

# The Good Prison Officer and Rehabilitation: An Inside Perspective

*Andi Brierley is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Investigation and Policing at Leeds Trinity University. Max Dennehy works at Reconnect (care after custody) and is a PhD candidate at Strathclyde University.*

**This article is a transcript of a presentation given at The Perrie Lectures in 2024. The Perrie Lectures is an annual event which has the purpose of stimulating dialogue between criminal justice organisations, the voluntary sector, and all those with an academic, legal, or practical interest in people in prison and their families. The theme of the 2024 event was 'Recruiting, training, and developing great prison officers'.**

We are happy to be here and thankful for having such a great opportunity, especially as two people who come from the predisposition of prisoners who have served several sentences, didn't complete school, and fought through addiction and recovery. If someone would have come to our doors whilst in any of those prison sentences we served and said, 'you will deliver a Perrie Lecture;' we're pretty sure we would have said, 'we don't think so.' We may have framed this with different terminology whilst in prison, but we have learnt to leave that lingo in the prison cell. Or at least get it out of the way in the car on the way to conferences!

Today, we intend to problematise the application of the word 'rehabilitation' to the role of the prison officer. This talk will cover insights from our personal experiences of incarceration and criminal justice practice combined with contributions and our reflections from the book we recently edited titled 'The Good Prison Officer: Inside Perspectives.'<sup>1</sup> Through this process, we intend to demonstrate how the term 'rehabilitation' is a functional concept that has a direct impact on the experience of both prisoners and prison officers, a finding that emerged from the production and publication of our book. We will posit that the work of the prison officer requires humanity, connection, empathy, understanding, and a balance between the use of force and security and the engagement of trust in a complex and intense carceral environment, which is no mean feat.

Michael Howard declared in 1993 at the Conservative Party Conference: 'Prison works. It

ensures that we are protected from murderers, muggers, and rapists — and it makes many who are tempted to commit crime think twice...'<sup>2</sup> 30 years on and the prison system, in the eyes of stakeholders — from prisoners, prison officers, and politicians alike — is in dire straits. Since that speech, the imprisonment rate in England and Wales has risen by 93 per cent, making it the highest imprisonment rate per capita in Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> We are sending more and more people to prison, and for longer and longer. Subsequently, the prison estate is severely overcrowded. Furthermore, the general condition and safety of the prison system have rapidly deteriorated within the last decade. Prison, in its current form, is broken and harmful, yet the term 'rehabilitation' is used more now than when either of us was in prison, spanning over two decades.

By the time we have finished this short talk, in addition to outlining both the thinking and contents of 'The Good Prison Officer' book, we will offer the provocation that the concept of rehabilitation — as an actionable process and intervention that can be done to people — not the idea that prisoners can go on to build successful and functional lives away from offending post-prison — can, through an uncritical and diluted application, not only obscure and sanitise the harsh reality of prison life, but can also, through constructing the prison as a place of treatment and positive intervention, serve to inadvertently legitimise and amplify the position of those such as Michael Howard who claim that Prison Works. We claim that overstating the efficacy of rehabilitation in the prison estate — and the ability of prison officers to be able to carry out such a task — not only negatively impacts the lives of prisoners but, just as significantly, has a detrimental effect on the morale of prison staff and the retention of prison officers.

## The Good Prison Officer: Inside Perspective

The 'Good Prison Officer: Inside Perspectives' was edited, written, and produced by seven ex-prisoners

1. Brierley, A. (2023). *The Good Prison Officer*. Routledge.
2. Howard, M. DOES PRISON WORK? Available online at Prison\_Works.doc (live.com) Accessed on 27/6/24
3. Fleck, A (2023). The Western European Nations Imprisoning the Most People. Statista. : Available online at Chart: The Western European Nations Imprisoning the Most People | Statista

who are now in roles within criminal justice practice, addiction and recovery services, or academia. Routledge — a leading academic publisher — published the book; this makes our team enormously proud because, at the time of writing and publication, none of the authors had a doctoral degree. In response, as a collective, we had to work extra hard to capitalise on our shared knowledge and skills to produce a piece of work that met the rigorous and high standards required for academic publishing.

### Background, Aim and Impact

Routed in the editor's extensive participatory approach to youth justice practice, and in the lived experience of incarceration, the overarching philosophy that underpins the book is in the recognition that it is a necessity for those who are closest to a problem to be a fundamental and essential part of the solution. This philosophy has transitioned across contexts from youth justice practice to teaching on the Unlocked Graduates Scheme for Leeds Trinity University. It was in becoming more familiar with the available literature on prison officer practice that a gap was identified; there was a distinct lack of prisoners and ex-prisoners making a direct contribution to the literature on what constitutes both 'good' and 'bad' prison officer practice from an inside perspective. Therefore, we took on the challenge to explore whether a group of early-career academics and practitioners with prison experience would produce such a contribution.

This led to the difficult task of finding the voices of those who occupy the dual role of possessing both a lived experience of prison *and* 'professional' experience too. The decision to pursue this task was made to ensure that the work would contain an understanding of professional expertise and an appreciation of the challenges of working in and around the criminal justice system. In a bid to represent the voice of the general prison population, a further decision was made to seek out the often most socially excluded voices. So, an additional criterion was made that the contributors would have experienced intersectional and multiple disadvantages, such as: 1) school exclusion, 2) addiction and recovery, 3) placement in the care of a local authority, 4) experience of several sentences (the revolving door of custody), and 5) youth incarceration.

Once the team was selected, we held informal monthly meetings and set up a lively WhatsApp group. We embarked on a journey together as a 'redemption community' with a shared vision that, through influencing prison officer practice, we may improve the prison system for prisoners. However, during this process, we found that the book's focus also began to include how prison officers are often not cared for or adequately supported. It is a view shared by the contributors of this book that strong social relations are an essential feature of desistance. With this in mind, we began to explore and question the implications of this lack of workforce support and underappreciated professional value within the sector and by the wider public. Our view is that prison officers not receiving adequate support hinders them from being best equipped to provide those necessary social relations for prisoners in custody.

It is essential to explain the impact of our work on the lives of prisoners, prison officers, and the prison sector in the UK, both in the North and in the South. The first book launch took place at Westminster University, with the second at HMP Edinburgh; this included attendance of men and women serving prison sentences, prison governors, leading criminology scholars,

third sector organisations, and the Cabinet Secretary of Justice and Home Affairs, Angela Constance. Consequently, we were all invited to the Scottish Parliament to participate in a discussion with politicians about how Scotland can improve their prison system through the lens of improving prison officer practice. Several authors have also visited prisons to speak to current prisoners and delivered workshops and training to officers about the book's content and recommendations. As a result of this work, we are immensely proud that all new prison officer recruits in Scotland — estimated to be about 700 per year — will receive electronic versions of our book whilst completing their initial training.

For us, the most significant impact was having Michael O'Leary write a review of the book.<sup>4</sup> Amid all the doom and gloom that hovers over the prison sector, Michael — a serving prisoner — reviewed an academic book about prison officers' practice written by seven ex-prisoners in professional roles, and it was published in the *Probation Journal* — you couldn't make it up! Talk about a redemptive 360°. It is critical to hold on to

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4. O'Leary, M. (2024). Book review: The Good Prison Officer – Inside Perspectives. *Probation Journal*, 71(1), 108-110.

those informal and unstructured positive news stories because although, as previously outlined, the Prison Service has its challenges, there certainly are pockets of hope and humanity we can reach for.

### The Jarring Question

For some former or serving prisoners, the book's title — 'The Good Prison Officer' — may prove particularly jarring. They would not be alone. When Andi first approached Max to contribute to the book, this was something he had to wrestle with. Initially, framing a book about prison life and prison experience in terms of good prison officers is something that took Max aback. However, as Maruna eloquently outlines in the book's foreword, 'who better to describe prison officer practice than those who have been on the receiving end of it.' Furthermore, Max reflected that, even as a serving prisoner, he had always understood that, although in a position of potentially unwelcomed power, prison officers were just people, like everyone else, trying to do a job. Furthermore, the characterisation of the 'us and them' relationship between prisoners and prison staff did not, in fact, ring true as much as, for example, the relationship with the police.

In addition to this, as a team, we understood that the role of a prison officer is extremely complex and multifaceted. Not many other jobs require the adoption of just so many — and often conflicting — 'hats'. Prison officers are not only required to deliver the prison regime but also to act as security and surveillance on the landings, to protect themselves, their fellow officers, and the prisoners in their care, but also to behave in pastoral roles akin to a social worker, mental health practitioner, conflict resolution facilitator, and caregiver — sometimes these roles can be enacted simultaneously.

Moreover, it rings true to the book's authors that, across the entire sector of the statutory criminal justice system, it is likely prison officers who have the closest relationships — and the closest thing to an *authentic* relationship — to those who have been sentenced to prison. However, prison officers are often absent from the discourse around prisons and prison reform and the attention of scholarly work. It is both for the complexity of the prison officer's role and the unique proximity to prisoners — and therefore the potential for both good and bad practices to impact the conditions of those

inside the prison — that we believe that the good prison officer is deserving of our attention and amplification.

### Flexibility: Negotiation and Discretion

When tasked with thinking about what it was that may constitute a 'good prison officer', we were drawn to the notion that, for us, a good prison officer was one who could, to the best degree probable, allow us to navigate the prison environment as well as possible. The prison environment — on either side of the equation — as we are sure that everyone who has either lived or worked in prison can attest to, can be one of hypervigilance and intensity. The chronic undercurrent of violence, underpinned by a relentless landscape of scrutiny and surveillance (from both prisoners and prison officers), can result in high levels of toxic stress and, by any measure, is unhealthy and unhelpful. To navigate such a landscape successfully requires a level of performance.

Hypervigilance (or an increased level of awareness) may manifest in a sense of being 'tuned in' to the wing. For example, being able to 'feel' in the air that something is about to 'kick off'; picking up on small patterns of behaviour, movements, or sounds that

indicate a shift in the tone of the wing — and the subsequent implications of this, i.e., violence. Another example may be in the everyday interactions of prisoners; 'where are you from, what are you in for.' Although this interaction may be seemingly banal and uninteresting in the eyes of an observer, it is steeped in hypervigilance, scrutiny, and performance. The back and forth that follows is underwritten by each prisoner attempting to assess each other: 'Who do you know, what jails have you been in etc.' — this is a real-time process of analysis and scrutinisation to look for discrepancies, contradictions, and any other information that may communicate either legitimacy or illegitimacy of a prisoner's status, and whether a prisoner may be either vulnerable, a threat (in a multitude of different manners), or dangerous.

The sociologist Erving Goffman describes life as a 'dramaturgy' — that is, life is a performance similar to a stage show.<sup>5</sup> In this dramaturgy, Goffman describes how people — actors — move through life by adopting either front- or back-stage roles. A clear example of this is the instance of a waiter in a particularly high-end

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5. Goffman, E. (2023). The presentation of self in everyday life. In W. Longhofer, W. & D. Winchester (Eds.), *Social theory Re-Wired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (pp. 450-459). Routledge.

restaurant. In the 'frontstage', the waiter may move around the restaurant elegantly and speak in soft and hushed tones. However, as the waiter moves into the kitchen — or the 'backstage' — he may drop his frontstage performance and begin to shout and bark orders at the kitchen staff. It is in the backstage that the messy business of maintaining the frontstage performance can be carried out. The prison is no different in this sense.

For some, the cell may serve as a backstage space, somewhere where the stressors of the prison regime may be momentarily paused and offer a brief respite from the hypervigilance and performance of front-facing prison life. However, we believe that pockets of space resembling the cell — in terms of momentary respite — can be carved out from the front-facing prison regime on the landings; this often requires prison officers to enact degrees of flexibility and discretion. Often, the pockets of space and time carved out of the regime may be unsanctioned and not necessarily within the strict guidelines of prison officer training. However, it is grounded in the intuitive and attuned understanding of the officers who undertake dynamic assessments to become relational in the moment, and to make discretionary decisions that harness authenticity and trust whilst still maintaining power and authority.

Just one example of this may be, when the cells are unlocked in the morning for movements, it may be pretty standard for a prisoner — who is not in work or education — to dart out of the pad and try to hide (or 'blend in') until the time when the doors were locked again, then hoping to remain out of the cell for the morning while the cleaners may be doing their work. Max describes in his chapter that the officers on the wing may give him a look or a nudge that let him know they knew what was going on — but had chosen to be flexible to maintain order in the wing through a relational approach. We reflect that, in doing this ourselves, it is often in these kinds of moments — as backstage spaces — in which the intense glare of prison life seems less bright, that allows for pockets of space for interaction between prisoners or prison staff that are the most authentic and grounded in humanity.

Practising flexibility and discretion are finely tuned skills; there is an art to knowing when to bend and when to stay firm. An overuse of discretion may render an officer a weak and easy target. An overenforcement of the rules may destroy the officer's legitimacy as a credible actor. Finding the 'sweet spot' may take some

practice. Discretion may not be a new concept to some prison officers. For those who have been in the Service for a considerable amount of time, they may enact discretion and flexibility as second nature. In a similar way to as previously described in the context of prisoners, for officers too, spending considerable amounts of time in the prison environment can result in being attuned to the rhythms, the emotions, and the subtleties of prison life and the ability to navigate and influence the terrain successfully — this is often referred to as 'jail craft'; for discretion, jail craft is critical.

It is no secret that the Prison Service faces considerable challenges around the recruitment and, perhaps more worryingly, the retention of prison staff. We have heard accounts of officers on the landings having only been in the job for just over 12 months,

often being the most experienced officers on the wings. Aside from the obvious challenges this poses to the functionality of the prison, this highlights to us the very real issue of experience being lost from the Prison Service in increasing numbers, and the unwritten and uncoded skills and knowledge that come from possessing a level of 'jail craft' being potentially lost too. The ability to walk the fine line of discretion whilst maintaining legitimacy may be

something that is witnessed and cascades down from officer to officer. With increasing levels of junior officers juxtaposed against a continuously decreasing level of experienced staff, it is essential that skills and tools such as flexibility and discretion — and other aspects of jail craft — are captured within the literature in order to preserve the qualities that contribute to becoming a 'good prison officer.'

### **Presence, Attunement, Connection and Trust (PACT)**

As a person with lived experience of several community disposals, four prison sentences and consequently four episodes of licence conditions on probation, Andi strategically used these service recipient experiences in relationship building — formulating a practice model for working with people involved in prolific offending or on the margins of society. Having a subsequent extensive career in youth justice for 15 years, qualifying in 2013, with the additional experience of working in Secure Children's Homes and currently in a Young Offender Institution — with the highest rates of violence in the prison service

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— Andi amalgamated his myriad of experiences to construct a relational way of connecting with those he worked with, shaping authentic relationships within criminal and carceral social fields to establish a set of key practice principles which increase the likelihood of developing trusting relationships within criminal justice practice. These principles also complement and set foundations for both trauma-informed practice and desistance ideals.

The PACT principles shaped Andi's professional response to those he worked with over his career, just in the same way he built reciprocal relationships prior to his career within criminal and carceral spaces. Those justice practitioners with backgrounds like his may need to develop an understanding of safeguarding, risk management, and multi-agency approaches, but most already know how to build organic relationships with a profile of people with similar identities and experiences who have also endured living on the margins.

This axiomatic insight constructs an intuitive understanding that without a reciprocal relationship which is natural and organic with those involved in criminality — on the wings in prison or within formal community interventions — the intended aim of changes in behaviour or improved social and health outcomes is illusory. The principals and component parts of the PACT model are developed from receiving 'good' and 'bad' practices from justice practitioners, and strategically integrating that lived understanding into practice, as well as the integration and observations of effective approaches from colleagues.<sup>6</sup>

Presence is the power of showing up in the moment to investigate what the person we are working with sees when they look at us as practitioners and what our service or institution 'feels' like for them. This is beyond reflective practice or our intentions; it is what the system we work for represents from their lived experience perspective. On prison wings, this could be considering how the prisoner experiences the uniform, the criminal justice system, professionals in general or authority due to their previous experiences that often include social exclusion, educational rejection, and social care involvement in childhood, or as parents.

Attunement is our response once we have reached out beyond reflective practice and gained an understanding of their perspective of our service, power, and society. We can then attune our relational position to meet them where they are. This holds true to the 'responsivity' principle of Risk Needs Responsivity, which requires us to be dynamic in our approach and to attune to the relational needs, cognitive capacity, learning style, motivation, and strengths of the person.<sup>7</sup> For prison officers, this is intuitively knowing how to operate in the carceral margins through jail craft. As Max outlines in his chapter of our book, it is when to use discretion, be flexible and negotiate with prisoners, maintain security, safety, and order, and construct backstage spaces, where the magic happens.

Connection is recognising the reciprocal nature of relationship building in all contexts. When we say, 'they are not engaging,' it places the emphasis on the individual receiving our service, placing little responsibility on the part of us as practitioners. Instead, we suggest we use 'we are not connecting' as this leans into a relational approach. When we consider those with lived experience of trauma, racism, social exclusion, addiction, and poverty who are disproportionately overrepresented in the criminal justice system, our approach as practitioners influences how they respond. Therefore, the principle

of connection allows a practitioner to recognise reciprocity and reduce blame and fault. On the wing, this reframing allows us to recognise our position of power and influence on prisoners. It can ensure that we consistently critique our approach, allowing space for reflective practice, professional flexibility, and innovation, which is certainly not easy in the prison terrain and requires practice.

Trust; if we as justice practitioners follow the first three key principles of the PACT model, we are more likely to obtain 'trusting' relationships from those we work with and reduce the power dynamics that often create barriers in a criminal justice context. Relational components that have been argued to embody trauma-informed practice in prisons: safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment.<sup>8</sup> We cannot obtain trust from every prisoner, but we can aspire to reach

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6. Brierley, A. (2021). *Connecting with young people in trouble: Risk, relationships and lived experience*. Waterside Press.

7. Bonta, J., & Andrews, D. A. (2007). Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation. *Rehabilitation*, 6(1), 1-22.

8. Bradley, A. (2021). Viewing Her Majesty's Prison Service through a trauma-informed lens. *Prison Service Journal*, 255, 4-11.



that level as a relational ambition. This is when a prisoner may open up about a relationship breakdown, ask an officer to help with a personal issue, or show vulnerability within a backstage — reaching out to our humanity.

### **Relationships, Desistance and Rehabilitation?**

On reflection, after publishing our book, we found it particularly interesting that, unlike the proliferation of ‘rehabilitation’ within the contemporary discourse around prisons and prison officers, this was a theme that was absent from the collection of chapters in ‘The Good Prison Officer’. The term ‘rehabilitation’ is mentioned 81 times in the 2021 Prison Strategy White Paper;<sup>9</sup> it is woven and threaded through the document at almost every turn and policy decision — and its subsequent justifications. Additionally, the notion of prison officers as potential agents of rehabilitation is seemingly enshrined in the available literature from His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service and other schemes focused on prison officer recruitment. However, in our reflections from the book’s chapters on the qualities that construct a good prison officer, or in our accounts of our prison experience and desistance journeys, having practitioners who can deliver this ‘rehabilitation’ seems lacking. Providing his unique inside perspective on the tension between prison officers’ ability to deliver rehabilitation and the agentic nature of desistance was eloquently argued by Michael O’Reilly in his review of the book, when he states that ‘by being Good Prison Officers, they could help more people to rehabilitate themselves.’

It is our position that mandating prison officers with the role of rehabilitating prisoners has an adverse effect on the relational aspect of the work of the good prison officer. When rehabilitation — as an interventionist, measured, and outcome-based process — is introduced as a key function to the role of the prison officer, it transforms the prison officer/prisoner relationship into one that is both conditional and transactional. Furthermore — and somewhat ironically — often, when reflecting on which officers were most impactful or genuine — and therefore creating the potential for a space that may facilitate or support some aspects of the desistance process — it was precisely the lack of an agenda that made those interactions and officers most authentic.

Asking prison officers, in and amongst the midst of a complex, strained, and difficult job, to now take on

the responsibility to ‘rehabilitate’ prisoners and, by extension, prevent reoffending is a tall order. Even with our first-hand experiences of prison and subsequent desistance, addiction and recovery, of working in practice with prison leavers and those involved with the justice system, and with additional academic knowledge of such processes on top, we do not claim to possess the skills or ability to ‘rehabilitate’ those people we work alongside. We can, however — as good prison officers can too — facilitate, support, and create the conditions for desistance pathways that people can step into, if they so choose. Furthermore, this approach has never altered our unfaltering and axiomatic belief that people can, and do, go on to lead successful and non-offending lives.

With all this in mind, what is our proposition? If we want to recruit, train, and retain great prison officers, we must recognise what we are asking of them, the complexity of the role, their expectations, and priorities. We have argued within this talk that being relational, understanding discretion and building connections with prisoners as prison officers within the carceral context can be complex, intense, and demanding. Our position is that we can indeed educate prison officers to be relational and responsive, without applying the responsibility and pressure of having to rehabilitate prisoners. This level of expectations within the role of prison officers, which is multifaceted and stressful and even at times traumatic, can negatively impact retaining great prison officers. After all, prison officers are human and can only do what is within the power of their practice and constraints of prison itself.

There are two critical considerations when applying the term ‘rehabilitation’ to the prison officer role and expectations within the current prison context. The first is that prison officers can be trusting, caring, and responsive without having to approach their work through the transactional term of rehabilitation. Desistance can be harnessed collaboratively through interpersonal relationships, but we argue here that it is often a consequence of reciprocal relationships; it should not be a prerequisite. The second is that being a prison officer and delivering care, nurture, flexibility, discretion, being responsive, fair, firm, safe, and trusting is an incredible privilege and, equally, a bloody difficult and testing role. Desistance may be borne out of all the above, but let’s recruit and retain ‘Good Prison Officers’ by allowing them to measure their daily roles on their humanity, not their individual ability to reduce reoffending.

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9. Ministry of Justice (2021). Prisons Strategy White Paper. HM Government.