

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2015 No 221



*Special Edition*  
**Reducing Prison Violence**

# Staff culture, authority and prison violence

*Dr Ben Crewe and Professor Alison Liebling* Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.

**At a time when the Prison Service is concerned about levels of violence, it is worth reflecting on whether different kinds of staff cultures, and different modes of authority, might generate different forms of violence. Based on research initially undertaken as part of a study of public and private sector prisons, this article sets out a framework for thinking about how both the over-use and under-use of power can, for different reasons, produce or enable violent responses from, or among, prisoners.**

A starting point for an analysis of this kind is Sparks, Bottoms and Hey's *Prisons and the Problem of Order*,<sup>1</sup> which contrasted the means by which two high-security establishments in the late 1980s sought to accomplish order. Albany ran a more restricted regime, and seemed somewhat punitive and antagonistic. Long Lartin allowed prisoners greater autonomy and promoted closer relationships between prisoners and staff. Albany was characterised by friction *between prisoners and staff*, and a greater level of frustration among prisoners about daily forms of constraint. In Long Lartin, while there was less hostility *between prisoners and staff*, problems between prisoners were more complex and serious. There was considerable 'back-stage violence', often linked to an elaborate informal economy and the existence of developed hierarchies between prisoners. Such patterns were linked to the prison's more relaxed mode of policing.

The first point to draw from Sparks et al's comparison is that there are some 'trade-offs' in prisons that are difficult to avoid. 'Safety', of a certain kind, can be secured in prison by minimising contact between prisoners, but this comes at the expense of feelings of autonomy and wellbeing, and creates sentiments of hostility towards the institution. Granting prisoners greater levels of freedom brings about risks in relation to exploitation, bullying, security and control. To put this another way, quoting Gresham Sykes,<sup>2</sup> 'increases in

freedom of movement, inmate responsibility, and material possessions ... set the stage for more bitter struggles with higher stakes'. While we do not think that 'security' and 'harmony' goals are, in fact, incompatible, the difficulties of getting their balance right in prisons is evidenced in the history of the Prison Service. In the high-security estate, the philosophy of a 'liberal regime within a secure perimeter' proved hazardous in the 1980s and early 1990s. Riots, high-profile escapes, and violence between prisoners, testified to the risks of ceding power to prisoners and under-enforcing rules. Meanwhile, the prison disturbances of 1990, most of which occurred in local prisons with restricted regimes and traditional staff cultures, demonstrated the dangers of impoverished and more oppressive environments. As described in the Woolf Report that followed the riots,<sup>3</sup> the disturbances reflected deep grievances among prisoners about the poverty of their conditions and the unjust manner of their treatment. The second implication, then, is that the over-use and under-use of power give rise to different kinds of frustration, and different forms of violent expression.

The 1990 riots are relevant to our argument in part because they form the backdrop to the development of rather different kinds of staff cultures, especially in the privately managed establishments that emerged in England and Wales from the early 1990s. Research undertaken from the 1990s onwards suggested that prisoners experienced more respectful treatment in private prisons — which had been tasked with modelling more progressive staff cultures — than in public sector establishments, while raising concerns about the inexperience of staff, levels of staff supervision, and resulting issues of safety and control.<sup>4</sup>

Intrigued by these findings, from 2008-2010, we undertook a major, independently-funded study of values, practices and outcomes in public and private sector prisons. The research sites included five private

1. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A. and Hey, W. (1996) *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. Oxford: OUP.
2. Sykes, G. (1956) 'Men, merchants and toughs: A study of reactions to imprisonment', *Social Problems*, 130-138.
3. Home Office (1991) *Prison Disturbances April 1990; Report of an Inquiry by the Rt. Hon. Lord Justice Woolf and his Honour Judge Stephen Tummim*. London: HMSO.
4. James, A.K., Bottomley, A.K., Liebling, A., and Clare, E. (1997) *Privatizing Prisons: Rhetoric and Reality*. London: Sage; Liebling, A, assisted by Arnold, H (2004) *Prisons and their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

sector and two public sector establishments, with a considerable (unexpected) range in quality among the private prisons. The specific methods and results of our comparison have been described elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> What is relevant for current purposes is the framework which we developed in order to illustrate characteristic differences between the sectors in relation to staff cultures and — in particular — the way that staff authority was used and experienced.

### Heavy-light, absent-present

Private sector imprisonment was consistently described by prisoners as 'lighter' than public sector imprisonment. By 'light', we are partly referring to aspects of the regime, such as the amount of time spent unlocked, greater freedom with regard to wearing personal clothing, and a set of conditions — including in-cell telephones, in one of the establishments — which 'normalised' the environment to some degree. Primarily, though, prisoners emphasised a form of staff treatment that felt less oppressive than in the public sector:

*In here, you're treated as an individual ... you're a person. In [the public sector], you're not, you're a number, you're just a piece of meat with a number on it. (Prisoner, private prison)*

*You're treated like humans ... you're given chances. Staff are a lot more approachable, things seem to be a lot more relaxed. (Prisoner, private prison)*

Lightness also referred to the way in which staff used their authority:

*[Staff] are a little bit more laid back, they are not on your back all the time ... as long as you're not doing nothing, they just leave you ... instead of being on your back for every little thing, 'don't do this, don't do that' ... like a boot camp. (Prisoner, private prison)*

In contrast, prisoners in public sector prisons more often described staff cultures that were 'heavy', a term that conveys a sense of their conditions 'bearing down' upon them, or feeling like a weight on their shoulders. Compared to custody officers in the private prisons, public sector officers were more likely to express views that prisoners were undeserving of respect:

*I would never call [prisoners] Mr ... like you're supposed to do, I won't [...] They don't deserve to be called Mr at all, they are prisoners [...] They are on a punishment, why call them Mr? (Officer, public prison)*

Prisoners in these 'heavier' cultures felt that staff regarded them as morally inferior, and as deserving of punishment beyond the sentence itself. This was also reflected in comments about how public sector prison staff used their authority. Public sector officers were more likely than private sector custody officers to be described as overbearing and antagonistic:

*Some of them are quite reasonable to be honest with you, but others ... their attitude towards you is ... it's like bullish and threatening ... you know, real evil stuff because they've got a key, you know*

*(Prisoner, public prison).*

While prisoners expressed a preference for 'lighter' staff cultures in general, results from measuring the quality of prison life (MQPL) surveys, undertaken in the five private and two public sector prisons, did not reveal an overall preference for private sector establishments. Indeed, in three of the private sector establishments in particular, some aspects of 'lightness', linked to weaknesses in the use of staff authority, were precisely what they disliked. In these establishments, prisoners felt that staff were unwilling to deploy their power or unable to do so appropriately. Often, they complained that staff did not project confident authority, were intimidated by powerful prisoners, and could not control incidents on the wings:

5. See Crewe, B., Liebling, A., and Hulley, S. (2015) 'Staff-Prisoner Relationships, Staff Professionalism, and the Use of Authority in Public- and Private-Sector Prisons', *Law and Social Inquiry*, 40(2), 309-344; Crewe, B., Liebling, A., and Hulley, S. (2014) Heavy-light, absent-present: rethinking the 'weight' of imprisonment, *British Journal of Sociology*, 387-410; Liebling, A., Hulley, S. and Crewe, B. (2011), 'Conceptualising and Measuring the Quality of Prison Life', in Gadd, D., Karstedt, S. and Messner, S. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*. London: Sage.

*Because they are young officers, they don't use their authority. They tell you to get behind your door and you say no ... and you can get away with it (Prisoner, private prison)*

*Since I've been here [I've seen] officers being totally intimidated, the bell going off and officers running off the wings and leaving [prisoners] to get on with it. (Prisoner, private prison)*

In such comments, prisoners both expressed anxiety about the degree to which staff were 'in charge' and complained about a tendency for them to under-enforce the rules. The result of both of these issues was that prisoners in these establishments either pushed boundaries, or simply did not know where the boundaries lay. The wings were sometimes described as 'like a council estate', communicating the sense that there was little authority, and that life was unpredictable and under-regulated:

*It is mayhem sometimes [...] They have not got a lot of control. Certain wings, the officers are not running the wings, the lads are. [...] It's not good is it? There is no authority really (Prisoner, private prison)*

As suggested here, most prisoners did not want the wings to be run by their peers: they wanted staff to occupy their position as power-holders. Likewise, they often complained that staff did not 'want to upset anybody', recognising that 'they're supposed to be the ones in power', and that a culture of permissiveness led to confusion about personal and professional boundaries. Relaxed forms of policing were therefore double-edged. They created a 'lighter' experience, in terms of the imposition of staff authority, so that prisoners generally did not feel aggravated or provoked by a heavy staff presence. At the same time, however, they allowed greater scope for prisoners to aggravate and exploit each other:

*Well it's just a more relaxed atmosphere here I think, but with that comes all the bullying and things like that, you know. [Staff are] not as vigilant as they would be in an HMP. (Prisoner, private prison)*

In contrast, one of the aspects of public sector imprisonment that prisoners appreciated was a kind of reliability or predictability, both in relation to regime organisation and the use of staff power. Such traits provided prisoners with a greater degree of psychological certainty about the ambient environment, about rules and boundaries, and about the capacity of staff to handle incidents on the wings.

*I've always found the officers in an HMP compared to the officers here more in control. Control of the situation, control of the jail, control of they know what they are doing. (Prisoner, private prison).*

... the fact that prisoners trusted public sector officers to use their authority effectively, and were willing to 'draw the line', made it less likely that prisoners pushed boundaries or sought to assault or exploit their peers.

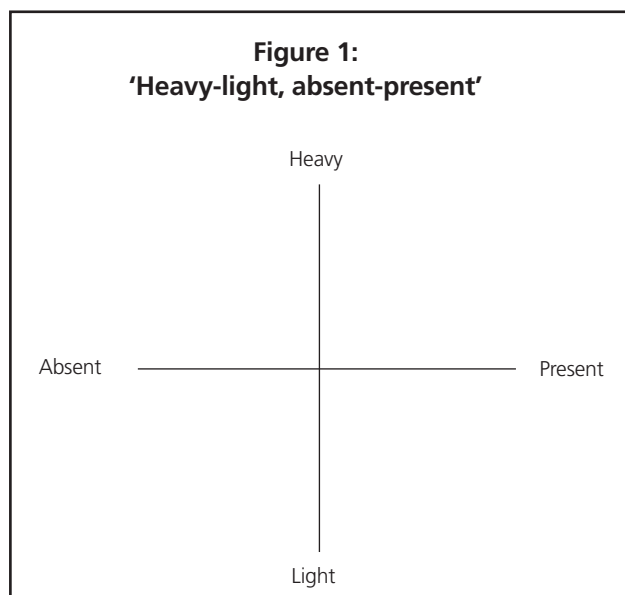
Indeed, the fact that prisoners trusted public sector officers to use their authority effectively, and were willing to 'draw the line', made it less likely that prisoners pushed boundaries or sought to assault or exploit their peers. Staff were more 'present' in the environment, not just through their physical being but also the imprint of authority that was embedded in daily culture and practices. As with 'visible policing' on the streets, prisoners felt more psychologically secure in knowing that staff were watchful and willing to intervene. To quote one prisoner, 'If [officers] can demonstrate to the prisoner that they are in

control of any given situation [...] then it calms down large number of prisoners (Prisoner, public prison). For such reasons, the slightly heavier culture of public sector prisons could, in certain respects, create a *less* oppressive environment:

*[Public sector imprisonment] is a lot more relaxed than private. It's horrible in private: you never know what is going to happen. Always fighting. Always bullying. (Prisoner, public prison)*

Our way of conceptualising these findings is through the figure presented below. In it, we differentiate between staff cultures not just in terms of their relative 'weight' (that is, through the vertical axis, labelled 'heavy' and 'light'), but also the 'absence' or 'presence' of staff power. The benefit of this figure is, in part, that it helps us to think through





why some private sector prisons were rated more positively than others. While we characterised all of the private establishments in the original study as 'light', the less good private establishments were considerably more 'absent' than those that scored well on the MQPL surveys. The two public sector prisons in our study were located within the top-right quadrant, that is as 'heavy' but 'present'. We will return to this figure, and to the other quadrants, shortly.

### Thinking through prison violence

The figure also allows us to think about the different kinds of prison violence that different regimes might generate or enable. We have suggested already that, in some of the private prisons in our study, what prisoners feared was the power of their peers to assault or victimise them. Inadequate policing of the wings made it easier for a drugs economy to develop, and for attendant forms of violence to be carried out. Tentative staff, or a sheer lack of staff numbers, allowed incidents to go on for longer, to involve a greater number of prisoners, or to have more serious consequences ('There was a fight last week. The screws didn't have a clue what was going on. I hear [him] say 'please stop' — they was throwing blows, you know, the guy was on the floor').

There is good reason to believe that under-policing, and the under-use of authority, may exacerbate the tendency among prisoners to engage in forms of violence, as a result of a dynamic of provocation and defensiveness. As many studies highlight,<sup>6</sup> in order to avoid victimisation, prisoners seek to avoid giving the impression that they are naïve or unable to defend

themselves. Many are also acutely sensitive to what they perceive to be personal slights ('disrespect'), due to childhood experiences of abandonment and residual feelings of shame.<sup>7</sup> To quote Robert Johnson:<sup>8</sup>

*Failure in social encounters, even the slightest hint of defeat, at once exposes their weaknesses to themselves and others. To guard against this, they must avenge even the slightest insult that might cast doubt on their manliness, brook any authority that would curtail their sense of self.*

Great importance is therefore attached to incidents which are ostensibly trivial, but might represent tests of psychological strength or challenges to self-esteem. These tests take many forms — requests for tobacco, for example — and are built into the prison's everyday social architecture, in particular, around the servery, phones and pool tables, where scarce resources and queuing systems offer opportunities to probe and display social dominance:

*People try and jump on the pool table. If you say, 'next', and some guy comes along and says, 'hold on, I'm next', and you say, 'hold on, you weren't here', then that's it: the chest comes out, the neck gets put forward, and one of you has got to back down. (Kyle)*

In the kinds of situations described here, the presence of staff can be preventative, and tends to be welcomed. Few prisoners want to fight, or want their fights to endure. Most prefer that staff are available to prevent conflicts from arising, to curtail them quickly, and to dissipate their anger. But, as suggested here, neither do prisoners want to be exploited or humiliated. The absence of staff makes it more likely that they will engage in forms of instrumental violence, in order to demonstrate that they will not be 'mugged off' or to position themselves 'above the line' that helps secure personal safety.

Furthermore, where prisoners lack confidence that staff are in control of the wings, they may feel the need to self-organise. In one such prison in our study (but we have seen it in others), interviewees talked of a time in the recent past when a large proportion of prisoners had begun to carry improvised weapons as a defensive measure. That is, the absence of staff power created an environment in which prisoners were 'on edge' and liable to over-react to perceived threats from others. In others,

6. Edgar, K., O'Donnell, I. and Martin, C. (2003) *Prison Violence: The Dynamics of Conflict, Fear and Power*. Cullompton: Willan; Crewe, B. (2009) *Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*. Oxford: OUP.
7. Gilligan, J. (1996) *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and its Sources*. New York: Grosset/Putnam Books; Butler, M. (2006) 'What are you looking at?: Prisoner Confrontations and the Search for Respect', *British Journal of Criminology*. 48, 6, p. 856-873.
8. Johnson, R. (1987) *Hard Time: Understanding and Reforming the Prison*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.

they may appoint prisoner 'leaders' to resolve conflicts on the wing.<sup>9</sup> One outcome of the absence of confident staff authority was that individual prisoners were able to accumulate greater power on the wings. While we only saw a small number of examples of evidence of staff deliberately or self-consciously delegating power to prisoners, it was clear, in some establishments, that some individuals had considerable coercive potential as a result of their criminal networks and reputations.

Second, prisoners in light-absent institutions were also aware that, where boundaries were deficient, it was harder for them to 'be good'. As well as seeking protection from other prisoners, they welcomed a certain amount of protection from temptation. Frequent references were made to the difficulties of personal change in the face of peer pressure. Positive behaviour required both 'headspace' — a feeling of safety and respect — and the absence of the kinds of attractions and distractions that could disrupt attempts to be a different kind of person. An absence of authority made it more likely that prisoners could be drawn into the drug culture and interpersonal conflict, and drawn in to forms of behaviour and identity that were exploitative and aggressive.

Third, prisons in which authority was somewhat absent generated specific kinds of frustrations. Prisoners often expressed exasperation about the ease with which they could find themselves in trouble for having breached invisible rules or ambiguous boundaries. They complained that staff were unpredictable in their adoption of the rule-book, overlooking infractions one day only to act on them the next, or turning a blind eye to serious breaches while sanctioning prisoners for incidents that seemed far more trivial. According to one prisoner in a privately managed establishment, 'if you wanted to sell drugs you'd get away with it in here, but if you have a towel at the end of your bed you're gonna get a nicking'. Meanwhile, a more laissez-faire mode of managing the wings meant that prisoners sometimes felt unsupported in material terms by staff. Some characterised light-absent prisons as 'a good place to kill time, but a bad place to progress'. We would not want to make strong claims that such irritations lead to

violence, but they certainly breed feelings of extreme frustration.

Finally, where staff are insecure in using their authority, or lack jailcraft, they may over-use as well as under-use their power. One way in which this is manifested is a 'stand-back, jump forwards' approach, in which staff under-enforce rules for some time and then over-react to a particular incident. Alternatively, where they lack confidence or self-legitimacy, prison staff may resort to aggression or formal modes of power in situations where more experienced officers would be able to resolve the situation through talk or tact. Prisoners in the 'light-absent' establishments in our study

reported that some staff used needlessly aggressive language — 'they're in your face and that, [acting like] you're all outside or in a boozer or something' — attributing this not to staff being too comfortable with or enjoying their power, but compensating for discomfort and insecurity about their ability to wield it.

In prisons that are culturally 'heavier', we would expect to find different forms of frustration and violence. Problems between prisoners result from an excess of institutional power, either its provocations or its punitive nature. Oppressive regimes — long hours in cells, restrictions, and a culture of disrespect or dehumanisation — breed tensions that may spill over into violent outbursts between prisoners and/or against officers. Meanwhile, staff are more dismissive and

confrontational, precipitating conflict directly by goading prisoners, treating them with disdain, or being deliberately heavy-handed when restraining them. Where authority is over-used, or is used carelessly or casually, it produces violence through processes of humiliation. Here, a prisoner describes the fury that he felt when an officer declined to open his cell door:

*I'm having a shower and I'm thinking 'how the fuck does she think she can talk to me like that? I've been nothing but courteous and nice to her'. And I thought 'no, I'm not having it'. If I didn't get it off my chest it would wind me up all night. So I've come out of the shower and I said ... 'next time, when I speak to you nicely*

9. See Liebling, A., Armstrong, R., Bramwell, R., and Williams, R. 'Locating and building trust in high security prisons', summary to the ESRC (available from authors).

*and ask you politely, don't think you can talk to me like I'm a prick, because I'm not a prick'. And I did go back afterwards and apologise to her, but it worked. Because it got my frustrations out. I went back and I said 'listen miss. I did go a bit ballistic at you but I just wanted to know that you did really offend me. I talked to you with nothing but courtesy. And talking to me like that, especially when there's another inmate in earshot round you, I'm not having that. I'm not having you treating me like a cunt. Because I'm not a cunt and you can't treat me that way'.*

The language here is significant, not only because it is so emotional, but also because of the prisoner's defensive assertions that he is a person of worth. Robert Johnson argues that reactions of this kind are typical of 'men reared on rejection and abuse in orphanages, detention centres, training schools and youth prisons'.<sup>10</sup> They are brittle, easily provoked into violence because of deeply embedded anxieties about their personal worth and masculine status. As Johnson notes, they 'know in their guts what it means to be locked up — to be 'helpless and vulnerable' (p86), and in prison they find themselves in the same state of dependency, impotence and shame that they have sought to keep at bay throughout their lives. Being spoken to disrespectfully or made to feel powerless therefore has a disproportionate impact on these men, awakening their feelings of inadequacy and igniting their feelings of impotent rage against a world that they feel has rejected them.

### Conclusion

Our research on public and private sector prisons tells us as much about penal power generally as it does about the specific practices or advantages and disadvantages of state and non-state provision. For

current purposes, its most significant revelations relate to the dangers of a low-cost, low-staff model of prison management, in which 'absence' becomes a common feature of public as well as private sector prisoners. When combined with the characteristic 'weight' of public sector imprisonment, the risk is that we find more prisons that we would locate in the 'heavy-absent' quadrant of our diagram. In such establishments, staff are standoffish or overbearing. In either case they are relationally withdrawn: their model of order is not based on the formation of deep relationships with prisoners. In at least one prison that has been subjected to cuts in staffing, as a result of the departure of experienced officers, reduced morale, and a more defensive attitude among prisons staff, we have seen this combination of characteristics: the retreat of uniformed staff to wing offices; more distant and less trusting relationships between prisoners and prison officers; and the delegation of power by staff to certain prisoners. Such developments create a fertile environment for violence.

The holy grail of prison management is the bottom right quadrant in our diagram. In such prisons, power is distinctly present, but feels neither intrusive nor oppressive. It functions through what we would call 'dynamic authority', whereby staff wield their discretion carefully, based on knowing the needs, moods and motivators of their prisoners. Staff-prisoner relationships are close and enmeshed, without being collusive.<sup>11</sup> Boundaries and expectations are clear. Prisoners are given high levels of autonomy, but they are held responsible by their peers and by prison staff for their behaviour. Such cultures are found in very few prisons, but are most likely to exist in small, well-staffed units, with a clear sense of purpose or community, such as PIPE units, therapeutic communities, and small drug detoxification units. There are lessons to be drawn from these establishments for all prisons seeking to develop the kinds of cultures and staff behaviours that minimise violence.

10. Irwin, J. (1970) *The Felon*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

11. Liebling, A. (2011) 'Distinctions and distinctiveness in the work of prison officers: Legitimacy and authority revisited'. *European Journal of Criminology*, 2011, 8: 484-499.