How the covid lockdown became the 'new normal'

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When the 2022 Perrie Lectures were postponed, I was slightly worried that my planned topic was going to be badly out of date by the time the Lectures were rescheduled in 2023. After all, I had been invited to speak about the research that I had been involved in over the past two years with Mark Johnson and the User Voice organisation looking at life inside prisons during the Covid-19 crisis. Yet, by 2022, the world was finally moving on from that bizarre period, and I feared that by 2023, few would be interested in even hearing the word Covid anymore.

Indeed, looking back, so much of the Covid crisis of 2020-2022 already feels like some bizarre, half-forgotten, bad dream. Did we really make arrows out of tape on the floor of supermarkets directing the flow of foot traffic? Were there really restrictions on how many people we could invite into our home or how long we could leave our houses? Did we really block off middle sinks in public restrooms so people would not stand side by side as they washed their hands? On the other hand, some of the things that seemed completely strange during the Covid crisis — like holding business meetings online with faces in little squares on a screen — have now become taken for granted as the 'new normal' of the post-Covid world. Some of the weird adaptations we adopted proved to be more efficient and economical than the 'old ways' and have arguably made our lives better.

Unfortunately, this has not been the case with British prisons post-Covid. When my colleagues at Queen's University Belfast and the User Voice charity first proposed to research life in prison during the Covid crisis, we assumed that what we would be studying was an unprecedented adaptation to incredibly exceptional circumstances. We pitched the research to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) as a once-in-a-lifetime natural experiment.[1] What would happen if virtually every person in the prison system was locked in their cell for 22 or 23 hours per day in isolation from their fellow prisoners and deprived of meaningful work, education, or rehabilitative interventions of any sort?

It was a grim question, and the answer was even more harrowing than we had expected,[2] but we presumed that whatever the results, this experiment would be a temporary one, a reaction to unimaginable circumstances. As soon as it was safe to do so, the lockdown would be ended with our research report existing as the only formal record of what really happened to that deeply unfortunate cohort of prisoners.

Alas, it is with no pleasure at all that we are routinely told that our research from this seemingly unique time in British penal history is 'still as relevant as ever' inside British prisons. That is, although the Covid crisis may be largely over in wider society (with the cessation of almost all the public health restrictions), the so-called 'Covid lockdown' remains in place across far too many prisons in 2023. In his annual report for 2022-23, HM Chief Inspector for Prisons for England and Wales writes:

> *Despite final COVID-19 restrictions being lifted in May 2022, we found far too many prisons continuing to operate greatly reduced regimes in the last year. This meant that prisoners remained locked in their cells for long periods of time without the purposeful activity that would support a successful reintegration back into society at the end of their sentences (p. 5).[3]*

1. Funding for the research described in this article was provided by the Economic and Social Research Council, project reference: ES/V01708X/1
2. User Voice & Queen's University Belfast (2022). Coping with Covid in Prison. London: User Voice. https://www.uservoice.org/consultations/coping-with-covid/
3. HMIP (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons). (2023). HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2022-23. London. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/07/15.91_HMIP_HMI-Prisons_ARA-2022-23_Web-Accessible.pdf

The Inspectorate's report found that, in 2022-23, around 60 per cent of surveyed prisoners were locked down for at least 22 hours per day on the weekends and 42 per cent on weekdays (compared to 28 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively, in 2019-20).

In short, the 'Covid Lockdown', although originally motivated by the need to save lives during an extreme crisis, has somehow become 'the new normal' for a large minority of the prison system. Call it the post-Covid crisis, perhaps, but it is just as real.

Learning the lessons of the covid lockdown

No one needs reminding about the severity of the threat that Covid caused to human life. Associated with almost 7 million deaths since 2020, Covid-19 triggered an extraordinary break with ordinary social life in the name of preserving public health and saving lives between 2020 and 2022. Universities shut their campuses, funerals were moved online, elderly relatives languished alone without visits from grandchildren for fear that one might spread a deadly virus. For a variety of structural reasons, prisons are particularly risky environments for contagion of this sort and became the epicentre for the spread of the virus internationally.[4] Indeed, in April 2020, epidemiological modelling conducted by HMPPS and Public Health England (PHE) suggested that between 800 and 2,000 prisoners in England and Wales might die as a result of the virus.[5] In response to this massive threat to health and safety, many countries around the world implemented widespread prisoner release plans (both early releases and temporary releases of those serving longer sentences).

In England and Wales, a large-scale release plan was floated, but rejected. Instead, the primary mechanism for saving lives became the implementation of a system wide 'lockdown' inside prisons whereby most of the 80,000 serving prisoners were kept in their cells away from other prisoners for 22 or 23 hours per day. According to Rule 44 of the United Nations revised Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment Incarcerated People, known as the 'Mandela Rules', this sort of isolation without meaningful human contact qualifies as 'solitary confinement'. If this confinement exceeds 15 consecutive days, it is considered by the Mandela Rules to be 'cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment'.

This extraordinary measure implemented at the start of the Covid crisis, however, was intended to save lives, and it almost certainly did. By the time the Covid lockdown was officially deemed to be concluded, fewer than 200 residents in HMPPS prisons had died after testing positive for Covid-19 — far fewer than was forecasted by public health experts. What was not known is what the costs of the lockdown had been and will be going forward for those who lived through it. A large body of research evidence suggests that solitary confinement can lead to severe mental health and behavioural problems.[6] What would be the result of confining an entire prison population in this way — even in the name of preserving lives? This was the pitch we made to the ESRC and HMPPS with the User Voice organisation in 2020: someone needed to collect systematic data about what was going on during this unprecedented moment inside British prisons.

Like almost every other social interaction inside prisons during this dangerous time, prison research had come to an almost complete standstill during the lockdown. Prisons could hardly become a protected bubble from the dangers of Covid if researchers and other outsiders (teachers, employers, trainers) were revolving in and out of the facilities each day spreading the virus to the captive population. The only way the virus could get into prisons, after all, was from those living on the outside. Luckily, we had a different idea for how to collect the much-needed data: we wanted to train people in prison in research methodologies and help them to conduct this research on their own. After all, who better to tell the story of the lockdown, we

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4. Maruna, S., McNaull, G., & O'Neill, N. (2022). The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of the Prison. Crime and Justice, 51(1), 59-103.
5. HMIP (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons). (2021). What Happens to Prisoners in a Pandemic? London. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/What-happens-to-prisoners-in-a-pandemic.pdf.
6. See e.g., Haney, C. (2018). The psychological effects of solitary confinement: A systematic critique. Crime and Justice, 47, 365– 416; Shalev, S. (2011). Solitary confinement and supermax prisons: A human rights and ethical analysis. Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice, 11(2–3), 151–183.

argued, than those experiencing this isolation day to day.

In the end, User Voice and Queen's University Belfast trained a team of 99 peer researchers across 11 prisons in research ethics and data collection methodologies, and strategized with them about how best to survey their wings and landings in a manner that was systematic but also safe. This remarkable group of imprisoned leaders far exceeded any of our expectations of what could be done, returning a sample of 1600 completed surveys and interviews (with response rates surpassing the expected norms), providing a goldmine data about the experiences of those at the frontlines of the Covid lockdown.

Outside of this data collection triumph, there was of course little to celebrate in this study. The actual findings were brutally bleak with, at best, a few bright spots of hope (the installation of in-cell telephones was definitely a lifeline for many). At the same time, the results were hardly surprising. Basically, it turns out that locking tens of thousands of human beings up in solitary conditions for months on end, with no visits, no education, no work, no basic socialising with peers can be rather damaging to their mental health.

Indeed, two thirds of the survey sample agreed or strongly agreed that mental well-being had 'never been worse' in their prison, and two thirds agreed or 'strongly agreed' that 'many people in this prison are becoming desperate and losing hope'. These insider judgements were verified by two standardised measures for screening for mental health: the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and the Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) that are routinely used inside and outside of prisons in the UK and beyond. Using this validated measure, almost half (49 per cent) of the sample scored in the 'severe' depression range (15+) on the PHQ scale — nearly doubling the rate of severe depression found in a recent study that used the same measures in prisons before the Covid lockdown. Likewise, half the sample reported symptoms of an anxiety disorder (like post-traumatic stress) with 34.9 per cent scoring in the 'severe anxiety' category —

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In short, the Covid lockdown helped to save lives during a hugely dangerous time, but it did so at a considerable cost to the health and well-being of the people in the care of the prisons. We argued that the mental health data from the project represented a 'ticking time bomb' putting prisoners, prison staff, and the general public at heightened risk.

Lockdown as the 'new normal'

A key focus of the research was around the process of recovery and the idea of 'building back better' after the Covid crisis passed. The prisoners we worked with, however, were far more dubious that there would ever be an end to what they were experiencing or indeed that the lockdown they were facing even had anything to do with Covid. One told us:

It is a high security prison, but we only ever see it going downhill. And Covid is just one of things which is almost you might say, giving them an excuse to send it even more downhill. And that's the direction it has been going in over the restrictions. We can't see a way for it going back up hill again, because we are not being given any positives in relation to workshops, education, we know they are there but the access to them is unfair, so it is not something you can get into a positive mind set about.

In the early days of the Covid lockdown in spring 2020, interviewees said they understood that the entire world was 'all going through this together' and they welcomed the protection from the virus. However, as the world moved on, prisons seemed to stand still. One respondent told us:

When we first went into lockdown, there was in a strange sort of way, more clarity, because outside everyone was in lockdown. You saw

7. Butcher, E., Packham, C., Williams, M., Miksza, J., Kaul, A., Khunti, K., & Morriss, R. (2021). Screening male prisoners for depression and anxiety with the PHQ-9 and GAD-7 at NHS Healthcheck: patterns of symptoms and caseness threshold. BMC psychiatry, 21(1), 1–11.

on TV that people were being furloughed, and not allowed to football matches, and all that was being stopped. Then there was a period of time when we were being locked up for long periods, only being allowed out in small cohorts, but we got used to that. That became a routine regime. We're not saying we liked it. … But then there came a period of time which is more recently, where it lifted for a while, and you could see outside things were being lifted — on TV, papers, radio — you could see now people are now going to football, going to chapel, doing things that are important to them. But then we are seeing the confusion almost, or how best to move out of the regime we've been in, and it seems harder now in my opinion.

Research participants generally felt that, by summer of 2021 when we were conducting our interviews, the Covid crisis was being used as an 'excuse' and that the real motivation for the lockdown was more about staff shortages or else trying to get control over the levels of violence that characterised so many British prisons prior to the Covid crisis.

A lot of the cracks in the prison are being plastered over with Covid. Before Covid started there was big problems and this is the way they hide it. They can mask all the problems around this now.

Covid is used as the excuse for everything. Once this Covid kicked in, I've never seen anything like it, no-one has ever seen anything like it in the world. I've been in jail since I was 14. The impact that Covid has had on the system is crazy. I would go so far as to say, worse than the spice epidemic in prison. Covid has had the worst effects.

They are using Covid as an excuse. It's not the disease anymore. Things have settled down with the disease, but they are still using it as an excuse to do what they wanted to do anyway.

Participants also felt that little would change because they thought the restrictive regime 'suited' staff better:

Staff want to keep it like this. … It's an easy life now with lockdown. Unlock is getting shorter and shorter. … No one can claim to be listening to the science at this point.

It's like Covid has been a trial to see how regimes can be used in prisons and they have obviously noticed that it works better by having more lockdowns, it makes their job easier.

Now Covid has allowed them to lock our doors, that's, that's another level of control.

In particular, participants felt that younger, more inexperienced staff without any experience of the old 'normal' prison regimes lacked the skills to be able to manage a traditional prison regime:

Through Covid, a lot of staff have left, new staff have come and now they feel like they're vulnerable, cuz they aint got a clue, and so they feel like they can't contain us. They're struggling to give jobs and do things like that and that's just day to day things in the prison.

This place is a ticking time bomb because the majority of prison officers have never experienced anything outside of Covid. Situations like that there, on the top corridor, happened six or seven times a day, and they won't have a clue how to deal with them.

Our research participants were also acutely aware of rhetoric from politicians and prison leadership that there had been a 'silver lining' to the lockdown, which was that prisons were now much calmer, with reductions in the record-levels of violence experienced just before the lockdown. Interviewees worried that this outward appearance of violence reduction was being used to justify the restricted regime they continued to experience:

That's what we're worried about. There's nothing we can do about Covid but what we

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are worried about is that [the lockdown] becomes the new norm...we are hearing reports that violence is down.

It's time to get control back in the jails but now they're thinking this is easy, violence is down, drug use is down, the small group that are doing that sort of stuff are people who are locked down.

It just seems to be that they've got control back of the jail and their happy with that and f**k the impact it's had on people.

The myth of violence reduction

The irony of this argument for violence reduction is that the people living in prisons did not feel any safer despite the lockdown. When asked to rate how the lockdown has impacted their feelings of personal safety and security, around 1 in 6 of the people in our survey said they felt safer in the lockdown. Yet, 28 per cent of survey respondents responded that the lockdown had made their safety concerns 'worse' (12 per cent) or 'much worse' (16 per cent). The most common response (given by 606 respondents) was that there had been 'no change' in terms of violence levels as a result of the lockdown.

We also asked survey respondents whether they thought that 'Most people in prison welcomed the lockdown because it has reduced violence and bullying'. Over half of survey respondents (56 per cent) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this and only around 22 per cent agreed. Clearly, a minority of respondents do feel that the lockdown has led to improvement in personal safety, primarily because the lack of movement or human interaction meant fewer opportunities for conflict. The vast majority, however, argued that official measures of violence were not capturing what they were seeing in the prisons:

They took violence away? They haven't took violence away…They say there's no bullying? Ha, I think it [the lockdown] has made it worse…what they've created is more toxic than what it was before.

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Participants reported that violence was manifesting in different ways, with prisoner-on-prisoner bullying occurring between cell-mates, or else becoming self-directed for those isolated alone.

A majority of the singles [single cells] they just bolted a bed on top [to create a double cell]. Yeah, and then they go 'Why's the violence risen?' Cos you got two men living on top of each other for 24 hours a day. They don't have a clue whether they're coming or going. You're feeding them pop and crisps, and then giving them a sausage roll for their dinner.

Interviewees reported that many of their fellow prisoners were directing their violence towards the only thing they had any control over — their cells:

We had one prisoner who smashed up his pad, he wasn't happy, because the phone wasn't working, so he smashed his pad up.

There is one fella who is probably £70,000 in debt from breaking cells.

Interviewees warned that this build-up of negative relationships between prisoners and staff could also lead to increased risk of violence being directed towards staff:

Well by the time you figure that out, 7 of your officers are off because they've got punched in the face because people are fed up, people in pain so they can't come to work — it's mad — this whole place is like a circus.

Likewise, participants commented on the impact that being locked down in prison might have on people on release:

Can you imagine the pent-up energy of being locked up in a cell for 6 months and then getting let out and going yeah, I don't give a s**t if I go and burn a house down.

Finally, numerous research participants suggested that there was high potential for rioting or large scale disruption inside the prisons if the lockdown continued:

This idea that violence has reduced because of the lockdown is nonsense. I mean, at first people accepted it [lockdown] because there was a sense that the country as a whole was all in it together. We were 'clapping for carers' just like everyone else. But the longer they keep people segregated, the risk of violence goes up tenfold. You get to the point where a riot is going to happen. They are making themselves a deep hole.

When things are getting properly back to normal outside, and it's getting worse in here and it stays like that, there's going to a lot of things that go wrong, a lot of rioting and that. They can only contain it for so long.

They'll end up pushing it back to the 90's where we had riots — don't look backwards, look forward.

Importantly, research participants attributed this possibility for aggression directly to the frustrations of the endless lockdown. They described how lockdown conditions 'made me feel like a zombie or an animal or not human. You get angry'. Others echoed this theme:

There is more angst and more anger about certain situations. A lot of people fighting, it may be about certain situations, but it is more about being locked up for so long and then the staff members talk to you and you snap at that staff member and things escalate, don't they?

That's why prisoners get angry with staff, they get angry about being locked up. And they say, oh prisoners get aggressive with staff — that's because they are being locked up for so long.

In this sense, participants felt that, rather than reducing violence, the continuing lockdowns and prolonged periods behind the door, were shoring up of risk of violence for when landings opened up again:

Lack of education, of exercise — hundreds of men full of testosterone willing to prove themselves — it's going to go through the roof. The outcome is going to be, when you do open the prison, we've got people we don't know with other issues from outside and different blocks and wings and it's just going to be madness. Violence is going to happen.

In short, the continuing restricted environment made men feel they had nothing to lose:

You can only supress people for so long before you get a reaction and with mental health deteriorating the way it is, you act more reckless, and you think f**k.

What do you think locking people up for hours and hours is going to do to people when they are let out? They have a lot of angst in them, it's no good for anybody full stop being locked up for that amount of time. Locking people up its only going to anger people more — it's a vicious circle. Lock-ups and then there's fighting, lockups and then there's fighting; it's non-stop.

What hope for making good?

Hopefully, not all of these predictions will come to fruition. Interviewees would likely be the first to admit that the bleak vantage point of 2021 was probably not the best place to make rational risk calculations about the future of the prisons. The anger and frustration that all prisoners were experiencing during this time surely seeped its way into our research findings, driving some of the bleaker assessments.

I will say, however, that the research participants turned out to be exactly right about the lockdown continuing long after Covid was under control. They also appear to have been right about predictions of rising self-harm and violence across the prisons. As we learned when doing our research, people in prison have a unique vantage point that often those of us on the outside cannot see. In other words, if the Government wants to ignore our 'Coping with Covid' research findings, that is fine. Yet, ignoring the warnings of people inside — especially at such a difficult time in the history of the prison service — strikes me as exceedingly risky.