing, that's it. And that's what I was when I was younger. So just kind of going back to who I was and just let go of the streets" — Daniel.

Daniel's narrative aligns closely with Maruna's (2001) successful desistance often involves the reconstruction of a 'redeemed self,' which entails embracing qualities that had previously been suppressed or underdeveloped. This return to a

"quiet and humble" self is not merely nostalgic; it represents a cognitive and emotional realignment with values and traits that were previously overridden by survival-based adaptations. Moreover, Daniel's journey reflects what Paternoster and Bushway (2009) refer to as a 'turning point' in identity desistance: a point at which the person begins to think of themselves in a fundamentally different way. The emphasis here is not simply on behaviour change but on being, on a reconfigured sense of self rooted in positive values and emotional awareness.

These testimonies illustrate how Key4Life provides a relational and symbolic space in which alternative masculinities can emerge and be validated. By creating conditions that encourage emotional expression, vulnerability, and authenticity, the Key4Life programme interrupts entrenched carceral norms and fosters the development of a prosocial, future-oriented self. Emotional honesty, self-acceptance, and relational openness are foundational to mindset change. Through this process, the men begin to author new personal narratives, ones that distance them from the trauma, shame, and rigidity of their past identities and orient them toward growth, connection, and contribution.

This theme of reclaiming an authentic self leads naturally into the shedding of a former crime-prone identity. Many men described how they had first got involved in crime as an attractive and familiar source of income, self-worth, or belonging. Cole explained:

> “So don't forget you're dealing with people that's got an identity, so it's like "What do you do?" "I'm a robber". They've got different names for the same thing, same thing, it's an identity. So, what do you do? What's your occupation? [N: I'm a Lecturer in Criminology at a university] Ok, so say that's not working out for you. It's not making enough money. So, I say, "How about you become a pilot?" What would you say? [N: Mmm] You know, nothing about planes. It's outside your comfort zone. So, you're now telling that drug dealer or that burglar to go to this profession, he's gonna say "It's a bit alien to me." So, you're talking about an identity crisis. "I can't do it. This is all I know."” — Cole.

Cole's analogy powerfully conceptualizes criminal identity not merely as deviance but as a form of occupational identity, deeply embedded in familiarity, routine, community validation, and sense of self. This helps explain why, for many men, leaving behind crime is not merely a logistical issue but a deeper existential challenge requiring not only new skills but a new story about who one is and who one could become (Maruna, 2001).

Yasin highlighted how self-belief in central to this process:

> “I feel like a lot of prisoners, what they lack is self-belief. They don't believe in themselves. No one in their life has ever told them: 'I believe in you. I believe you can amount to anything you want to be'. No one's told them, so they just believe they're nothing” — Yasin.

This speaks to the core of cognitive transformation theory (Giordano et al., 2002), which holds that internal change must precede behavioural change. Central

to this process is the acquisition of "hooks for change", opportunities, relationships, or events that enable individuals to begin seeing themselves differently.

Key4Life appears to intervene directly in this narrative by challenging limiting beliefs. Dean's account illustrates how firsthand exposure to employers dismantled previously unquestioned assumptions:

> “I thought if I go for a job interview, they're never going to take me. Key4Life, they actually brought, um, employers. After sitting down and speaking with a lot of them, it could change my perspective of it” — Dean.

Dean's language reflects a subtle but significant shift in his perspective challenging internal scripts of worthlessness and exclusion.

Barry's experience draws attention to the emotional dimension of this shift:

> “Reconnecting my inner emotions and just understanding myself as a person and realising the potential I have within me” — Barry.

This articulates how emotional literacy and mindset change go hand in hand. Identity change is not purely cognitive, it is deeply emotional. Reconnecting with emotion becomes itself a vehicle for recognising self-worth and dormant capability.

Ismail situated this more broadly in a critique of wasted potential:

> “I believe, like prisoners, they're so bright, honestly, since my whole sentence, they're the brightest people, but they've just used their energy in the wrong aspects of their life, and they have so much potential. They've limited their mindset” — Ismail.

Ismail reframes criminal identity not as inherent pathology but as misdirected skill and structural constraint. His comment captures the insight that identity and aspiration are bounded by what individuals perceive to be available or possible.

For many, Key4Life acted as a catalyst for cognitive and emotional reorientation: away from fatalism, suspicion, and bravado, and toward accountability, hope, and self-efficacy. Yasin reflected:

> “Not every single person can be saved. That's the reality of life. However, you give people the opportunity, you give people the chance to be saved. To make that change. So that's what I think Key4Life offers, a chance. The rest is up to you. No one can ever force you to change. No one forced me to change” —Yasin.

Yasin's reflection is grounded in recognition of personal agency, but also implies that Key4Life creates conditions in which agency becomes more accessible.

Steve, who had grown up with a father addicted to drugs and turned to dealing himself, said Key4Life had changed his perspective:

> “It's helped me tackle my own problems on the inside, inside my head. What I've never been able to see, I can see now. It's not just a small world, because there's a lot bigger, better things out there” — Steve.

The deeper thread running through these narratives is the emergence of self-responsibility without self-condemnation. What Key4Life appears to nurture is

constructive ownership of one's past, paired with compassion, perspective, and hope. It offers a practical and emotional restructuring, allowing men to try on alternative selves that feel achievable and authentic.

Re-evaluation of Relationships: A core feature of developing a prosocial, non-offending identity involved the deliberate re-evaluation of relationships with friends, family, and partners. This process was supported by Key4Life's 'spider web' activity, in which participants map out their social networks and identify which relationships support their goals and which may hinder change. As participants developed hope and shifted their thinking, many engaged in distancing themselves from negative influences, repairing family bonds, and seeking prosocial connections.

Several participants spoke about distancing themselves from negative influences and making intentional choices about who they surrounded themselves with. Cory explained that recognising no one else could serve his sentence forced him to reassess those around him:

> “I just think no one's gonna do the sentence for me... I have to do it myself. So, what I need is to kind of keep my mind there and it's my peers as well, I know I have to kind of choose my peers wisely now, and kind of stay away from negativity” — Cory.

Darren highlighted the tension between past loyalties and future commitments:

> “All these negative people or people that ain't got your best interests at heart, remove them from your life... I've obviously got my two best friends who will always stick by me... When I get out on license I'll always stay on track because I've got family and I'll be at work every day... You don't need your friends to live your life you just need yourself” — Darren.

Darren's account reflects mature awareness of the risks posed by uncritical loyalty. His prioritisation of family and work underscores a reorientation toward socially valued roles that support desistance (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011).

Lenny similarly described deliberately surrounding himself with men who shared his commitment to change:

> “There's a few people, just people I want to see when I get outside. Obviously, they've all got the same mindset as me... they're all trying to get a job, be a family man, and just make their family proud and stuff, really. And that's obviously what I'm trying to do” — Lenny.

For some, the impetus for re-evaluating friendships came from direct experiences of betrayal. Ulysses described a pivotal moment in court when friends he grew up with allowed him to take blame for crimes he didn't commit:

When I got sentenced to four years that was when the penny dropped, and my friends were in the dock next to me knowing that I never done anything like that. That was the biggest heartburn. My friends, they've all gone guilty and 'Oh look, I'm guilty and I'm guilty, but he's not guilty.' They let me come to jail. And for me, that was, these are people I grew up with, that was the biggest eye opener ever. Ulysses.

Ulysses's account of being betrayed by childhood friends who prioritised their own interests powerfully illustrates how criminal networks often lack the loyalty they claim to embody. This "eye opener" became a catalyst for fundamentally reconsidering who deserved his trust.

This vigilance about associations was further sharpened in Naem's account, which foregrounds the risks of even indirect ties to street networks:

> “Even me picking up that phone call from that young man who's still within the streets, I gave them a gateway back to me... you need to not be a part of anything that's to do with the streets... it's so easy to put the word "conspiracy" and then you're straight back into where you don't want to come from... that is something that I'm enlightened with now” — Naem.

Naem's narrative captures the fragility of desistance: past identities can shape how one is perceived and policed, making boundary-setting both a moral and practical necessity. His heightened self-monitoring reflects the vigilance characteristic of maturing desisters (LeBel et al., 2008).

In addition to rejecting negative peer influences, several men described a broader re-evaluation extending to repairing family bonds, particularly recognising the emotional toll their imprisonment had on loved ones. Cory offered a powerful articulation:

> “And if you think about it, every single person that loves me is doing the sentence with me. So, if you get that information in your head, and most people love their family. So, if you get that information in your head and you still gotta do something, and it puts you back in there. You don't, you can't tell me you love your family kind of thing. You might have kids. You told me you're selling drugs because you've got no opportunities, you sell drugs you end up in prison. So, you weren't really doing it for your son, was you? Because you're away from him now?” — Cory.

This reflection reveals a significant shift not only in mindset but in moral reasoning. Cory reframes his previous justifications for offending as ultimately self-defeating. This internal dialogue evidences what McNeill (2016) calls "moral agency": the ability to evaluate one's actions through the lens of their impact on others. His rhetorical challenge exposes the contradictions in narratives that once supported his behaviour and marks the emergence of a more emotionally attuned and accountable self.

Hakim similarly reflected on the emotional cost his offending had on his mother:

> “My mom... she wouldn't sleep until I come home... she'd go out looking for me all the time. I feel bad now when I reflect on it. I put my mum through a lot of trauma as well” — Hakim.

Hakim's recognition of his mother's suffering similarly embodies moral agency, re-humanising relationships that offending had strained.

As desistance research demonstrates, sustained behavioural change requires social scaffolding and alternative sources of belonging (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). These accounts show that in shedding unhelpful ties and cultivating new ones,

participants demonstrate the emotional maturity and forward thinking required to sustain change.

Prosocial Identity: The culmination of these processes, developing hope, changing mindset, and re-evaluating relationships, was the gradual construction of a prosocial identity. This was not merely a behavioural shift but a deep reworking of how the men saw themselves, their place in the world, and their imagined futures. Participants began to see themselves not primarily as offenders or criminals, but as individuals capable of positive contribution, worthy of care and respect, and oriented toward a more meaningful future. This identity transformation represents a foundational step in the desistance journey, embodying what Maruna (2001) describes as "secondary desistance": a shift from stopping crime to becoming someone for whom crime is fundamentally incompatible with their sense of self.

Many participants framed their transformation not as becoming someone new, but as reclaiming who they truly were before crime took over their lives. This redemptive narrative, central to Maruna's (2001) theory, allows individuals to maintain biographical continuity while accounting for past wrongs. Jay articulated this powerfully:

> “I was always a good kid but I got lost right” — Jay.

Barry echoed this sentiment:

> “If I was in a different environment, I wouldn't have been inside prison because the boy I was then I still feel like I'm still the same person. Always had good morals, a good heart” — Barry.

These narratives position crime as an aberration from their "real" selves rather than a defining characteristic. By reclaiming their moral core, participants construct a coherent identity that integrates past mistakes while rejecting them as inconsistent with who they fundamentally are.

For others, the shift felt less like rediscovery and more like fundamental transformation—what Giordano et al. (2002) term the "replacement self," a new identity incompatible with offending. Yasin captured this sense of a complete reset:

> “I feel like I'm in a place now where I'm comfortable, I'm confident, I'm at peace. Everything that I've had to go through, left everything behind. It's almost like a reset, and this is like the new person and everything in life I've learned. If you don't learn from your lessons in life, you wasted your life, you're stuck. I've not wasted them. I've gone through difficulties, troubles. What I've learned from everything I've taken whatever I can away. And I can use that to help others. I can use that to help myself. I can use that to help so many people” — Yasin.

Yasin's account illustrates several key features of prosocial identity development. He describes emotional states, confidence, peace, comfort, that contrast sharply with earlier narratives of anger, shame, and hopelessness. He frames difficult experiences as learning opportunities rather than wasted years, reinterpreting suffering as wisdom. This generative orientation, where one's past

becomes a resource for helping others, is characteristic of mature desistance (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992).

Identity transformation requires not only internal change but external validation through social recognition. As McNeill (2016) and LeBel et al. (2008) argue, desistance involves both subjective shifts (how you see yourself) and social recognition (how others see you). The Key4Life graduation ceremony emerged as a pivotal moment where participants could publicly perform their new identities before audiences that mattered most, their families. Yasin described how the graduation ceremony allowed his family to witness his transformation:

> “My family was there, my partner was there, my brothers were there. They were so impressed; they'd never seen me in that light. They remember me as a 17-year-old coming to prison, being a little rebel, now they're seeing me as a man and standing up being who I want to be... My little brother said to me, "After all these years, we're proud of you and it's lovely the changes you've made. And you give us; we look up to you still." And that really resonates. He had a chance, a chance to see me in a different light before I come out” — Yasin.

His brothers' pride represents the social validation necessary for new identities to solidify (Farrall, 2004; Bottoms & Shapland, 2011).

Beyond social validation, the development of a prosocial identity involved fundamental moral reorientation rooted in values-based frameworks. Byron articulated a philosophy of reciprocity that underpinned his new sense of self:

> “Listen, in this, in this world, yeah, people complain about oh, I want this and I want this and I don't get this. Do you know what I did? I said I wanted love. I became more loving. Yeah. I said I wanted respect. I started giving out respect. Yeah. Do you understand what I'm saying? Yeah. So, you see, everything I want, I make sure I give. Do you know what I'm saying? That's been the game changer in my life” — Byron.

Byron's philosophy represents what McNeill (2016) describes as "moral agency": the capacity to act according to values and to understand oneself as an ethical actor. Rather than demanding or taking what he wants, Byron adopts a generative stance, giving what he hopes to receive. This shift from extraction to contribution marks a profound reorientation of self in relation to others.

Jose framed his emerging identity around prosocial values.

> “I want to be a good person. And how you earn your wealth also defines you as a person. Do you know what I mean? That's all it is” — Jose.

Perhaps the most compelling marker of prosocial identity development was participants' orientation toward helping others and contributing to their communities. Naem articulated this with philosophical depth:

> “You know, to me, to be brutally honest me giving back is my way of giving back to the universe, because I think it's going to serve me later. It's not really about the prison or how they see me. These kids belong to me.

> They belong to me. You belong to me. Because we all, we all coexist in the world. My kids, one day, might play with your kids somewhere, or your grandchildren, etc. We breathe the same air. So my contribution towards these kids is my contribution to the greater understanding of how this thing works... I want to give back to the community" — Naem.

Naem's vision of interconnectedness represents a radical shift from the individualistic, survival-oriented mindset of street life, positioning himself as responsible not just for his own children but for all children, recognising that his actions ripple through the social fabric.

Underpinning these transformations was the critical recognition of personal agency: the belief that change is possible and that they, not external circumstances, are the authors of their futures. Nathan captured this sense of empowerment Nathan captured this:

> "It takes you as an individual to be able to get up and go make something happen... If you're gonna end up sitting there waiting for someone to save you. Nobody is going to save you... It takes programmes like this, to instil that in people's minds" — Nathan.

This internalisation of agency represents a decisive break from the fatalism that characterises persistent offending.

The adoption of a prosocial identity is not simply about behavioural reform, it is about moral realignment, emotional reconnection, and social re-entry. Through Key4Life, the men came to see themselves not just as ex-offenders, but as agents of their own transformation: capable of care, contribution, and change. This process aligns with key desistance theories: Maruna's (2001) redemptive narratives, Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation, McNeill's (2016) emphasis on moral agency and social recognition, and Farrall and Calverley's (2006) attention to social scaffolding. Crucially, these emerging identities did not reject the past but integrated it, drawing on lessons learned to support others and navigate a more hopeful future.

Conclusion: This research set out to examine the experiences of men engaged with the Key4Life programme at HMP Fosse Way, exploring how a third-sector rehabilitation intervention operates within a newly opened resettlement prison. What emerged from the analysis of 46 in-depth interviews was not simply an evaluation of a single programme, but a comprehensive account of the intersecting forces that shape pathways into crime, the institutional dynamics that perpetuate rather than interrupt those pathways, and the specific relational and structural conditions under which meaningful transformation becomes possible.

The findings document a clear trajectory: from early lives marked by poverty, spatial marginalisation, educational exclusion, familial instability, and racialised policing, through custodial experiences that reinforced rather than challenged criminogenic patterns, to engagement with an intervention designed to address both the emotional wounds and structural barriers that standard prison regimes systematically ignore. In doing so, this study contributes empirical depth to theoretical debates about desistance, rehabilitative culture, and the role of third-

sector organisations in promoting change within contexts of profound institutional failure.

4.5 Conclusion: Synthesising the Journey from Disadvantage to Desistance

This research demonstrates that rehabilitation is possible within custodial settings, but only when interventions recognise and respond to the structural, emotional, and relational dimensions of offending and desistance.

The biographical accounts presented in this report reveal how involvement in crime is produced through cumulative processes of structural exclusion and relational deprivation. Participants described childhoods shaped by poverty and spatial inequality, where growing up on stigmatised council estates meant internalising messages of comparative worthlessness and accepting limited horizons. Educational systems failed to accommodate neurodivergent learning needs or respond to trauma, instead responding with exclusion that accelerated trajectories toward crime. Family structures, destabilised by death, imprisonment, addiction, and economic precarity, left young men without stable adult guidance or prosocial role models. In the absence of legitimate pathways to recognition and material security, participants described adopting "scripts of survival": localised strategies for navigating hostile environments where crime offered the only available route to status, belonging, and economic participation.

These scripts were not individual pathologies but rational adaptations to structural abandonment. Participants described how racialised policing, gang profiling, and joint enterprise prosecutions expanded the boundaries of criminalisation to capture not only those involved in offending but those guilty merely of association, geography, or cultural expression. By the time participants arrived in prison, they had already been systematically failed by education, social services, mental health support, and policing. Incarceration represented not the beginning of state intervention but its culmination.

Far from interrupting these trajectories, prison entrenched them. The men arrived carrying accumulated wounds of poverty, exclusion, trauma, and institutional abandonment. Prison intensified rather than healed these wounds, reinforcing criminogenic patterns through hypermasculine cultures, inadequate support, and adversarial relationships. Mental health needs went unmet, grief remained unprocessed, and family relationships deteriorated. Prison became, as many participants described, not a site of rehabilitation but a "criminal university."

Participants' accounts of release revealed abandonment at the prison gate: no meaningful aftercare, no secure housing, no employment support, and no relational anchor to sustain fragile commitments to change. Reoffending was not a failure of individual resolve but a structural inevitability, the predictable outcome of a system designed for containment rather than reintegration. The result is a closed loop: disadvantage produces criminalisation, criminalisation produces custody, custody reproduces disadvantage, and the cycle continues.

Standard rehabilitation programmes failed because they addressed symptoms rather than causes, focusing on behaviour modification without attending to underlying trauma, identity, or structural barriers. It was into this context of systemic failure that Key4Life entered. What distinguished the programme was not simply its

content but its relational foundation and structural design: facilitators who demonstrated genuine care rather than professional detachment; ex-offender mentors whose lived experience conferred credibility and hope; culturally relevant pedagogy that reflected participants' lived realities; and a model that explicitly addressed emotional trauma before focusing on employment or behaviour change. The programme created spaces where men could drop defensive "prison masks," express vulnerability safely, and begin reconstructing identities no longer defined by criminality.

This transformation was neither instant nor linear. For many, it began with renewed hope, followed by willingness to challenge long-held beliefs and experiment with more authentic ways of being. As participants re-evaluated who they trusted, what they valued, and what kind of life they wanted to lead, they constructed more prosocial identities: not as rejection of self, but as reclamation of parts that had been buried by trauma, prison culture, and social marginalisation. These emerging identities did not reject the past but integrated it, drawing on lessons learned to support others and navigate a more hopeful future. What Key4Life facilitated was not simply rehabilitation in the conventional sense, but a deeper process of rehumanisation, one that enabled participants to imagine, test, and inhabit new ways of being.

For policymakers, prison administrators, and rehabilitation practitioners, the implications are clear. Effective rehabilitation requires investment in interventions that are emotionally informed, relationally grounded, culturally relevant, and structurally continuous. It requires prison cultures that embody rather than merely espouse rehabilitative values. It requires early intervention in schools and communities to disrupt trajectories before criminalisation occurs. And it requires through-the-gate support that ensures fragile commitments to change receive the practical and relational scaffolding necessary to endure beyond release.

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates that such change is achievable. The question for government, criminal justice agencies, and society is whether it will be supported, scaled, and sustained. The men whose voices animate this research have shown what becomes possible when systems choose humanity over punishment, investment over abandonment, and hope over fatalism. Their transformations suggest that prisons can become sites of genuine rehabilitation, but only if we fundamentally reimagine what that requires.

5.1 Discussion of the Key4Life Programme's Key Outcomes

This section outlines the twelve core outcomes identified through the analysis of interviews with participants in the Key4Life programme. These outcomes represent the most consistent and meaningful changes described by the men in relation to their personal development, attitudes, relationships, and future aspirations. Many of these outcomes are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, and together they paint a compelling picture of how engagement with Key4Life can create the conditions for meaningful, lasting transformation.

Improved Emotional Resilience: Participants described developing new tools to manage their emotions more effectively, particularly in high-stress or triggering situations. Through workshops, roleplay sessions, and equine therapy, men learned to identify, process, and articulate their emotions, enabling them to respond to conflict with reflection rather than anger or violence.

Improved Communication: The programme improved participants' ability to express themselves, listen actively, and navigate conversations with greater confidence and clarity. These skills translated to better relationships with family, peers, professionals, and potential employers.

A Changed Mindset: One of the most consistent outcomes was a change in mindset: from fatalism and defensiveness to openness and possibility. Participants described reevaluating their beliefs about themselves, their past behaviour, and their potential.

Improved Relationships: Participants commonly described improvements in their relationships with family members, partners, and children. Through structured reflection and encouragement, many men re-evaluated how they had treated loved ones and sought to rebuild trust.

Improved Behaviour and Reduced Violence: Several men reported becoming less confrontational, more patient, and better able to manage conflict without resorting to aggression. This shift was often linked to increased emotional intelligence and empathy.

An Improved Prison Culture: Participants described how their changed attitudes had a ripple effect, creating a more positive and reflective group dynamic on the wing. The presence of Key4Life contributed to a collective cultural shift that challenged negative norms and made it safer to be vulnerable and emotionally expressive.

Hope for the Future: Key4Life gave men a renewed belief that change was possible and that their future held promise. Participants described how the programme lifted them out of hopelessness and gave them something to look forward to.

Motivation and Purpose: Many men described feeling a renewed sense of purpose and motivation, whether tied to employment, supporting their children, or re-engaging with life in a more meaningful way. This sense of drive was nurtured through encouragement from mentors and the achievement of completing challenges.

Increased Confidence: Many men described feeling more confident as a result of participating, whether in speaking publicly, engaging with employers, or navigating social situations. This increase in self-confidence accompanied a broader shift in self-perception, helping men view themselves as capable of change and success.

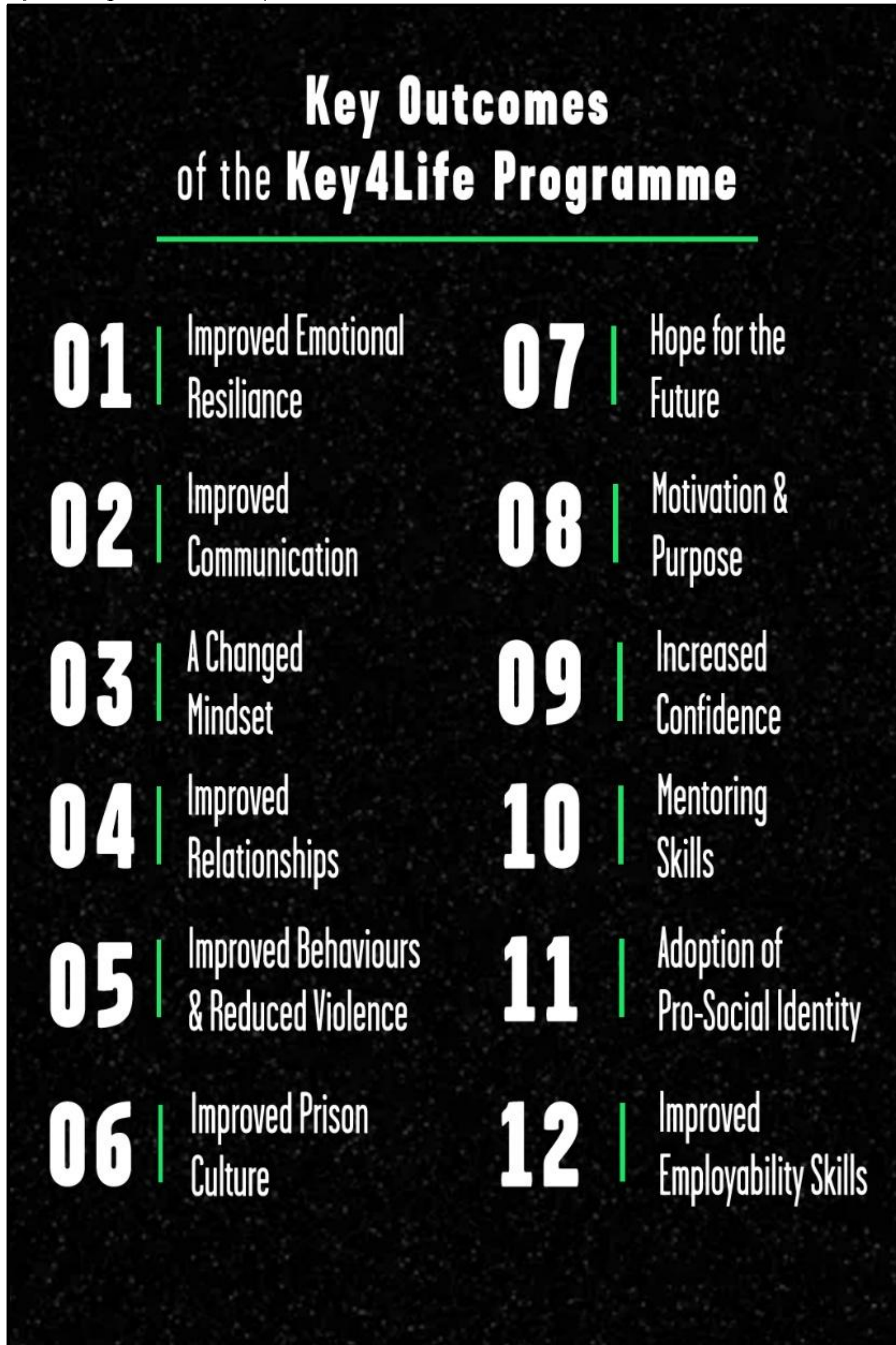
Employability Skills: The programme placed strong emphasis on preparing participants for employment through CV writing, interview preparation, and direct engagement with employers. Participants reported increased optimism about finding work and a better understanding of their transferable skills.

Mentoring Skills: Several participants who had completed the programme returned as mentors, describing how this deepened their own transformation while allowing them to give back. Mentoring fostered responsibility, reinforced personal change, and cultivated leadership qualities.

The Adoption of a Prosocial Identity: Perhaps the most significant outcome was the emergence of a new, prosocial identity: one defined by care, authenticity, and responsibility rather than crime or survival. This new identity was often described not as a total reinvention but as a reconnection with a truer, earlier self.

5.2 The Twelve Outcomes as an Interconnected System

The twelve outcomes documented in this report are not isolated achievements but deeply interconnected dimensions of a holistic transformation. Each outcome reinforces and enables the others, creating conditions under which fundamental identity change becomes possible.



Infographic listing the twelve interconnected outcomes of the Key4Life programme, ranging from improved emotional resilience and communication to increased confidence, pro-social identity, and employability skills.

At the foundation lies emotional resilience. Through structured workshops, equine therapy, and reflective exercises, participants developed new capacities to identify, articulate, and regulate their emotions. This emotional literacy disrupted the hypermasculine codes that had governed their behaviour, allowing them to replace automatic reactions rooted in anger or defensiveness with reflective, considered responses. Learning to "step back" and "pause" transformed their capacity to navigate conflict without resorting to violence, directly enabling improved behaviour and creating safer environments on the wings.

Improved communication skills emerged as both a product of emotional development and a catalyst for relational transformation. Participants who learned to articulate their feelings and engage in constructive dialogue found themselves better equipped to repair fractured family relationships, navigate employment opportunities, and build authentic connections with peers. These skills allowed men to be vulnerable without fear, to express care without shame, and to resolve conflict through dialogue rather than intimidation.

The employability component addressed both practical skills and psychological barriers. Through CV workshops, mock interviews, and direct engagement with employers, participants developed confidence in professional contexts that had previously felt inaccessible. Crucially, employer engagement offered recognition and legitimacy. When corporate professionals entered the prison to conduct interviews, they signalled that participants' potential extended beyond criminality and that legitimate economic participation was genuinely attainable. This external validation helped participants reframe their self-perception, shifting from fatalistic assumptions toward hopeful engagement with future possibilities.

The adoption of a prosocial identity represents the culmination of these processes. Participants described this shift not as a wholesale reinvention but as a reconnection with an earlier, truer self that had been obscured by survival scripts and carceral conditioning. As Jay reflected, "I was always a good kid but I got lost." Key4Life facilitated this narrative reconstruction by creating spaces where participants could reflect on their values, acknowledge harm caused, and commit to lives oriented toward care rather than destruction.

This identity transformation was reinforced through mentoring roles. Participants who became Key Mentors described how helping others deepened their own change, consolidating new identities as "someone who helps rather than harms." The mentoring structure created a self-sustaining cycle: graduates returning to support new cohorts, modelling possibility, and embedding positive cultural norms within the institution itself.

These outcomes collectively shifted prison culture. Participants and staff observed that Key4Life cohorts created ripple effects on their wings, fostering more reflective, emotionally open, and constructive environments. When enough men demonstrate that vulnerability is safe and that conflict can be resolved through dialogue, the social dynamics shift. Officers respond differently, peers feel safer, and space opens for others to drop their own "prison masks." This collective dimension underscores that rehabilitation is not only an individual process but a social and cultural one.

5.3 Theoretical Significance: Operationalising Desistance

These findings extend and deepen contemporary desistance theory by demonstrating how abstract concepts translate into lived experience and institutional practice. Maruna's (2001) concept of redemption scripts is not merely a narrative device but a psychologically and socially embedded process facilitated through structured reflection, relational support, and opportunities for prosocial contribution. Participants' accounts reveal how Key4Life created conditions for narrative reconstruction: through workshops that invited reflection on values and identity, through mentors who modelled transformed lives, and through employer engagement that offered glimpses of alternative futures.

McNeill's (2006; 2012) multidimensional framework of personal, social, and structural desistance is similarly illuminated. Personal desistance, the internal transformation of identity, values, and self-perception, was fostered through emotional development work and cognitive reframing. Social desistance, the relational recognition and validation necessary to sustain change, emerged through mentoring relationships, family reconciliation, and employer engagement. Structural desistance, the removal of barriers and provision of opportunities necessary for reintegration, was addressed through employability training and corporate partnerships, though participants remained acutely aware that structural barriers would persist beyond the programme.

Giordano et al.'s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation maps precisely onto participants' descriptions of their Key4Life journey. The programme provided "hooks for change": equine therapy, employer engagement, and mentoring opportunities that opened cognitive space for reimagining the self. It supported the development of replacement identities grounded in care, responsibility, and authenticity, and created reflective spaces where participants could reframe past offending as behaviour inconsistent with their truer selves.

The research also contributes to prison sociology by demonstrating how third-sector interventions can create "pockets of hope" (Liebling, 2004) within otherwise punitive institutional environments. Key4Life succeeded by creating an alternative relational environment characterised by trust, genuine care, and recognition of participants' humanity. This finding underscores that effective rehabilitation requires institutional cultures that embody rehabilitative values, not merely discrete interventions delivered within punitive contexts.

Crewe's (2009, 2011, 2014, 2014) scholarship on prison culture and masculinity gains empirical depth through these findings. Participants' descriptions of the "prison mask" and the dangers of vulnerability corroborate Crewe's arguments about the emotional labour required to survive carceral environments. Key4Life's success in creating spaces where men could "drop the mask" demonstrates that alternative cultures are possible within custodial settings, provided interventions explicitly challenge toxic norms and model emotional safety.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This research has several limitations that warrant acknowledgement. First, the study was conducted at a single site, HMP Fosse Way, a newly opened resettlement prison with distinctive characteristics that may not generalise to the wider custodial estate. Comparative research across multiple sites with varying security categories and institutional cultures would strengthen understanding of how context shapes programme effectiveness.

Second, the sample consisted of 46 men who chose to engage with Key4Life, introducing potential self-selection bias. Men who volunteer for rehabilitative programmes may already possess higher motivation or greater openness to change than those who decline. Future research could usefully examine patterns of non-engagement and what adaptations might reach more resistant populations.

Third, the cross-sectional design captured participants' perspectives at a single point rather than tracking outcomes longitudinally. Longitudinal research following participants from programme engagement through community reintegration would provide crucial evidence about whether reported shifts translate into sustained desistance.

Fourth, the sample was exclusively male, precluding examination of how gender shapes experiences of rehabilitation. Research examining gender-specific rehabilitation needs would strengthen understanding of effective practice across diverse populations.

Fifth, the qualitative methodology prioritised depth over breadth, enabling rich exploration but limiting statistical generalisation. Future research could integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches, combining narrative depth with validated psychometric measures.

Finally, while the research documented improvements in prison culture and behaviour as reported by participants, it did not include systematic observation, staff surveys, or institutional data. Multi-method research incorporating ethnographic observation and institutional records would provide more comprehensive understanding.

These limitations notwithstanding, the consistency of themes across 46 interviews, the analytical attention to disconfirming evidence, and the grounding of findings in established theoretical frameworks enhance confidence in the credibility and transferability of findings.

5.5 Policy Implications: Rehabilitation as Relational and Structural

The evidence presented in this report carries clear implications for criminal justice policy, prison management, and rehabilitation strategy. The findings demonstrate that custody can be more than warehousing, but only if interventions address both the emotional wounds and structural conditions that produce and perpetuate offending. Standard prison regimes, characterised by adversarial staff-prisoner relationships,

inadequate mental health provision, hypermasculine cultures, and absent aftercare, cannot achieve rehabilitation. They systematically prevent it.

Key4Life's model offers a blueprint for effective intervention: emotionally informed, relationally grounded, culturally relevant, and structurally continuous. The programme demonstrates that meaningful change requires interventions that recognise participants' humanity, validate their experiences, address trauma before expecting behaviour change, and provide tangible pathways to legitimate participation in employment and community life. This holistic approach aligns with contemporary policy aspirations toward rehabilitation but requires investment, institutional commitment, and willingness to challenge entrenched punitive cultures.

Crucially, rehabilitation cannot succeed through custodial interventions alone. The pathways to crime documented in this report began in childhood, shaped by poverty, educational exclusion, and absent role models. Effective prevention requires early intervention in schools, particularly in Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision, where trajectories can still be redirected. It requires community-based programmes that provide prosocial mentoring before criminalisation occurs.

For those already in custody, the findings underscore the need for prison cultures that embody rehabilitative values rather than merely delivering programmes within punitive environments. This requires investment in staff training, particularly around trauma-informed practice and desistance principles. It requires recognition that prison officers are rehabilitative agents whose relational skills matter as much as their security functions.

Post-release support emerges as equally critical. The abandonment participants described upon leaving prison, no housing, no employment, no relational anchor, guaranteed failure. Through-the-gate continuity, sustained mentoring, employer partnerships, and stable accommodation are not luxuries but necessities if custody is to contribute to public safety rather than perpetuate cycles of reoffending. Key4Life's model of meeting participants at the gate and maintaining weekly contact offers precisely this continuity, ensuring that fragile commitments to change receive the practical and relational scaffolding necessary to take root.

The recommendations detailed in the following section flow directly from these findings and address each dimension of the problem this research has documented.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Strategic Context

At a time when reoffending costs the taxpayer an estimated £18 billion annually and prison safety remains a critical concern, programmes such as Key4Life represent promising models with an emerging evidence base that combine cost-effectiveness with measurable impact on desistance, employability, and institutional safety. The integration of lived experience mentoring, cultural relevance, emotional rehabilitation, and employer engagement addresses multiple policy objectives simultaneously. The Justice Data Lab has now evaluated over 250 rehabilitation programmes, with a small but significant number demonstrating statistically significant reductions in reoffending. The evidence consistently points to the value of relational, through the gate, and lived experience-led approaches.

The following recommendations outline a strategic framework for scaling this impact across the criminal justice system and beyond. While this qualitative study provides rich evidence of participant experience and perceived benefit, it does not allow causal conclusions about system-level effectiveness. These recommendations should therefore be read in conjunction with Recommendation 8, which calls for longitudinal evaluation prior to wider commissioning decisions.

6.2 Recommendations for Government Action

Recommendation 1. Commission National Expansion of Relational Rehabilitation Programmes Across the Prison Estate

HMPPS has taken positive steps to support third sector rehabilitation through the Rehabilitation Grants Scheme 2026-2029, providing grants of up to £150,000 per year for evidence-based projects across prisons and probation. This is a welcome foundation, but scaling up this investment is now essential if proven relational rehabilitation programmes are to reach the prisoners who need them most.

The Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service may wish to consider building on the existing grants framework by establishing a dedicated multi-year funding stream for relational, lived experience-based programmes with an independently verified evidence base, such as those assessed through the Justice Data Lab. Such programmes directly align with ministerial priorities to reduce reoffending, improve prison safety, and enhance rehabilitation outcomes. Their model, combining emotional development, cultural credibility, structured mentoring by individuals with lived experience, and employer partnerships, offers a scalable intervention that addresses the root causes of offending behaviour.

The Government could usefully consider recognising such programmes within the national rehabilitation strategy as core interventions for young men at high risk of reoffending, with funding allocated through the next Spending Review to support

delivery in at least 15 additional establishments by 2029-30, beginning with a pilot expansion in the 2027-28 financial year.

Immediate action: The MoJ may wish to commission a costed expansion plan and identify priority establishments for rollout by the end of the 2026-27 financial year, prioritising Young Offender Institutions and Category C training prisons with high concentrations of young adult men serving sentences of 12 months or more.

Recommendation 2. Strengthen Prison Officer Training Through Lived Experience Expertise

HMPPS has made progress in developing trauma-informed and desistance-based approaches to officer training, including the Becoming Trauma Informed programme now being extended from women's prisons into the male estate, and the Impact framework grounded in desistance theory. These are welcome developments. However, this research identifies a specific gap: the systematic involvement of organisations with lived experience expertise in delivering officer training.

Participants in this evaluation described significant cultural shifts on prison wings where the programme operates, including reduced violence, more positive staff-prisoner relationships, and greater engagement with purposeful activity. These shifts depend not only on programme participants but on staff who understand and support the emotional and behavioural change process. Training delivered by individuals with lived experience brings authenticity and credibility, helping staff understand the relational skills needed to support change.

HMPPS may wish to consider commissioning organisations such as Key4Life to develop and deliver training modules for prison officers, complementing rather than replacing existing provision.

Recommended action: HMPPS could commission Key4Life and similar organisations to develop and deliver training modules for prison officers and operational managers that draw on lived experience to help staff better understand and support the emotional and behavioural change process. This could include insights from programme participants and practical tools for supporting emotional development and relational safety. Rollout could be linked to existing officer professional development frameworks, with a pilot commencing in the 2027-28 financial year.

Recommendation 3. Develop a Professionalised Framework for Lived Experience Mentoring

Peer mentoring is already widely practised across the prison estate, with provision including the Prisoners' Education Trust Level 2 Peer Mentor course, the HMPPS Creating Future Opportunities wing model, and various establishment-level schemes. However, the MoJ's own research confirms that these schemes remain non-standardised, inconsistently accredited, and offer little opportunity to share best practice between establishments. There is no national framework recognising lived experience mentoring as a professional pathway with clear standards, training, and employment outcomes.

HM Prison and Probation Service and the Department for Work and Pensions may wish to consider jointly establishing such a framework, building on existing provision rather than replacing it, and recognising lived experience mentoring as a distinct professional pathway with clear standards, training, and employment pathways for programme graduates.

Participants in this evaluation consistently identified their mentoring roles as transformative, not only for those they supported but for their own sense of purpose and desistance. However, uncertainty about expectations, limited formal recognition, and inconsistent support between programme cycles undermine the sustainability and impact of this work. The Government could usefully recognise lived experience as a distinct professional asset within criminal justice, health, and social care sectors, with structured pathways into paid employment as peer mentors, desistance coaches, or rehabilitation practitioners.

> "I think it will be quite interesting to see how this program is replicated elsewhere. Because the mentoring cohort that Key4Life were working with here, I would say were a group of talented men of much many years of lived experience within prison. Some doing, most of them doing over a decade in prison. So when you are working with people like that, they've got a lot to bring to the table anyway. For example, if culture carriers and others that are actively engaged in this kind of work are trained by Key4Life, it helps give more momentum and more training towards the work that they're doing and want to go into. So I think in that case, the mentoring side of it does work, where both parties benefit from one another. I think ultimately, the people that you're working with, the mentors, it kind of helps with their rehabilitation as well. So they're likely not to come back to prison. You can't forget that as well." — Salman, Key4Life Programme Participant

Recommended action: There is value in HMPPS commissioning the development of a national Lived Experience Mentoring Standards Framework, drawing on the expertise of organisations such as Key4Life and building on existing accreditation schemes, piloted across a small number of establishments with a pilot commencing in the 2027-28 financial year. DWP could usefully explore employability incentives and support packages for mentors transitioning into peer support roles post-release.

Recommendation 4. Fund a Structured Post-Programme Reinforcement Model

Through the gate support for prison leavers exists through the Probation Service and Commissioned Rehabilitative Services, alongside third sector organisations such as St Giles Trust and Catch22. However, the National Audit Office has found that the majority of high value resettlement contracts are not meeting quality standards, and handover between prison and probation is missed in around half of cases. Critically, no provision exists specifically to maintain the motivation and momentum of

graduates of relational rehabilitation programmes in the period immediately following programme completion or release.

The Ministry of Justice could commission and fund a structured continuity model for graduates of relational rehabilitation programmes, incorporating booster sessions, digital engagement tools, and mentor check-ins for up to 12 months post-programme completion. Participants repeatedly emphasised the motivational power of programme content and the risk of losing momentum without ongoing reinforcement. In a system where through the gate support is often fragmented and inadequate, maintaining connection and motivation is critical to sustaining desistance.

Proposed model: The MoJ could fund organisations such as Key4Life to pilot a 12-month post-programme package including quarterly booster workshops in custody and community, monthly mentor check-ins, and access to a digital engagement platform with goal-setting tools, peer support, and employment resources. This could be funded as a two-year pilot with embedded evaluation, beginning in 2027-28.

Recommendation 5. Establish Multi-Year Cross-Sector Funding for Programme Sustainability

HMPPS has taken steps to support third sector rehabilitation through the Rehabilitation Grants Scheme 2026-2029, providing grants of up to £150,000 per year for evidence-based projects. While welcome, this provision is limited in scale and scope and does not constitute the sustained, cross-sector investment needed to ensure the long-term viability of proven relational rehabilitation programmes. Short-term, fragmented funding undermines the ability of third sector organisations to plan strategically, invest in evaluation, and deliver consistent impact.

The Treasury, Ministry of Justice, and Office for Civil Society may wish to convene a cross-sector funding coalition to provide sustainable multi-year investment in Key4Life and comparable third sector organisations with a verified evidence base, recognising their contribution to crime reduction, employment, and community cohesion. A sustainable funding model could draw on central government departments, Police and Crime Commissioners, local authorities, philanthropic foundations, and private sector partners.

Recommended funding model:

- Core delivery funding: Ministry of Justice, allocated through multi-year grant agreements
- Early intervention and prevention: Department for Education
- Employment and skills development: Department for Work and Pensions
- Innovation and evaluation: Philanthropic and private sector

Immediate action: The MoJ could usefully convene a funding stakeholder group and commission a three-year investment plan, with funding commitments secured by the end of the 2026-27 financial year.

Recommendation 6. Strengthen and Scale the Existing Employer Engagement Infrastructure

Significant progress has already been made in supporting prison leavers into employment through the New Futures Network, Employment Advisory Boards, Employment Hubs, and the Going Forward into Employment Civil Service scheme. These initiatives, many developed under the leadership of Prisons Minister James Timpson, represent a strong foundation. However, employer engagement remains inconsistent and the structural incentives needed to drive wider private sector participation are not yet in place.

The Department for Business and Trade, Ministry of Justice, and Cabinet Office may wish to consider building on this existing infrastructure by introducing the fiscal and procurement levers needed to embed inclusive hiring more deeply across the economy. Specifically, government could explore introducing employer National Insurance relief for businesses hiring individuals within 12 months of release, with the precise cost and mechanism to be determined through HM Treasury modelling and consultation with employer bodies. Embedding inclusive hiring commitments into public sector procurement contracts above £5 million would further extend the reach of existing schemes. A national "Second Chance Employers" campaign, building on the profile already generated by Employment Advisory Boards, could consolidate and amplify existing momentum.

Employment is the strongest predictor of successful desistance. The infrastructure exists. The missing levers are structural incentives that would make inclusive hiring the norm rather than the exception.

Immediate action: The MoJ could convene a roundtable with leading employers, the New Futures Network, third sector rehabilitation organisations, and sector bodies to identify the specific barriers that remain and co-design a strategy to address them, with outputs delivered by Q3 2026-27.

Recommendation 7. Draw on Lived Experience Evidence to Inform Youth Justice Reform

The Youth Custody Service, Youth Justice Board, and Department for Education may wish to consider drawing on the lived experience evidence gathered in studies such as this one when reviewing provision for young people in custody and those at risk of offending, ensuring that the emotional, relational, and structural dimensions of disadvantage are reflected in current youth justice reform.

While this study focused on adult men at HMP Fosse Way, participants' retrospective accounts of their experiences in youth custody and of growing up without adequate support provide compelling evidence of the long-term consequences of inadequate early intervention. Many described youth custody as a site of criminalisation rather than rehabilitation, reinforcing rather than disrupting pathways into adult offending. Educational disruption, absence of emotional support, exposure to violence, and lack of meaningful relationships with trusted adults were recurring themes across the data.

These accounts resonate with the government's current reform agenda as set out in A Modern Youth Justice System: Foundations Fit for the Future (Ministry of Justice, 2026), which emphasises closing the gap between the best and the rest of the youth justice system and embedding Child First principles across provision. This study's findings support that agenda by illustrating, from the perspective of adult men looking back, what was missing at critical junctures in their lives.

Recommended action: The Ministry of Justice, working with the Youth Justice Board in its evidence and oversight capacity, may wish to consider how retrospective lived experience evidence from adult prisoners can be systematically gathered and incorporated into youth justice policy development, complementing existing data on outcomes for children currently in the system.

Recommendation 8. Invest in Longitudinal Evaluation and Evidence Development Across the Sector

The Ministry of Justice, in partnership with academic institutions, is encouraged to commission longitudinal research into the sustained impact of relational, lived experience-based rehabilitation programmes on desistance and reoffending. While this evaluation has generated rich qualitative insights into programme impact during custody, the longer-term question of whether and how that impact is sustained through resettlement and community reintegration remains unanswered. Without longitudinal evidence, commissioning decisions will continue to rest on short-term outcome data that cannot capture the sustained impact of relational rehabilitation on desistance trajectories. Key4Life could serve as an initial case study through which to develop a robust methodological framework, with findings intended to inform investment and evaluation across the wider rehabilitation sector.

A well-designed longitudinal study would need to track participants from programme engagement through resettlement and into the community over a minimum of two years post-release, incorporating a comparison group to distinguish the effects of structured rehabilitative support from standard release pathways. Such a study would generate both theoretical advances in desistance research and practical evidence for policymakers and commissioners about what forms of support matter most and how provision should adapt across different phases of reintegration.

Proposed approach: The MoJ, working with research councils and academic partners, could support a longitudinal study of approximately £500,000 over four years with access facilitated through HMPPS and a relational, lived experience-based rehabilitation programme. A research team with existing knowledge of the programme and established relationships with participants would be well placed to lead this work, ensuring continuity and maximising the value of prior investment in data collection. A lead researcher could be appointed by Q1 2027-28.

6.3 Conclusion: A Strategic Investment in Desistance and Public Safety

This research demonstrates that programmes such as Key4Life deliver precisely the kind of transformative, evidence-based intervention that the government's prison reform agenda demands. At a time when reoffending costs the taxpayer billions annually and prison safety remains a critical concern, relational, lived experience-based rehabilitation programmes represent models with a compelling and growing evidence base, combining cost-effectiveness with measurable impact on desistance, employability, and institutional safety.

The integration of lived experience mentoring, cultural relevance, emotional rehabilitation, and employer engagement addresses multiple policy objectives simultaneously: reducing reoffending, improving prison culture, supporting employment outcomes for prison leavers, and creating self-sustaining change. The twelve interconnected outcomes identified in this research show that rehabilitation is not a linear process but a holistic transformation involving identity, relationships, emotions, and future orientation.

The cost of inaction is clear: continued cycles of reoffending, wasted human potential, unsafe communities, and unsustainable pressure on public services. With appropriate investment and political will, programmes such as Key4Life can be scaled nationally to transform lives, reduce harm, and deliver value for money. The question for government is whether they will be supported, scaled, and sustained.

The evidence is compelling. The need is urgent. The opportunity is now.

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Appendix A

Serco Restricted and Sensitive

Serco REC Final Decision Letter

By Email

Natasha Du Rose

24 July 2024

Dear Natasha,

Re: Research Project: Successful crime prevention and rehabilitation innovations

Thank you for submitting the changes requested by the Research Ethics Committee which we can confirm have been accepted.

It also gives us great pleasure to confirm that Director, Wyn Jones has now approved for your research to go ahead at HMP Fosse way.

We look forward to seeing the results of your research and to see it implemented within the Serco contracts.

Well done!

Yours sincerely

The Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B

Participant 1 Information Sheet

Study title: Successful crime prevention & rehabilitation innovations

You are invited to take part in a research study by researchers at London Metropolitan University in partnership with Key4Life. Before you decide whether you would like to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and please say if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Researchers/Interviewers:

Natasha Du Rose n.durose@londonmet.ac.uk;
James Morgan jc.morgan@londonmmet.ac.uk;

What is the purpose of this study? The purpose of this study is to examine your experiences of the Key4Life programme. We want to understand the ways in which Key4Life can help prison leavers improve their lives.

Why have I been invited? You have been invited because you are on the Key4Life programme. We are interested in understanding your experiences of taking part in this programme.

Do I have to take part in this interview? It is up to you if you wish to take part in the interview, and you may change your mind at any stage and without giving a reason. If you want to stop taking part, there will be no problem for you.

What will happen if I take part? - If you accept to take part in this study, you will be interviewed by Natasha Du Rose or James Morgan. The interview will last approx. 45 mins to 1 hour. We want to record the interview if you agree.

Is it confidential?

Everything you share with us will be confidential. We won't tell anyone anything that will connect you to the interview. You will not be identified from the research information we collect as we will change your name, the names of other people and places you refer to so you cannot be identified. If we use quotes from your interview in our report to Key4Life, they will not have your name next to them.

It is important that you do not tell us details about plans for future crimes of violence that could put you or others at risk, or past serious offences the police do not already know about. If so, it would be our duty to share this with Key4Life and if agreed with them inform the Resettlement Lead at Fosse Way. By serious, we mean specified violence against others or a specific targeted plan for a theft such as street robbery or burglary. However, we would discuss this with you first and only share the minimum information needed to ensure yours and other people's safety.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part? -You might talk about difficult experiences, people or ideas that can make you feel upset. There will be no judgement about the things you discuss whether they are legal or illegal. If you feel upset after the interview, please contact one of the organisations at the end of this information sheet.

What are the possible benefits of taking part? - It is hoped that by sharing your experiences and views you will be able to reflect on them and this will benefit you in some way. The information gained from your interviews will contribute to our understanding of how Key4Life works and how it might be changed or improved, and how other programs can learn from their practice.

What will you do with the interview data? - The interviews will be typed out but any information that could identify you will be removed. We will write up research reports, and we will use some quotes from you, but we will make sure that nobody can work out who said them.

londonmet.ac.uk/about/cares/

What do I do if I have any further questions? -If there is anything you're not sure about, please ask the researcher and we'll be happy to answer.

Who has reviewed the study? -This study has been approved by London Metropolitan University's Ethics Committee and Serco's Research Ethics Committee.

Support - If you feel upset following this interview, please ask to speak to your Key4Life Keyworker or your Keyworker at Fosse Way. If for any reason you want to keep this private, you can contact the prison charity PACT on their free helpline 0808 808 2003 who offer advice and emotional support to prisoners. You can also contact the Samaritans from prison 24 hours a day on 0845 4507797.

Appendix C

Key4Life Interview Guide

0. Demographic questions

· What is your age?

· What is your nationality?

· How would you describe your ethnic origin?

· What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

· Do you have any children? If so, how old?

· Do you consider yourself to be a disabled person or have a learning difficulty?

· Do you have any long-term health conditions?

1. Can you tell me about life before you came into contact with the CJS?

· Early life · Relationships · School · Area-crime- street culture. WC. Work · Leisure · Challenges. Racism

2. Can you tell me about your offending history?

· First memories of crime

·What was your last index offence?

· What different crimes have you committed?

· Your reasons for getting into crime (attraction, motivations) opportunity

· What did you get out of it? (functions served- status, belonging, thrill, money etc)

3. Can you tell me about any time spent in prison?

· How long was your sentence? When are you due for release?

· What was prison life like? What were the biggest challenges?

· How did prison affect you? mental/physical health; relationships; pre-· prison plans for life/career. Prison culture?

· And, can you tell me about any support you received during or after you left prison? Probation?

4. Can you tell me about your experience of the Key4Life program?

-What did it give you? What aspects of it did you find most useful for you?

· Do you think it improved your well-being, communication, behaviour, goals and aspirations?

· Do you think Key4Life can help reduce reoffending, & improve people's life chances to build a better life? · Improve prison security & reduce violence?

· Improve prison culture? Mentoring- your experience? Has it helped you?

5. Can you tell me about what you think you needed or ex-offenders in general need to help live a life without committing any crimes?

· Relationships · Housing · Employment ·Financial security

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