

## **Paul's story**

I've been in prison every year of my life since I was 18.

My convictions include car crime, shoplifting, assault, burglary, robbery and supply and conspiracy for class 'A' drugs.

I'm 45 now and been free of crime for two years and clean from heroin for 8 months.

Crime became a way of life for me. It just built up slowly – first from approved school, then borstal, then prison. Little jumps. It became familiar. Getting caught and going to prison was no deterrent for me. I was used to it.

I was the only one of six children in our family who went into crime and later drugs. I was the second youngest. They are all settled into marriages and jobs. I think it was stubbornness on my part. I wouldn't listen to sensible advice. I always thought I knew better.

I was raised in a respectable catholic working class family with our own home in a reasonable area. My dad was a long-distance lorry driver and my mother was a very intelligent housewife from Northern Europe – they met during the war. She could speak six languages. Neither of them are living now.

I had a thing going at junior school. My mate and I became joint best fighters as we couldn't beat each other. When you get that sort of reputation people look up to you. I got above myself with no regard for others.

My first crime was in 1969 when I was eleven. I stole a purse from my friend's next door neighbour. It was still the old currency then and had eight shillings and six pence in it.

The police came round and I admitted it straight away.

The court sent me to an approved school in Liverpool for three years. My mum agreed that I should have a short sharp shock to 'teach me a lesson'.

The school was an awful experience. I didn't tell my parents about what happened there. That's just how it was. I can still remember some of the teachers' names. I didn't do any more crime while I was at that approved school though.

I came out at 13. But by then I'd missed out on my education as we didn't have a full curriculum at the approved school. So I went into the third year badly behind everyone else and I never caught up.

I left school at 16 with no qualifications. But it was easier to get jobs then and I worked in warehouses. My first wage was £14 a week.

I was 17 when I got arrested for pinching cars and was sent to a borstal for 8 months. When I got out I carried on stealing and ended up in prison for theft of motor vehicles.

I was in my early twenties when I had my last job in a factory. I got married in 1980 and we had a daughter. My wife had never been in trouble and after I'd been in prison a few more times we spilt up. I just wouldn't change. I've got two little grandchildren now. I love spending time with them.

The drugs came much later. It was 1985 when I started on speed and ended up dealing for about a year until I got arrested. I was about 28.

Sometimes I'd have my own place. Other times I'd be living in hostels or the Salvation Army or YMCA – usually when I got out of prison and had nowhere to go.

So what changed me? My last sentence was in 1995 for seven years for supply of class 'A' drugs. I served five years. Mum died while I was in prison. I decided then that I was sick of it. The prison service was reforming and I had to contribute and take part in groups, education and work. I didn't want to and I was getting the block. I had enough.

Although I'd been supplying I never took heroin until I went to prison – that's where I got my addiction.

I served five years and would have rather stayed in than come out on licence. There are too many restrictions when a licence is hanging over your head. Like answering to probation officers about who you're mixing with and where you've been.

So when I got done for shoplifting two years ago and realised I'd have to go back to prison I opted for a new scheme called the Targeted Policing Initiative (Prolific Offenders Scheme). It specialises in supervising people who have done lots of crime such as burglary and street crime. I can honestly say that it has turned my life around.

It's based at a police station and run by a police officer and a probation officer. There is a doctor involved as well for drug treatment. They all swap information about me, so there's no getting away with anything.

The police are like 'big brother' always watching what I'm doing and who I'm mixing with. They check my whereabouts when there have been crimes carried out in the city that are like the ones I used to do. And I'm held to account all the time. I had to agree to this before I came on to the project so I did know what I was letting myself in for.

The project got me off drugs altogether. I started off on methadone and then took an opiate blocker. I don't take any medication at all now. It's such a relief not to be addicted.

We have a monthly meeting called a 'Multi Agency Planning & Assessment Meeting' It's run by a Chief Inspector we all call 'Mr D'. Even the staff call him that. And I even quite like him. Once I was caught on CCTV talking to some drug dealers and at the meeting I had to explain why. I could have got breached for that.

The Probation Officer supports me trying to settle back into a normal life. I feel that's what I've got from the project – a normal life.

A big thing I've had to do with the probation staff is to look at the way I think. I've attended a special group work programme called 'Beyond the Mask' which looks at problem solving and how you approach decision making. I've learned how to do positive 'self talk' when I'm thinking negatively or about whether to steal or take drugs. It has really made me think hard about the consequences of my actions.

Now when I go in a shop and see a 2lb pack of bacon I think there's just no point me stealing it because I'd be breached off the project straight away and sent to prison. And for what? A bit of meat. It's too high a price to pay. Easier all round to pay for it.

I was in a group work session the other day and it did my head in. I found it hard to be there. But had no choice but to stay in the session. Afterwards on my way home I found myself walking towards where I know drug dealers hang out. I did my positive

'self-talk' as I've been taught. And I went and sat in McDonalds and had a coffee. Just sat and talked myself out of doing anything bad. After a while I felt better and I did go to speak to my old acquaintances for a while. They even seemed pleased for me when I told them I was off the gear and not doing that sort of thing anymore.

I think it's too early for me to start work. I'm still at risk of slipping back when under pressure. A job would be pushing it right now. But I am able to manage my income support payment these days – whereas before I'd blow it all when I got it. Then I'd have to turn to crime to get cash. Eventually I hope to get a job and support myself again. Maybe some voluntary work firstly.

I've started to co-present that same group work programme now I've come to the end of my order. I feel I'm a good role model for the other guys on the project. Most of them are younger than me. They can see how much I have changed from all the bad stuff I was doing in the city, to where I am now - drug and crime free. Hopefully seeing me gives them aspirations.

It's coming together for me. I've got a decent flat. I see to the garden, rake the grass, make things look nice – like normal people do. Taking it steady, one day at time.

I'm happy to speak publicly if I can put something back by telling my story about the waste of my younger years. Because I feel I've taken too much from the community. If I can help other people locked into drugs and crime make changes then that's a big plus for me.

**Ends**