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**Special Edition:
Race in Prison (part 1)**

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The Editorial Board wishes to make clear that the views expressed by contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the Prison Service.

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Editorial

Race in Prison

Dr Hannah Bennett is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Staffordshire, specialising in the Prison Crime-Terror Nexus.

Race in prison is often the subject of quiet acknowledgement but little sustained attention—noticed, debated, and then shelved as too complex or too inconvenient. This special edition of the *Prison Service Journal*—the first of two volumes—takes a different approach. Here, contributors examine the realities of racial inequality across prison systems in England, Spain, and Italy, and from the perspectives of those most often overlooked. The aim is not to offer simple solutions but to illuminate uncomfortable truths, highlight resilience, and insist that race cannot remain an afterthought in discussions about imprisonment.

We begin with those too often treated as invisible: Black women in prison. In *Procedural injustice: unpacking systemic prison failures and the resilience of Black women in prison*, **Dr Angela Charles** explores how everyday procedures—Discrimination Incident Reporting Forms (DIRFs), Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), even Black History Month—can reproduce marginalisation rather than mitigate it. Angela shows how mistrust, cultural ignorance, and racialised double standards undermine legitimacy, yet she also uncovers resilience and solidarity among Black women who continue to assert agency within restrictive systems.

A similar theme runs through *Intersecting realities*, where **María del Mar Martín Aragón** at the University of Seville examines the compounded marginalisation of migrant women in Spanish prisons. Her analysis of ‘cimmigration’—the merging of criminal and immigration policies—reveals how foreign women are criminalised not for what they do but for who they are. Excluded from gender-sensitive programmes, relegated to invisible categories in official data, and isolated by language and cultural barriers, these women occupy a penal space designed without them in mind. Yet Change to: María also identifies spaces of support and advocacy that resist these exclusions, reminding us that structural silence is not the same as consent.

If Angela and Martín expose systemic failures, **Sev Bikim MBE** offers a glimpse of what meaningful change can look like. In *Building trust through action: Race, reform and the DIRF system*, Sev—Diversity and

Inclusion Lead for the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk prison group—discusses how to move beyond policy statements to practices that build credibility. Her work on prisoner-led DIRF scrutiny panels, reverse mentoring between staff and prisoners, and the Equality Advocates programme highlights the importance of trust through accountability. Sev’s message is refreshingly direct: equality is not an add-on, but a way of working that must be lived daily if it is to make any difference.

Trust—or rather, its absence—is also central to *Navigating the system: The experiences of young Black men in prison* by **Finley MacDonald**, **Dr Cody N Porter**, and **Dr Paul Gavin** from the University of the West of England. They trace how accumulated disadvantage funnels young Black men into prison, where the cycle of exclusion is further entrenched. From school exclusions to over-policing, inadequate mental health provision to the stark lack of prison staff diversity, their analysis shows a system that continues to treat young Black men as both over-scrutinised and under-protected. The authors argue that initiatives like the Police Race Action Plan cannot succeed without confronting root causes. Representation, culturally competent services, and genuine accountability are not optional extras but essential conditions of legitimacy.

In *Equality, diversity and inclusion champions*, **Manisha Guru** brings the perspective of a practitioner tasked with embedding inclusion in the everyday. Drawing on her experience as an Assistant Psychologist and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Champion, Manisha reflects on the promise and pressures of this role. She highlights the importance of practical steps—using interpreters, ensuring culturally sensitive assessments, fostering psychological safety—but also the limits of expecting individual champions to carry systemic change. Her conclusion is unambiguous: EDI must be everyone’s responsibility. Without collective ownership, champions risk being reduced to lone voices in institutions resistant to change.

In this important contribution, **Hindpal Bhui**, Visiting Law Professor at the University of Oxford and Inspection Team Leader at HM Inspectorate of Prisons

(HMIP), draws on the 2022 HMIP thematic review and recent research to examine the persistent disproportionality in the experiences of Black prisoners. He explores the paradox that Black men in prison are both more likely to experience force and less likely to self-harm or report vulnerability, situating these patterns within historical, cultural and psychological frameworks. Hindpal highlights how racialised assumptions of danger and resilience distort staff—prisoner relationships, compromise safety, and obscure hidden trauma. His analysis, which combines empirical evidence with theoretical insight, challenges the prison service to confront the deep-rooted legacies of colonialism and racism that shape perceptions of risk and vulnerability—and to develop responses grounded in understanding, trust and communication.

The edition concludes with a wider European lens. In *Between borders and bars: Citizenship, othering and penal governance in Italy*, **Simone Santorso** and **Alvise Sbraccia** argue that Italian prisons have become laboratories for managing migration. With migrants making up almost a third of the prison population, imprisonment operates not only as punishment but as migration control. Their concept of the 'citizenship line' captures how formal and informal practices—ethnic wings, discretionary transfers, racialised narratives of radicalisation and self-harm—sort and subordinate prisoners along lines of national belonging. Italian prisons, they argue, do not simply exclude migrants; they contain them in conditions of subordinated inclusion, where the aim is not rehabilitation but containment.

Across these seven contributions, certain themes recur with force. First is the persistence of procedural

injustice: whether in England, Spain, or Italy, systems that claim neutrality frequently produce racialised inequalities. Second is the centrality of trust: policies and programmes fail when they lack credibility with those they claim to serve. Third is the importance of agency and resilience: from Black women resisting marginalisation to EDI champions pushing for cultural change, voices emerge that refuse silence. Finally, these articles remind us that race in prison is never incidental: it shapes who is imprisoned, how they are treated, and what futures are made possible—or foreclosed—once inside.

This first volume of our special edition does not provide easy answers. What it does provide is clarity: clarity about the depth of the problem, the resilience of those most affected, and the urgency of embedding race at the centre of prison reform. The second volume will continue this task, exploring the legacies of trauma, identity, and belonging that shape experiences of imprisonment. For now, these contributions invite us to confront the uncomfortable truth that until race is taken seriously in every aspect of prison life, justice will remain incomplete.

Finally, as is custom in the first edition of the year, this issue includes the announcement of the winner of the Prison Service Journal's Bennett Award for outstanding article of the previous year; this is awarded to **Mark Jones**, for his article *Creating the Roots of Hope: Using art to support well-being in prison*, which was published in edition 279.

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Procedural injustice: Unpacking systemic prison failures and the resilience of Black women in prison

Dr Angela Charles is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Northampton University and a visiting fellow at The Open University.

Black women represented 8.9 per cent of the prison population at the time of the Prison Reform Trust's report.¹ Despite the disproportional number of Black women in prison, they are an under-researched population. The experiences of Black women in prison have been overlooked and incorrectly categorised into explanations that are either relevant to white women or Black men.² This paper will detail some of the specific ways in which Black women face disadvantage and discrimination in the prison estate. Drawing on fieldwork from two female prisons in England, this paper gives voice to the lived experiences of several Black women who were either interviewed or participated in a focus group.³ Two prison procedures that have negatively affected Black women will be explored: Discrimination Incident Reporting Forms (DIRFs) and Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). These two processes were chosen because ROTLs are integral to rehabilitation and maintaining familial ties, and DIRFs are essential for discrimination incidents to be logged and dealt with. The paper will then detail Black women's experiences of Black History Month (BHM), a topic mentioned during multiple interviews. The women's discussions naturally highlight how Black women could be given more responsibility in moulding BHM celebrations. To conclude, there will be some reflections on

creating more transparency and equity in prison processes and creating more trust between staff and Black prisoners.

Black women's experiences in prison are complex, challenging, and multi-faceted due to the intersecting identities they carry from society into the Criminal Justice System (CJS). In many ways Black women can be seen to be swimming against the tide and only just surviving. This struggle is present in all aspects of society: education, employment, housing, mothering, healthcare and the CJS.^{4 5} It is integral to also acknowledge the lasting impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism on Black women's identities, their social location and ultimately their disproportionality in the CJS.⁶ Agozino powerfully argues that the outside oppressions of colonialism and neo-colonialism have scarred and continue to scar Black women through institutional practices; once this is acknowledged we can address why Black individuals are disproportionately at 'the receiving end of colonialist criminal justice'.⁷ Structural intersectionality is a term that adequately describes the difficulties Black women face due to their social location in society through the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class.⁸ These factors work in combination in Black women's everyday lives, creating oppression, discrimination, and further challenges.⁹ Similarly, Collins' seminal discussion of the matrix of domination argues that four power domains: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and

1. Prison Reform Trust. (2017). *Counted Out: Black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the criminal justice system*, Available at: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/old_files/Documents/Counted%20Out.pdf
2. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 8, 139-167.
3. Charles, A. (Forthcoming). *Black women in prison: Exploring the intersection of race and gender in Experiences of imprisonment*. Palgrave Macmillan.
4. Emejulu, A., & Bassel, L. (2015). Minority women, austerity and activism, *Race and Class*, 57(2), 86-95.
5. Government Equalities Office. (2010). *Ethnic minority women's poverty and economic well-being – Research Findings No. 2010/6*. London.
6. Dastile, N., & Agozino, B. (2019). Decolonising incarcerated women's identities. Looking through the lens of prison abolitionism. *SA Crime Quarterly*, 68, 21-32.
7. Agozino, B. (2023). The decolonization paradigm in criminology. In C. Cunneen, A. Deckert, A. Porter, J. Tauri, and R. Webb (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook on Decolonizing Justice*. Routledge.
8. Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
9. Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas. *Annual review of sociology*, 41(1), 1-20.

interpersonal reproduce Black women's subordination over a prolonged period.¹⁰ The disciplinary domain manages the oppressions of Black women through increased surveillance and social control. Alexander concurs with this viewpoint, arguing that the mass imprisonment of Black people serves as a system of social control and marginalisation of Black communities under the pretence of criminal justice;¹¹ here within these social organisations intersecting oppressions originate, develop and are maintained.¹² The prison is like a microcosm of society and so matrices of domination exist and are maintained through prison policies and processes, and on a micro scale through everyday interactions between staff and Black women prisoners.

The research study: Providing some context

Most of the quotes in this paper are from Black or Mixed-heritage women in prison that participated in either a focus group or one-to-one interview with the author between June 2018 and December 2019 in either one open or closed category C prison. Focus groups were used in addition to interviews to create a group setting to discuss abstract terms such as race and gender through visual tasks.¹³ There were 23 one-to-one interviews with Black women and two focus groups; six women participated in both the interview and focus group. The women ranged from early twenties to mid-late fifties. The women selected either agreed to be involved after being approached by the author or through gatekeepers who were prison officers or from higher management.

There were also interviews with four staff members ranging from prison officer to safer custody management roles. They were asked different questions to the women prisoners with a focus on their roles, their understanding of the needs of Black

prisoners and the ways in which the prison met those needs. The staff interviewed showed passion and dedication to being in the Prison Service and working with the women whilst highlighting the constraints and harsh realities of the role. All women were provided with information sheets and consent forms prior to the research. Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed through thematic analysis.¹⁴ The women have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. In some cases, the names written are the names chosen by the women during their focus groups. Some of the names may be quirky, but this adds to the character and voice of the women, and they have been retained for that reason.

Discrimination Incident Reporting Forms (DIRFs)

DIRFs are one of the main ways that prisons record and deal with alleged discrimination. DIRFs allow any individual, whether staff or prisoner to fill in the form if they feel they have been discriminated against based on the nine protected characteristics.¹⁵ Although data has not been collected on DIRFs submitted by Black women, previous investigations found a lack of evidence of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service upholding DIRFs by Black

prisoners.¹⁶ The discussion of DIRFs naturally occurred during one of the focus groups. One woman, Tasty, describes how the DIRF process was used against her by a staff member and succinctly highlights the complexities and power imbalance that can occur when a form can be used by staff and prisoners. Essentially, a DIRF had been put against her for allegedly conspiring against a prison officer as well as planning to submit a DIRF claiming the officer was racist. Tasty explains the officer:

Kind of threatened me not to, if you know what I mean, and then really patronised me

Black women can
be seen to be
swimming against
the tide and only
just surviving.

10. Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black Feminist Thought*. Taylor and Francis.

11. Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.

12. See footnote 10: Collins, P. H. (2002).

13. Charles, A. (2024). Storytelling and catharsis in prison: Identity trees as elicitation and a means of sharing Black women's narratives, in Chamberlen, A. & Bandyopadhyay, M. (Eds.), *Geographies of Gendered Punishment: Women's Imprisonment in Global Context*. Palgrave Macmillan

14. Sullivan, C., & Forrester, M. (2018). *Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

15. Prison Reform Trust. (2018). *Reporting discrimination in prison*, Available at: <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/reporting-discrimination-in-prison/>

16. HM Prison and Probation Service. (2024). *Advancing Equality for Offenders and Children in Custody Policy Framework*, Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670fc363366f494ab2e7b9db/advancing-equality-offenders-children-policy-framework.pdf>

and said, 'If you feel like I'm being racist to you right now, you're in your right to put in a thing against me,' like in a very disgusting, patronising way... I had never said anything about the officer, about two weeks later, Korkor was called into the office about the exact same thing.

Whilst this incident may be a rare occurrence, it highlights some of the negative implications with the DIRF process and the ways in which it could be misused. Tasty then reveals the small number of DIRFs that were submitted and the reason behind it:

Talking to the Diversity and Equalities Officer, they've only had three DIRFs, in the last 18 months...they said they don't know whether if it's because nothing is going on or the residents fear to report something [another woman interjects to confirm it is fear] and to be honest it is fear to report something because the officer said 'I don't know if they think they are going to get shipped out or something'.

In the closed prison, when speaking to a Safer Custody management team member, the low number of DIRFs was also mentioned as a sign of the prison doing well:

We have like DIRFs which are like discrimination forms that staff and our residents can fill out if they feel they are being discriminated against in the nine protected characteristics, so all the other ones as well as race... we get very little of those. I think in the last two years we have had 15 maybe which for a jail of this size is quite low. We don't tend to see any complaints within our complaints system either.

There must be caution when relying solely on statistical data collection. Whilst HMPPS states that 'data from the DIRF log must be reviewed and analysed locally regularly, to identify any trends',¹⁷ the process of

assessing possible trends is more complex. The statistics only provide a partial picture into the actual prison environment and the lived experiences of these prisoners. At face value, three DIRFs would appear to indicate that the prison in question is successful in achieving equality, whereas this was inconclusive. Additionally, the Safer Custody management's interpretation of low numbers ignores the possibility that fear of recrimination or a lack of faith in the system may be reasons why DIRFs are not completed. From speaking to these women there was little faith in the process for reporting DIRFs and complaints more broadly. The research conducted has shown that whilst prison management may look at the number of DIRFs submitted and perceive the low numbers as a positive sign of reduced levels of discrimination, there may be a lack of confidence in the process and the system. The Equality Analysis Policy Framework emphasises the need to give voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthy motives,¹⁸ and so every effort should be put into ensuring all prisoners including Black women have confidence and trust in the DIRF/complaint system. Unfortunately, previous research suggests racialised groups have had to opt for alternative methods to resolve their grievances,¹⁹ or they had a fatalistic acceptance that their issues would not get resolved.²⁰

There was little faith in the process for reporting DIRFs and complaints more broadly.

Issues with Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL)

ROTL allows prisoners to go into the community for specified amounts of time for various purposes such as reconnecting with family, work, education and other activities to support a transition back into society. ROTL can significantly improve outcomes for former prisoners upon release, thereby assisting in the rehabilitation process.²¹ When discussing ROTLs with Black women there were concerns about disparities of the length of time for forms to be signed and their eligibility for ROTL. Lisa compared her situation to two white women:

I'll say I came in on the same day as two other women, we all came from Gold Park together,

17. See footnote 16: HM and Probation Service. (2024).

18. Ministry of Justice. (2023). *Equality Analysis Policy Framework*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-analysis-policy-framework>

19. Phillips, C. (2012). *The Multicultural Prison: Ethnicity, Masculinity, and Social Relations among Prisoners*. Oxford University Press.

20. Van der Vaik, S., & Rogan, M. (2023). Complaining in Prison: 'I suppose it's a good idea but is there any point in it?' *Prison Service Journal*, 264, 3-10.

21. Kay, C. (2021). The impact of policy change on prisoner resettlement and community integration: A case of disproportionate response. *Critical Social Policy*, 41(2), 315-325.

both of them are white and both of them have sat their boards two weeks ago. So maybe it's just that my specific person is extremely busy, or the other factor is that I'm the only Black one. There are girls that have been, that are months behind. I know of a girl here, she was three, four months late for her ROTL because.. they're understaffed. But they know who they wanna rush through the process.

Here Lisa felt as though her rehabilitation has not been prioritised compared to other women because of her race. Whilst there may have been specific reasons for the delay, an important takeaway is that many Black women feel that their race or ethnicity has led to these disadvantages. As a criminal justice agency such concerns need to be acknowledged and rectified to reduce the levels of mistrust between prisoners and staff. Another example below further demonstrates Black women feeling marginalised and disadvantaged:

So, I went out 7th December, and I'm meant to have it [ROTL] every two weeks after that, but because no one's here to take me out, my next one is the 2nd January. Like that's a mad thing! You should have obviously looked at that, and thought my rehabilitation is vital... I've been in for a little while now, so you would have thought that you'd want me to integrate and get out there and start you know, just like doing stuff. But like I said, they don't give a flying fuck, when it comes to Black people they don't care. (Crystal)

Crystal's comments demonstrate that when there are setbacks that are not explained by staff it leads to frustration and the belief their race has played a role. Some of the Black women discussed how it would be beneficial to have a point of contact to discuss updates, timescales and any delays with processing ROTLs. Such dialogue would open communication and help the women to receive explanations for delays and setbacks. This ties in with Chigwada-Bailey's work in which she highlighted that due to poor communication Black women were often left without any reason or

understanding why their applications were delayed.²² In many cases, officers had negative stereotypes of Black women as mad, criminal, arrogant, anti-authority, hostile and aggressive, and this impacted access to education, employment and other rehabilitative activities.²³ Additionally, Chigwada-Bailey argued that staff did not take the time to listen and speak to Black women, which meant limited opportunities for dialogue. The author's findings suggest that there is still a lack of dialogue between staff and Black women that allows for important conversations and questions to be asked. Black women explained how they had very surface level interactions; therefore, more open and vulnerable conversations relating to ROTL are being missed.

Natasha also highlighted the unequal access to employment in and outside of the prison via ROTL.

You should have obviously looked at that, and thought my rehabilitation is vital...

It's like you're holding me back, but then other people you've pushed out; people that ain't had a job in their lives. And even if you look at the statistics of how many people they've put out of colour and then how many people in others, you'd be like, 'Wow!' Certain females

it's like they get fast paced before me and I'm just like, 'Hm, really?'

Apparently, there was eight positions, and all eight was Caucasian [filled by Caucasian women]. The women that were Black that applied didn't get it.

These examples speak to previous research that has argued that women's prisons are tainted by 'relational inconsistency' and 'shifting behavioural expectations'.²⁴ Essentially, they argue that such inconsistent use of authority and enforcement creates a 'psychologically stressful environment, which sows distrust between prisoners and their custodians'.²⁵ Black women regularly question why other women's progression is put before their own, and ultimately, it leads to distrust of prison officials. Only a small percentage of Black women had been permitted to go on ROTL whilst many had yet to go out on a ROTL. Additionally, HMIP findings have revealed that Black

22. Chigwada-Bailey, R. (2003). *Black women's experiences of criminal justice: race, gender and class: a discourse on disadvantage*. Waterside Press.

23. See note 22: Chigwada-Bailey, R. (2003).

24. Crewe, B., Schliehe, A., & Przybylska, D. (2023). 'It causes a lot of problems': Relational ambiguities and dynamics between prisoners and staff in a women's prison. *European Journal of Criminology*, 20(3), 925-946.

25. See note 24: Crewe, B., Schliehe, A., & Przybylska, D. A. (2023).

and Minority Ethnic (BME) individuals believed systemic bias was present in the prison and that there was a lack of equity when it came to decisions around education, training and employment.²⁶ The final section will discuss BHM in the prison and the way it is experienced for the Black women in the author's research before concluding with some reflections.

Black History Month (BHM) experiences

Most Black women in the research highlighted at least one positive aspect of BHM and the celebratory events the prison organised. Crystal commented that BHM was 'the only thing that we get to... take over ourselves to get to do'. Her comment highlighted the importance of celebrating it and having some level of responsibility and autonomy in planning BHM. Despite the positive aspects of BHM, Black women still highlighted the negative aspects to celebrating it within the prison. For example, Crystal exposed the difficulties of planning BHM:

When we want to cook our food and stuff like that, it's all umming and arring, but any other things like ... you know, Silver Jubilee, Queen Jubilee, I dunno, they go all out for that, but when it's BHM, it's not really. In every jail I've been to it's the same, they do a big lead-up to it, yeah, you can do all this, you can do all that; when the time comes now it's like mm, but we can't do this because of that.

It did not go unnoticed when BHM plans were scaled down or changed at short notice:

They were meant to do a day where they cooked like African food, West Indian food, but then they cancelled it. Everyone chosen what they wanted and then they cancelled it due to they'll be breaking health and safety and things, policies, whatever, but apparently, they had Travellers Day and they went ahead with all the food and stuff, so I don't know. (Catherine)

Every other year before now they've done a BHM, and they cook food and it's a mass event, but this year the governor stopped that, and it was just like, as a Black person, we're used to that, but it was not nice. You're in jail, you've had this all along, why can't we celebrate it? You celebrated Ramadan, you

celebrated all these other cultures, but you're shutting us off again like... the officer, Miss Thomas, had to break it down, it's like, 'This happens to us all the time, why are we surprised? When you go home, you're gonna celebrate Black history every day'. And it's true, but I was just like, that really hurt me and it hurt a lot of the Black people here. (Erica)

Another example of a BHM issue occurred in the open prison. Tasty described how she was enlisted to help create a BHM poster:

So, I was like OK, but obviously we don't have access to anything here, we don't have internet, we don't have nothing. They're free, they're outside, they can bring in anything.

This woman brought in three, she went into her local travel agents and brought in three holiday brochures to the Caribbean for me to make a poster for BHM with. And she told me they've got really good pictures of giraffes and tigers in the brochures, and she was like, and I've got a music magazine at home, with bongos in it.

There was a complete lack of cultural understanding of Black heritage or BHM, and staff ignorance. In this case, Black history/culture was reduced to something primitive and simplistic. The lack of planning also reiterates that such events were a low priority. One reason provided for the poorly planned BHM events was the lack of knowledge and resources:

I think it's because they haven't got the knowledge and resources to... they go on in and they get two Black people and then stick it on a noticeboard, then that's them done. You know, one of them ones. It's because there's no Black officers here to even back us up if that makes sense, get involved and get their knowledge, cause that's all what it's about is it's about knowledge. (Crystal)

Some of the Black women were quick to point out that although Black women had been enlisted to help, they were still not given the complete freedom to cook:

We're meant to cook for it but you're giving us the ingredients that you think we should

26. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. (2022). *The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff*, Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/12/The-experiences-of-adult-black-male-prisoners-and-black-prison-staff-web-2022.pdf>

be cooking with. I just told them I'm not doing it anymore, because my name's attached to that and that don't taste like my Black food. (Tracy)

Black women wanted more responsibility with cooking and organising BHM. They also desired events to embrace and celebrate their ethnicity and heritage throughout the year. Additionally, some women highlighted the importance of having more multicultural events and awareness, stating, 'different cultures, just do it every month, pick a culture' (Ruth).

Reflection and pathways forwards

This paper has sought to focus on a few prison processes and procedures in a deliberate way. Firstly, these processes have been focused on to demonstrate a few ways in which some Black women feel unsupported and unprotected. Secondly, these specific procedures can be improved and tweaked to improve the experiences of Black women in prison. Starting with DIRFs, work must be done to increase confidence that DIRFs will be taken seriously when relating to prisoner grievances against staff. This can be done by assuring prisoners that submitting DIRFs against staff members will not penalise or adversely affect them. There must be assurances that staff being reported are not involved or part of the investigation in the initial stages. Additionally, the process needs to ensure that no abuses of power occur through prison staff writing DIRFs against prisoners in displays of power. Moreover, prisons should not solely rely on the number of DIRFs submitted by prisoners. The prison should conduct qualitative research through anonymous open-ended surveys to determine, firstly, if there have been instances of discrimination that have not been

Inconsistent use of authority and enforcement creates a 'psychologically stressful environment, which sows distrust between prisoners and their custodians'.

reported, and secondly, prisoners' overall confidence about the DIRF process.

Furthermore, there needs to be a wider understanding of how discrimination occurs and is presented. Some forms of discrimination are more covert and subtle. This is particularly the case when considering racial microaggressions within the CJS and society more broadly. Racial microaggressions have been described as automatic acts of disregard that stem from white superiority that include 'brief, covert, ubiquitous expressions of racial bias and discrimination'.²⁷ Other scholars have described microaggressions as 'white putdowns' that are 'automatic, preconscious or unconscious', subtle verbal and non-verbal insults, layered and cumulative with profound effects.²⁸ An example of this can be seen in the following interaction that a prisoner recalled:

If something's bothering me and I went to an officer and maybe say something to one of them, the way they will look at you and, you feel like, don't say it... I don't think they did that to those white people. (Nancy)

Microaggressions can also occur through 'micro assaults',²⁹ described as a deliberate assassination of a Black person's character as evidenced below:

A slight raise of the voice or voicing of my opinion in a way that isn't completely docile and placid is seen as being aggressive and I need to calm down. Even more so in prison. So yeah, I do find it's definitely one strike being a woman and an even bigger strike being a Black woman.

Some prison staff may be guilty of 'microinsults' where they are insensitive to an individual's racial heritage and identity or microinvalidations, which negate Black people's thoughts and experiences; the latter is important. Without staff being able to understand Black people's lived experiences in society

27. Houshmand, S., Spanierman, L., & Stefano, J. (2017). Racial Microaggressions: a Primer with Implications for Counseling Practice. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 39, 1-14.

28. Kohli, R., & Solórzano, D. (2012). Teachers, please learn our names!: racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15(4), 441-462.

29. Sue, D., Capodilupo, C., Torino, G., Bucceri, J., Holder, A., Nadal, K., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271-286.

and their colonial histories, they will be unable to understand why mistrust and frustration permeate into the prison.

The process of ROTL needs more transparency, particularly when there are delays and discrepancies about them being approved. Having a point of call to discuss these issues would allow such transparency and would help to strengthen relations between staff and Black prisoners. Inevitably, there may be outcomes that are displeasing to some women, but the transparency and communication lines will be open which is key. Additionally, further investigations are needed into why Black women are unsuccessful in employment opportunities during their ROTLs, and efforts need to be made to improve any disproportionality. Again, with more clarity and transparency, some of these concerns can be discussed and tackled. Forums that focus on race, diversity and reducing discrimination are perfect settings for these discussions to be had if women are encouraged to speak freely. Agozino mentions a helpful term of 'institutionalised racism'. This term draws on the fact that staff may not be overtly racist, but they are aware of the inherent racism of institutionalised practices, and therefore such practices are implemented by 'conscious social actors', rather than blame being placed on the systems of an inanimate institution.³⁰ There may be cases where staff are not aware and simply take for granted the prison processes in place; this poses a further question of whether criminal justice actors ought to be trained to be more aware of the embedded disadvantage such processes cause for racialised individuals. There is no easy fix of the deep-rooted mistrust present between many Black women and the prison institution. However, these initial changes to prison processes will begin to rectify incidents of discrimination and allow women to gain confidence in these processes.

Lastly, BHM needs to be led by Black prisoners, and they should be viewed as the experts in organising culturally rich events that allow the celebration of their Black heritage. BHM is the one month where Black women feel more able to be unapologetically expressive of their culture, yet this opportunity is restricted when they are not given the autonomy to celebrate authentically. Simple changes can be made such as giving Black women full control when cooking African and/or Caribbean foods, asking the women what they would like BHM to cover, and avoiding scaling back or cancelling BHM plans. The latter makes Black women feel resentful and it leads them to believe BHM and Black culture is disposable. Again, when plans must be amended or cancelled, this should be discussed honestly and transparently with the reasons given. Outside of BHM, there should still be efforts to allow Black women to celebrate their ethnicity on a regular basis through cooking, music, art, fashion, literature, and general discussions.

In conclusion, this paper has sought to detail a few policies and processes that became important topics of discussion within the author's PhD research. The aim of the paper is to share these important comments for the Prison Service to reflect and make improvements where possible. Small changes can be made to make a lasting impact for Black women. A few Black women praised staff members they could rely on in times of need or those who had made their experience more bearable. The hope is that every Black woman in prison can have one staff member that they can rely on as a source of support, guidance, and transparency during their prison experience.

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30. Agozino, B. (2003). *Counter-Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason*. Pluto Press.

Intersecting realities: Exploring the intersectionality of race and gender among women in Spanish prisons

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In the field of prison research, women have historically occupied a secondary place, with incarcerated migrant women representing an even less studied minority.¹ The lack of specific reintegration strategies perpetuates their discrimination and vulnerability, hindered by the intersection of poverty, gender, and migratory status.

This intersectionality magnifies the disadvantages in reintegration and exposes deficiencies in public policy that could be addressed through development cooperation by creating programs aligned with the rehabilitative objectives of imprisonment.

A key phenomenon that stands out in the discussion about the imprisonment of migrants is 'cimmigration', the convergence of criminal and immigration policies, resulting in the criminalisation of migrants. This implies a legal and social distinction that marginalises a growing group of people, depriving them of rights and placing them in a position of systematic exclusion, contributing to their overrepresentation in prisons and reinforcing barriers in their reintegration process.

This article explores the challenges and opportunities of development cooperation in the reintegration of incarcerated migrant women in Spain, adopting an intersectional lens, acknowledging how race, gender, and migratory status intersect to shape the experiences of imprisoned women.

Gender, migration and the penal system: An intersectional approach

Building on the intersectional framework outlined above, it is clear that poverty plays a pivotal role in

exacerbating the vulnerabilities of migrant women in prison.

In this context, the feminisation of poverty has drawn attention for over 40 years,² highlighting how women face higher levels of poverty than men in general.³ Currently, 1 in 10 women face extreme poverty, and if the trend does not change, by 2030, 342.4 million girls and women will be in this situation, with 220.9 million residing in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ This is closely related to gender inequality as there are fundamental aspects of poverty that go beyond money where women encounter greater limitations, such as opportunities to accumulate human capital, exercise autonomy, and contribute to economic production. Gender differences in access to education and health, as well as their reduced agency, create disparities in economic opportunities, which affect their ability to generate income and overcome poverty.⁵ As women are overrepresented in part-time jobs, earn lower incomes, and dedicate more time to unpaid care work at home,⁶ this leads them to the margins of the labour market, underemployment and illegal work.

Contexts of poverty, scarcity, and social exclusion create a fertile ground for short-term decision-making,⁷ which, although potentially leading to severe future consequences, initially serves to meet the most basic and pressing needs.⁸ In this regard, committing a crime emerges as an alternative to solve difficult situations.

However, rather than addressing the root causes, the structural response to these acts of survival is increasingly one of criminalisation. Criminal law, while ostensibly neutral, disproportionately targets women in poverty, especially single heads of households.⁹ This reflects a classic system where subsistence crimes are heavily punished, while corporate crimes often escape

1. Varela Portela, C. (2017). Gestionando la diversidad cultural en las prisiones. El caso de las mujeres. *Revista de Estudios e Investigación en Psicología y Educación, Extra (8)*, 55-58.
2. Pearce, D. (1978). The Feminization of Poverty: Women, Work, and Welfare. *The Urban and Social Change Review, 11*, 23-36.
3. Naciones Unidas. (1995). *Informe de la Cumbre Mundial sobre Desarrollo Social*, Copenhague.
4. Naciones Unidas. (2023). *El progreso en el cumplimiento de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible. Panorama de Género 2023*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
5. De Paz Nieves, C., & Muller, M. (2021). *From Data into Action: The Impact of Gender Analysis on Policy and Programming*, World Bank.
6. See footnote 4: Naciones Unidas. (2023).
7. Haushofer, J., & Fehr, E. (2014). On the psychology of poverty. *Science, 344* (6186), 862-867.
8. Shah, A.K., Mullainathan, S., & Shafir, E. (2012). Some Consequences of Having Too Little. *Science, 338* (6107), 682-685.
9. Calandra, N., et al. (2021). *Feminización de la pobreza y feminización del encierro*. Universidad Nacional de Villa María Argentina.

scrutiny.¹⁰ Crimmigration¹¹ now encompasses aspects related to social practices, discourses, immigration controls, media perspectives,¹² and the design and implementation of public policies.¹³

However, linking criminality with migration in a simplistic way entails a reductionist view of a topic that needs in-depth analysis due to its multiple facets. To address this phenomenon adequately, it is necessary to consider crime statistics, the complexity of migration processes, and the contexts in which migrant women settle after arrival. García España shows that migration acts as a protective factor against crime, contributing to a decrease in crime figures, although he clarifies that 'the extent to which it does so depends on other types of conditions'.¹⁴

To better understand these complex dynamics, we turn to the concept of intersectionality, highlighting the connections between different systems of power,¹⁵ and the importance of studying these relationships not only at their points of convergence but also within specific power contexts that allow for an adequate analysis of these dynamics.¹⁶

Migrant women imprisoned in Spain

Characteristics and context of prior vulnerability

Since 2000, the number of imprisoned women globally has increased by nearly 60 per cent,¹⁷ though they remain a minority. In Europe, women average 5 per cent of the prison population;¹⁸ in Spain, it is 7.3 per

cent, with nearly 25 per cent of these being foreigners,¹⁹ mostly from Latin America.²⁰ In this context, Lynch and Verma emphasise the importance of examining how social power dynamics influence formal and informal methods of social control.²¹ This perspective suggests that, globally, imprisonment is disproportionately applied to minorities and impoverished individuals. The majority of the prison population is made up of people living in poverty.^{22 23}

Although Spain does not systematically collect racial or ethnic data in its penal system, the overrepresentation of foreign women, especially from Latin America, suggests that race and racialisation play a significant role in incarceration trends. In the broader European context, Latina women are often racialised in ways that intersect with gendered stereotypes, such as being perceived as hypersexual, emotionally volatile, or involved in illicit economies. These stereotypes, though subtle and often implicit, can influence policing, sentencing, and the treatment women receive in prison. The absence of race-disaggregated data in Spain not only obscures the full picture of structural discrimination but also reflects a broader issue of data invisibility, which hinders justice and the development of equitable public policies.

Acknowledging this limitation is

essential in intersectional analysis, as it signals both the need for improved data practices and a deeper understanding of how race and ethnicity, even when unmeasured, shape the lived experiences of incarcerated migrant women.

Poverty plays a pivotal role in exacerbating the vulnerabilities of migrant women in prison.

10. Ferrajoli, L. (2008). La desigualdad ante la justicia penal y la garantía de la defensa pública. In Ministerio Público de la Defensa & Asociación Interamericana de Defensorías Públicas (Eds.) *Defensa pública: garantía de acceso a la justicia* (77-89). La Ley.
11. Stumpf, J. (2006). The crimmigration crisis: Immigrants, crime, and sovereign power. *American University Law Review*, 56, 367-419.
12. Brouwer, J., Van Der Woude, M., & Van Der Leun, J. (2017). Framing migration and the process of crimmigration: A systematic analysis of the media representation of unauthorized immigrants in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Criminology*, 14(1), 99-119.
13. Rosenbloom, R.E. (2016). Policing Sex, Policing Immigrants: What Crimmigration's Past Can Tell Us About Its Present and Its Future. *Californian Law Review*, 104(1), 149-199.
14. García España, E. (2019). Más inmigración, menos delincuencia. *Revista Crítica Penal y Poder*, 18, 199.
15. Hill Collins, P., Da Silva, K.A., & Aires Gomes, M.C. (2021). Intersectionality, epistemic oppression and resistance: an interview with Patricia Hill Collins. *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada*, 60 (1), 328-337.
16. Hill Collins, P., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality* (2nd edition). Polity Press.
17. Fair, H., & Walmsley, R. (2022). *World Female Imprisonment List* (Fifth Edition). Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research.
18. Aebi, M.F., & Cocco, E. (2024). *Prisons and Prisoners in Europe 2023: Key Findings of the SPACE I report*. Council of Europe & University of Lausanne.
19. Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023). *Informe General 2022*. https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/pdf/archivos-y-documentacion/documentacion-y-publicaciones/publicaciones-descargables/publicaciones-periodicas/informe-general-de-instituciones-penitenciarias/Informe_General_IIPP_2022_12615039X.pdf
20. Data obtained from the National Institute of Statistics, https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Datos.htm?t=25715#_tabs-grafico
21. Lynch, M., & Verma, A. (2016). The imprisonment boom of the late 20th century: Past, present, and future. In J.D. Wooldredge & P. Smith (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of prisons and imprisonment* (1-34). Oxford University Press.
22. See footnote 11: Ferrajoli, L. (2008).
23. Sepulveda Carmona, M., & Donald, K. (2014). Access to Justice for Persons Living in Poverty: A Human Rights Approach. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1-42.

Although earlier research assumed a uniform profile for incarcerated women,²⁴ more recent studies highlight differences.²⁵ For example, foreign women in Spain tend to avoid substance abuse, experience worse work conditions, and are often first-time offenders with long sentences, especially for drug trafficking.²⁶ They also tend to have higher education levels.²⁷

The three most common crimes among incarcerated women in Spain are: crimes against property, public health, and homicide.²⁸ These offences, especially drug trafficking, are frequently linked to poverty and traditional gender roles.²⁹ Many 'mules' seek fast income to support families, unaware of the high risks, including being used as decoys or suffering health complications.³⁰

Research in Latin America, the region of origin of many imprisoned women in Spain, reveals that most are marginalised, poorly educated, victims of violence, and main providers for dependents. They typically work informally and become involved in crime due to survival pressures.³¹ The feminisation of poverty and patriarchal norms push women into the lower tiers of drug trafficking.³² Inside prison, the system reflects external inequalities: designed for men,³³ with scarce gender-adapted facilities, and minimal access to programs or qualified work.³⁴ This marginalisation perpetuates their exclusion.³⁵

Race and racialisation play a significant role in incarceration trends.

The Brasilia Rules³⁶ and the UN³⁷ both highlight key vulnerabilities — gender, poverty, and migration - that shape access to justice and reintegration after prison. Incarcerated women often face all three, compounded by histories of gender-based violence;³⁸ many are trapped in cycles of abuse and criminalisation due to economic dependence and lack of support.⁴⁰

Challenges and barriers in the prison system

Spain's penal philosophy, as enshrined in its Constitution (Article 25.2), emphasises rehabilitation and social reintegration as core goals of imprisonment. This aligns with other EU models like Sweden and Norway, which prioritise reintegration and support over punishment. However, Spain's decentralised prison system, in regions like Catalonia and the Basque Country, creates disparities in the availability and quality of programmes, particularly those that are gender-sensitive and culturally responsive. As a result, migrant women receive uneven support, complicating the implementation of effective nationwide reintegration strategies.

This has profound consequences for incarcerated women, whose experiences in prison are shaped by the system's structural gaps and, by embedded gender norms and roles. Imprisonment affects women differently: a woman violates not only

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24. Atabay, T. (2014). *Handbook on women and imprisonment: with reference to the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (The Bangkok Rules)*. United Nations.
25. See footnote 23: Atabay, T. (2014).
26. Quiroga-Carrillo, A., Varela Portela, C., & Míguez Salina, G. (2023). Una aproximación al perfil de las mujeres extranjeras privadas de libertad en España. *Quaderns de Psicologia*, 25(2), 1-20.
27. Jiménez Bautista, F. (2015). Seguridad y migraciones: las mujeres extranjeras en las prisiones españolas. *SOCIAL REVIEW. International Social Sciences Review / Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales*, 4(2), 195-205.
28. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).
29. Giacomello, C. (2013). *Mujeres, delitos de drogas y sistemas penitenciarios en América Latina*, Consorcio. Internacional sobre Políticas de Drogas.
30. Serrano Suárez, D.S. (2020). Pobreza y criminalidad femenina. *Revista Sistema Penal Crítico*, (1), 113-133.
31. See footnote 28: Giacomello, C. (2013).
32. Laurenzo Copello, P. (2019). Mujeres en el abismo: delincuencia femenina en contextos de violencia o exclusión. *Revista Electrónica de Ciencia Penal y Criminología*, (21), 1-42.
33. Agudo Arroyo, Y. (2012). Desigualdades implícitas y sentidas por mujeres extranjeras en centros penitenciarios españoles. In M.L García de Cortázar et al. (Eds.), *Estudios sobre discriminación en el ámbito penitenciario: extranjeras en las prisiones españolas* (79-112). Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia.
34. Juanatey Dorado, C. (2018). Delincuencia y población penitenciaria femeninas: situación actual de las mujeres en prisión en España. *Revista Electrónica de Ciencia Penal y Criminología*, (20), 1-32.
35. Azaola, E. (2005). Las mujeres en el sistema de justicia penal y la antropología a la que adhiero. *Cuadernos de Antropología Social*, (22), 51.
36. Cumbre Judicial Iberoamericana (2008). *Reglas de Brasilia sobre acceso a la justicia de las personas en condición de vulnerabilidad*.
37. Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas. (2014). *Los Derechos Humanos en la Administración de Justicia (Resolución 69/172)*.
38. See footnote 24: Atabay, T. (2014).
39. Chatha, S.A., Ahmad, K., & Sheikh, K.S. (2014). Socio-economic Status and Domestic Violence: A Study on Married Women in Urban Lahore, Pakistan. *South Asian Studies: a research journal of South Asian Studies*, 29 (1), 229-237.
40. Schuler, S.R., Bates, L.M., & Islam, F. (2008). Women's Rights, Domestic Violence, and Recourse Seeking in Rural Bangladesh. *Violence Against Women*, 14 (3), 365-345.

the law but also gender expectations.⁴¹ Most have dependents,⁴² and separation is emotionally devastating,⁴³ especially for those in poverty, and imprisoned for the first time. The Bangkok Rules recognise these intersecting vulnerabilities, which are further aggravated for non-resident foreign women.⁴⁴ In such cases, imprisonment can deteriorate mental health or trigger new disorders.⁴⁵ Adapting to prison life often leads to behaviours maladaptive in free society, complicating reintegration.⁴⁶

Entering prison generally represents an abrupt break with family ties and support networks. For foreign women, this can represent an additional challenge in family and social terms, especially when they lack prison visits, support, and economic assistance for their dependents.⁴⁷ Having a support network in these circumstances is crucial to mitigate the adverse effects of imprisonment, such as feelings of loneliness and disconnection from reality, phenomena that contribute to prisonisation. Communication challenges, such as five-minute phone calls and time zone mismatches, frustrate relationships with families abroad.⁴⁸

The lack of connections hinders access to release permits and third-stage classification, which represents a significant obstacle in the reintegration process for migrant women. This situation highlights the need to strengthen treatment programmes and activities in penitentiary institutions, focusing on the social integration of these women. These programmes not only focus on the rehabilitation of inmates in general but are essential to address the specific needs

of vulnerable groups, such as migrant women, thus facilitating their effective reintegration, a fundamental objective of prison sentences according to our constitution.

The (re)production of gender stereotypes in activities aimed at women not only disempowers them⁴⁹ but also reinforces gender differentiation and perpetuates the social inequalities that disadvantage them. This situation results in the frequent neglect of women's needs in the prison system, reflecting a reality also observed in other areas of society.⁵⁰ Therefore, treatment programmes and activities must be focused from equality perspectives, thus facilitating adequate training that allows women to access qualified and valuable professions in the labour market.⁵¹

Regarding paid employment within the prison, gender biases are also observed. While 'specific' jobs for men are carpentry, metal carpentry, cooking, and baking, those for women are sewing, laundry, and cleaning.⁵² This division reflects a traditional distribution of roles according to gender, which perpetuates stereotypes and inequalities in the prison environment. However, the opportunity to perform paid work allows foreign women to 'maintain the sense of their migration project'.⁵³

As for treatment programmes, the Spanish prison system currently only offers three specific programmes for the foreign population: educational (formal education, languages, vocational training, and health); multicultural (legal matters, sociocultural characteristics, and intercultural activities); and values and cognitive skills, in which only 46 inmates have

Imprisoned women often combine poverty, foreign status, and victimhood - three overlapping vulnerabilities.

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41. Naredo Molero, M. (2004). ¿Qué nos enseñan las reclusas? La criminalización de la pobreza desde la situación de las reclusas extranjeras y gitanas. *Humanismo y trabajo social*, (3), 67-94.
42. Malalcaza, L. (2015). Gobernabilidad y violencia: acerca del ejercicio de la maternidad en las cárceles bonaerenses. *Derecho y Ciencias Sociales*, 12, 154-168.
43. See footnote 23: Atabay, T. (2014).
44. Naciones Unidas. (2010). *Reglas de las Naciones Unidas para el tratamiento de las reclusas y medidas no privativas de la libertad para las mujeres delincuentes* (Resolución 65/229).
45. Laishes, J. (2002). *The 2002 Mental Health Strategy for Women Offenders*. Correctional Service Canada. Rickford, D. (2003). *Troubled Inside: Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Women in Prison*. Prison Reform Trust.
46. See footnote 1: Varela Portela, C. (2017).
47. Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Andalucía. (2020). *Informe sobre la situación de las mujeres presas: Tratamiento y derechos de las mujeres privadas de libertad en los centros penitenciarios de España y Andalucía*.
48. Castillo Algarra, J., & Ruiz García, M. (2010). Mujeres extranjeras en prisiones españolas. El caso andaluz. *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, 68 (2), 453-472.
49. Gargari Casas, M.M. (2022). Patrones de la melanina: color y género en el CEFERESO. In M. Belausteguigoitia Rius & C. Giacomello (Coords.), *Mujeres privadas de libertad: Perspectiva de género, prácticas artísticas, jurídicas y pedagogías en resistencia* (73-88). Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres INMUJERES.
50. See footnote 34: Azaola, E. (2005).
51. Cervelló Donderis, M.V. (2021). Mujer, prisión y no discriminación. *Estudios Penales y Criminológicos*, (41), 551-591.
52. See footnote 46: Castillo Algarra, J., & Ruiz García, M. (2010).
53. See footnote 46: Castillo Algarra, J., & Ruiz García, M. (2010).

participated in 2022.⁵⁴ None of these has a specific gender focus.

Only two national programmes address women specifically: 'Gender Violence Prevention Program for Women in Penitentiary Centres, *Ser Mujer*' and the 'Program of Actions for Equal Rights Between Men and Women in the Penitentiary Field'. Neither is targeted at migrant women. *Ser mujer* has improved self-esteem and emotional balance, especially for gender violence survivors,⁵⁵ with high foreign participation. However, effects on non-victims are mixed.⁵⁶ The 'Program of Actions' focuses on coordination with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), supporting violence victims, family assistance, and awareness campaigns.⁵⁷ While promising, it still lacks focus on cultural migratory specificity.

Cultural and occupational activities also reflect gender stereotypes. For example, women participate in sewing, laundry, and aerobics, while men have access to the bakery, carpentry, and athletics. Few women join general competitions.⁵⁸ This (re)production of stereotypes disempowers women and limits their post-prison options.

Migrant women in Spanish prisons face several challenges and barriers based on gender inequality and migration status.

The lack of specific programmes addressing their cultural background, legal, and family situation deepens their vulnerability and hinders reintegration. Separation from their families and the absence of support networks, combined with limitations in communication and access to prison benefits, complicate their isolation and mental health, seriously compromising their reintegration opportunities.

To untangle these issues, it is necessary to design policies and programmes with an intersectional approach that includes factors such as gender, migration, and caregiving responsibilities. Some of them encompass the creation of non-stereotyped vocational training programmes, targeted psychological support, and fostering healthy family and social relationships. An integrated and equitable approach is the only way to advance towards a functioning prison system that genuinely aids in the rehabilitation and reintegration of these women.

Recommendations for a gender-sensitive, inclusive reintegration strategy

Strategies for the reintegration of imprisoned migrant women must account for their socio-structural frameworks. Imprisoned migrant women have undergone the process of being criminalised due to deep-rooted class and gender discriminatory forces within society, suffered well before their incarceration period. Therefore, any approach towards reintegration goes beyond the incarcerated barriers of rigid, development-focused, and rights-neglecting techniques.

From this perspective, development cooperation plays a key role as a mechanism to confront the root causes of feminised poverty and social exclusion. Migrant women often come from areas where access

to education, formal employment, and health care is limited. Furthermore, deeply rooted patriarchal norms tend to curtail their autonomy. These factors drive many of them to migrate in search of better opportunities, only to face new barriers such as restrictive immigration policies, labour market discrimination, precarious legal status, and social isolation. Under these circumstances, many women develop what are

typically viewed as 'survival strategies', which are then criminalised, transforming poverty into a matter of penal concern.

In this context, a human rights-based approach to development cooperation calls for tackling the structural inequalities that shape their lives, both before and during incarceration. Spanish development cooperation policy, particularly through Law 1/2023 on Sustainable Development Cooperation and Global Solidarity, reflects a commitment to gender mainstreaming and the empowerment of women and girls across all levels of action. From this rights-based and gender-sensitive framework, cooperation must aim not only to improve basic living standards but to dismantle the institutional and social barriers that prevent migrant women in prison from achieving full development and equal participation.

It is at this point that the importance of NGOs comes into play. Their involvement inside jails and

The effectiveness of Spain's rehabilitative ideals is moderated by its decentralised prison management system.

54. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).

55. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).

56. Viedma Rojas, A., & Del Val Cid, C. (2019). *Evaluación de la eficacia de un programa de tratamiento para el empoderamiento de las mujeres en prisión*, Ministerio de Interior. Secretaría General Técnica. Instituto de la Mujer y para la Igualdad de Oportunidades.

57. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).

58. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).

beyond serves as a vehicle for applying inclusive reintegration strategies. Organic Law 1/2023 recognises the importance of their presence in the penitentiary system, which is especially relevant in the area of rehabilitation, as they bring complementary resources, programmes, and human support to those carried out by the state. They are also major players in open-regime interventions, particularly in community service programmes and alternative sentences. Recent data show that 140 NGOs and partner entities operate in open-regime contexts through delivering 219 broad programmes, which encompass a total of 718 specific initiatives.⁵⁹

While there are no programmes explicitly targeting migrant or foreign women as a specific group, some interventions do address these populations separately. In 2022, for example, seven partner entities-led programmes specifically for women reached a total of 56 participants.^{60 61} In the same year, social integration centres (SIC) carried out programmes focused on foreign nationals, involving 145 women in activities related to employment, family relations, and integration support.⁶²

One particularly relevant area is the operation of supervised accommodation units, often managed in partnership with NGOs and typically used by women.⁶³ These residential facilities, located in regular community setting with no external identifiers, offer a less stigmatising environment that facilitates gradual reintegration. Their importance is especially pronounced for imprisoned migrant women, as penitentiary institutions often lack sufficient resources to address the full range of needs faced by this population,⁶⁴ many of whom have lived in poverty or exclusion before their incarceration.

Beyond their formal role in reintegration, NGOs are deeply valued by those living behind bars. Many of them experience profound disconnection and

abandonment by society and institutions. The emotional connection helps restore dignity, build self-esteem, and sustain hope, all of which are crucial elements in the process of rehabilitation. This offers a glimpse of life beyond the prison walls, a safe space for self-expression, emotional support for those without families, and a vital bridge to the outside world,⁶⁵ which often feels distant during incarceration.

The criminalisation of migrant women stems from structural inequalities, poverty, educational gaps, and caregiving burdens. These push women toward crime as a survival mechanism. Tackling this requires addressing the feminisation of poverty and the structural causes behind it.

A rights-based, inclusive prison system must recognise women's diverse trajectories. Migrant women face unique barriers - language, legal status, lack of networks - that hinder reintegration. Policies must reflect diversity.⁶⁶

A holistic approach should promote autonomy, build capacity, and prevent recidivism. Strategies must include gender-sensitive training, family contact facilitation, and psychological care tailored to their backgrounds.

Only through intersectional, inclusive policies can we ensure that imprisonment does not perpetuate inequality but supports reintegration and justice for all women. This requires not only acknowledging the compounded effects of gender, migration status, and poverty but also committing to culturally appropriate, gender-sensitive, and trauma-informed reforms that respond to the real needs of incarcerated migrant women.

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59. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).

60. Workshop "New Technology for employment" (developed in CIS A Coruña by *Fundación Erquete* where 4 women participated); Workshop "Employment and prison" (developed in CIS Alcalá by *Fundación Arco Iris* where 2 women participated); Workshop "Employment counseling" (developed in CIS Alicante by *Asociación programa reinserción mujeres* where 12 women participated); Workshop "Pathways to freedom" (developed in Madrid V.Kent by *Fundación Alamedillas* where 11 women participated); Workshop "Hosting and rehabilitation for women" (developed in Madrid V.Kent by *Fundación Prolibertas. Arco Iris* where 7 women participated); Workshop "Nice to meet me" (developed in Málaga by Arrabal where 14 women participated); Workshop "making purses" (developed in CIS de Valencia by *Pastoral Penitenciaria* where 7 women participated).

61. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).

62. See footnote 19: Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias. (2023).

63. Rodríguez Yagüe, C., & Pascual Rodríguez, E. (2022). *Las mujeres en prisión: la voz que nadie escucha. Explorando nuevas vías de cumplimiento de las penas impuestas a mujeres a través de la cultura*. La Cultivada (Fundación Gabeiras).

64. See footnote 23: Atabay, T. (2014).

65. Benito López, R., & García Almonacid, J.A. (2019). La intervención de las ONG'S y el voluntariado en el medio penitenciario. *Revista de Estudios Penitenciarios, Extra*, 75-86.

66. See footnote 49: Cervelló Donderis, M.V.

Building trust through action: Race, reform and the DIRF system — An interview with Sev Bikim MBE

Sev Bikim MBE is the Diversity and Inclusion and Families Lead for the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk prison group in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. She was interviewed by Dr Hannah Bennett, who is the Guest Editor of the Prison Service Journal Special Edition on Race in Prison.

The interview was conducted in January 2025

HB: Can you start by giving us an overview of your role and the work you do within the Prison Service?

SB: I am the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) and Families Lead for the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk (BCN) prison group. My role is to support the prisons within this group by aligning national D&I strategies with regional activity and tailoring them to meet the unique needs of each site. Every prison has its own dynamics, so my approach involves understanding these distinct challenges and opportunities.

I work to ensure that the D&I Managers and Families Leads at each site are equipped to enhance outcomes for staff, prisoners, and their families and loved ones. My role also involves building and strengthening relationships with internal and external stakeholders, acting as a bridge to foster collaboration and achieve meaningful results.

For me, Diversity and Inclusion is not a standalone initiative—it is a golden thread that runs through every aspect of prison operations. By integrating D&I principles into the core business objectives of all prison functions, we can drive improvements in the outcomes for people in prison, support our staff, and create stronger connections with our communities.

HB: What led you to become involved in initiatives around race and equality in prisons?

SB: I've been working in the equality, diversity, and inclusion space for over 10 years across different roles and grades within His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). My journey began at HMP Woodhill as an Equalities Officer, where I engaged in focus groups, oversaw the administration of Discrimination Incident Reporting Forms (DIRFs), handled complaints investigations, and conducted data analysis.

A pivotal moment early in my career was collaborating with the Zahid Mubarek Trust (ZMT), introduced to me by my functional head. Together, we worked to improve outcomes for ethnic minority prisoners at HMP Woodhill. This led to the development of a joint Staff and Prisoner anti-racism workshop designed to strengthen staff-prisoner relationships. It also created safe spaces for dialogue and introduced collective reverse mentoring between staff and prisoners, to explore race related issues within the prison environment.

At HMP Bedford, I adapted this initiative despite the challenges of COVID-19, ensuring its rollout in a meaningful way. The success of this work contributed to me being awarded the MBE—a recognition of collective effort, innovation, and dedication.¹

Being from an ethnic minority background, I've experienced firsthand some of the struggles faced by both staff and prisoners. This personal connection has given me a unique perspective and drive to address disparities. My academic background in law and early exposure to the Criminal Justice System further deepened my understanding of the systemic disparities that often feed into the challenges seen in prisons. Recognising that these inequities are inherited at different stages, I've focused on addressing them locally and regionally, using strategic planning, collaboration, and commitment to drive positive change.

HB: Could you explain the Equality Advocates programme and its significance in the prison environment?

SB: The Equality Advocates programme is a prisoner-led initiative designed by ZMT to improve the treatment and outcomes for prisoners from ethnic minority backgrounds. It plays a vital role in addressing racial disparities within prisons by empowering peers to provide support and advocacy.

1. Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) is a British award recognised for outstanding achievement or service to the community, particularly for long-term, significant contributions.

Advocates are selected through a thorough process, ensuring they have the skills and commitment to fulfil their role. They are given a clear job description, ongoing support from the ZMT, and the BCN prisons' management team. Their development is a priority, with a bespoke personal and professional development course spanning seven sessions. This course not only enhances their skills but also aligns with their personal and professional goals.

The role of the advocates includes supporting ethnic minority prisoners, working with Equalities Leads to implement local equality strategies, and reporting progress, challenges, and opportunities to both the ZMT and prison management. Upon completing their 6-month assignment, advocates earn accredited qualifications in peer mentoring and advocacy, further equipping them to support others and contribute meaningfully.

What makes this programme unique is its ability to amplify prisoner voices, foster trust, and encourage participation in decision-making processes. The advocates' presence creates a ripple effect, improving relationships and building confidence among prisoners and staff.

HB: What challenges have you encountered in implementing this programme, and how have you addressed them?

SB: Interestingly, I've received strong support from prison Governors and Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) who were eager to trial the programme. To ensure success, I took time to clearly outline the structure, goals, and expected outcomes, and this transparency-built trust and buy-in from leadership.

One logistical challenge was managing the session sizes due to high interest and participation. Additionally, sifting through a large number of applications to select the right advocates was both exciting and demanding. While we wanted to offer opportunities to more participants, we remained focused on ensuring the quality of the cohort.

Ultimately, these challenges were manageable and reflected the enthusiasm and engagement the programme generated, which is a positive sign of its impact and relevance.

HB: How do you measure the impact of Equality Advocates on the culture of prisons?

SB: The selection process is critical—collectively we look for individuals who are ready to drive change, not just those who are compliant or easy going. This ensures advocates represent a diverse and motivated group.

The impact is evident in several ways. Advocates lead peer-driven initiatives like the CCC (Connect, Communicate, and Change) programme, which fosters collaboration between prisoners and staff to identify and solve issues on the wings. Their work has also increased trust and confidence in the DIRF system by providing a transparent and accessible platform for addressing concerns.

Advocates actively participate in forums and meetings, giving a voice to those who might otherwise go unheard. One of the most rewarding outcomes is the progression of advocates themselves—from moving to open conditions to preparing for release. At HMP Wayland, for example, I've seen advocates successfully transition to the open prison estate or be released, and the demand for more cohorts continues to grow. Each new request for a cohort reaffirms the positive cultural shift brought about by this programme.

HB: Building trust between staff and prisoners is a recurring challenge. What strategies have you found most effective in fostering trust, particularly across racial lines?

SB: Trust is built on four key values: accountability, transparency, respect, and fairness. These principles guide all the work we do within the D&I space.

One of the most impactful strategies we use is leveraging lived experiences. Initiatives like Let's Talk My Story sessions and reverse mentoring allow us to explore challenges and build understanding. For instance, we've had Governing Governors participate in reverse mentoring with young adults from ethnic minority backgrounds. Their feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, as it's fostered deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of ethnic minority prisoners.

Perception is one of the greatest challenges, especially when discussing sensitive topics. Creating safe spaces where staff and prisoners can talk openly, without fear of judgment or error, is essential. These platforms allow us to listen, learn, and grow together.

Diversity and Inclusion is not a standalone initiative—it is a golden thread that runs through every aspect of prison operations.

Ultimately, fostering trust is about building communities where staff and prisoners work collaboratively to improve outcomes. We're still on this journey, but every step we take brings us closer to creating an environment where trust is mutual and enduring.

HB: How do you handle situations where trust has been broken due to incidents of discrimination or bias?

SB: When trust is broken, the first step is to actively listen. It's important to hear not just what happened but how it made people feel. Empathy is key to understanding the depth of the situation and addressing it effectively.

We then look at what lessons can be learned. Often, we bring everyone involved together in a safe space to discuss the incident. This can be a casual setting with coffee and biscuits or a more structured environment, depending on what feels right for the group. The goal is to create an open and honest dialogue where all parties feel heard and supported.

Transparency is vital—we acknowledge mistakes and commit to learning from them. This often involves targeted training, workshops, or collaborative projects with prisoners, staff, and external stakeholders.

By addressing incidents head-on and creating opportunities for reflection and growth, we can rebuild trust and strengthen the relationships that are critical to our shared goals.

HB: How important are positive staff-prisoner relationships in addressing racial inequalities, and what can staff do to improve these relationships?

SB: Positive staff-prisoner relationships are absolutely critical in addressing racial inequalities. From my experience, trust and mutual respect are the foundation for creating equitable environments. When staff and prisoners engage meaningfully, it creates opportunities to challenge biases, address misconceptions, and foster a shared sense of accountability.

One approach I've championed is embedding diversity and inclusion as a 'golden thread' through all areas of prison life, rather than treating them as standalone initiatives. This means building relationships

through consistent, everyday actions rather than occasional interventions.

Staff can improve these relationships by actively listening to prisoners and acknowledging their lived experiences.

Another key step is for staff to act as allies. Allyship involves not just understanding but actively standing alongside individuals to challenge inequality and drive change. For instance, staff who participate in reverse mentoring with prisoners not only gain insight but also demonstrate their commitment to understanding and addressing racial inequalities.

Ultimately, addressing racial inequalities is a shared responsibility. By cultivating positive, respectful relationships, staff and prisoners can work together to break down barriers and build a fairer environment.

HB: What role does staff training and awareness play in shaping these relationships, especially around race and cultural understanding?

SB: Staff training and awareness are essential in shaping meaningful relationships and fostering cultural understanding. Without the knowledge and tools to address racial disparities, staff can unintentionally perpetuate biases or misunderstandings.

Training needs to go beyond 'box-ticking' exercises. It should include immersive and reflective elements, such as unconscious bias workshops, cultural competency sessions, and practical initiatives like scenario-based training. For example, in my work, I've incorporated an allyship workshop into sessions, enabling staff to better understand the nuances of race and culture while equipping them with strategies to challenge inappropriate behaviours.

Awareness starts with self-reflection. When staff understand their own biases and how these might influence their interactions, they can take steps to address them. Training must also highlight the importance of fairness and transparency, helping staff see how their actions contribute to the wider prison culture.

In practice, awareness leads to proactive actions, such as using DIRF systems effectively, challenging discriminatory 'banter,' or creating safe spaces for prisoners/staff to share their concerns.

Ultimately, training and awareness aren't just tools—they are investments in building trust and

Trust is built on four key values:
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fostering an inclusive environment. When staff are empowered with knowledge and understanding, they are better equipped to address inequalities and build the positive relationships that are essential for change.

HB: The Discrimination Incident Reporting Form (DIRF) is a key tool in addressing racial discrimination in prisons. Can you describe how these investigations are conducted and what outcomes they usually lead to?

SB: Absolutely, I agree that DIRFs are a crucial tool in tackling discrimination in prisons. At BCN, we've refined the process to ensure every complaint is handled with care, integrity, and fairness. Investigations aren't just about sitting at a computer—they require a thoughtful, hands-on approach to get to the heart of the issue.

So, here's how it works:

- ❑ When a DIRF is submitted, our D&I team triages it, using the King Formula. The King Formula is a structured approach that helps identify whether a difference in treatment due to a protected characteristic has caused detriment without a reasonable explanation—essentially determining if discrimination is the likely cause.
- ❑ Once triaged, the D&I managers allocate the DIRF to a trained case investigator, usually a trained middle manager on a rotational system. To maintain impartiality, any conflicts of interest are resolved by reassigning the case to another investigator. Timelines are set, usually 14 days, though it can extend to 28 days depending on complexity or availability of evidence.
- ❑ The investigation itself prioritises safety and transparency. Interviews are conducted in appropriate locations, ensuring both staff and prisoners feel safe. Every DIRF begins with an acknowledgment that outlines the steps of the process, setting clear expectations for everyone involved.
- ❑ The investigator gathers evidence, including prisoner accounts, staff statements, and even body-worn camera footage if available. Importantly, responses must be thorough and demonstrate that the individual's voice has been heard, and their concerns taken seriously. If discrimination isn't found, the

Positive staff-prisoner relationships are absolutely critical in addressing racial inequalities.

DIRF isn't dismissed outright; instead, it's redirected to the general complaints process, with clear communication back to the complainant.

- ❑ Post-investigation, outcomes are tailored to the issue; whether it's a genuine apology, mediation, or training sessions. These outcomes are followed up to ensure they're implemented and that recurring incidents are reviewed collectively.

We've also introduced external and internal scrutiny measures, including prisoner-led DIRF scrutiny panels, which have been instrumental in building trust. Prisoners know their concerns are being taken seriously, and this transparency has strengthened the credibility of the DIRF system across the BCN sites.

HB: In your experience, how effective is the DIRF process in bringing about meaningful change?

SB: In my view, the DIRF process has been incredibly effective in driving meaningful change. At BCN, we've worked hard to demonstrate that DIRFs are more than just forms, they're a pathway to accountability and improvement.

One of the most significant impacts has been the increase in trust and confidence. By colour coding DIRF boxes, sharing regular updates, and being open about our external scrutiny processes, we've shown both staff and prisoners that this isn't just a tick-box exercise.

Prisoners now feel empowered to use the system because they know their voices will be heard. The transparent investigation process and the opportunity to appeal decisions further reinforce this trust.

The process has also improved relationships between staff and prisoners. Investigators take the time to engage, connect, and communicate, which helps break down barriers and address misunderstandings. It's not just about resolving complaints; it's about fostering an environment where people feel safe to speak up and confident that their concerns will be acted upon.

Of course, meaningful change goes beyond individual cases. By reviewing outcomes collectively, we're able to spot patterns and implement systemic changes. Whether it's through training, workshops, or policy adjustments, the DIRF process continues to be a catalyst for creating fairer, more inclusive environments.

HB: I know you have recently received an award at the House of Lords for your involvement

in delivering the pilot in HMP Wayland from January to April 2024 to address the lack of confidence in the prison discrimination complaints system amongst ethnic minority prisoners, with a particular focus on young adult prisoners. Congratulations.

Could you share the key motivations behind the Wayland Pilot and give us an overview of what it involved?

SB: The motivation for the HMP Wayland pilot came from listening to the voices of prisoners who felt unheard and disillusioned with the discrimination complaints process. Particularly, young adult prisoners from ethnic minority backgrounds expressed a significant lack of trust in the system. The HM Inspectorate of Prisons thematic review highlighted these issues, and we knew we couldn't afford to let them linger.

The pilot was designed to re-establish trust and ensure that prisoners had confidence their concerns would be taken seriously. We focused on creating a prisoner-led scrutiny panel that allowed for transparency and accountability. The key idea was to involve those directly impacted; young black prisoners, in the process, providing them with ownership and a platform to contribute to meaningful change.

The pilot ran from January to April 2024, where we trained a cohort in critical thinking, fairness principles, and how to assess DIRFs objectively. The scrutiny panel reviewed a percentage of DIRFs, provided feedback on trends, and identified potential biases. We also embedded the ZMT to provide independent oversight, which was crucial for fostering trust.

HB: What impact has the pilot had on trust in the discrimination complaints system, particularly among young black prisoners and staff?

SB: The impact was profound. Young black prisoners who participated in the scrutiny panels shared that they finally felt part of the solution rather than just the problem. This shift in mindset was pivotal. Through their involvement, we saw an increased trust in the DIRF process—not just among the panel members but also among their peers, who began to see the process as more transparent and fairer.

For staff, it was eye-opening. They gained insights into how prisoners perceive discrimination and their complaints. This created opportunities for learning and

growth, particularly in understanding bias and the importance of communication.

The number of complaints resolved without escalation grew, and we saw a notable drop in the perception of 'inaction' on DIRFs. For me, that's the most rewarding outcome—seeing trust slowly being rebuilt, brick by brick.

HB: What were the main challenges in implementing the HMP Wayland pilot, and how did leadership at HMP Wayland and within HMPPS contribute to its success?

SB: One of the main challenges was overcoming initial scepticism. Some prisoners and staff questioned whether the pilot would lead to real change or just be another 'tick-box' exercise. Building that trust took time, and it required consistent communication and small, visible wins.

Another challenge was logistical—ensuring panel members were given adequate time and space to review DIRFs while balancing their daily routines. But the leadership at HMP Wayland made it clear this pilot was a priority. The Governor fully backed the initiative, which made a huge difference in getting staff buy-in.

At regional and national levels, the support we received was invaluable. Leadership ensured we had the resources and external expertise to guide the process. They didn't just endorse the pilot—they championed it, which gave it the credibility it needed to succeed.

HB: How do you envision the HMP Wayland pilot influencing wider prison reforms, and what are the next steps for you and your team in promoting racial justice and equality within the prison system?

SB: The pilot has the potential to be transformative across the prison estate. It's more than just a procedural reform; it's a cultural shift. By placing trust and transparency at the heart of the process, we've demonstrated how meaningful prisoner engagement can lead to better outcomes for everyone.

The next steps are about scaling up. We're already sharing the lessons from HMP Wayland with other prisons in the BCN region and beyond. The pilot's good practices have also been shared with other regional D&I leads for them to consider adapting in their own regions and prisons.

Ultimately, training and awareness aren't just tools—they are investments in building trust and fostering an inclusive environment.

For me and my team, the focus remains on embedding racial justice into everything we do. This means continuing to listen, challenging systemic biases, and working collaboratively with both staff and prisoners to ensure that diversity and inclusion isn't just a policy, it's a lived reality.

HB: What recommendations came out of the pilot for generating trust and confidence in the discrimination complaints system?

SB: Several key recommendations emerged:

- ❑ **Prisoner-led panels:** Empowering prisoners to scrutinise the system fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, which directly builds trust.
- ❑ **External oversight:** Involving independent stakeholders like the ZMT provides transparency and demonstrates that the system isn't just self-regulated.
- ❑ **Clear communication:** Explaining the DIRF process step by step, including timelines and outcomes, helps manage expectations and reduces frustrations.
- ❑ **Training for investigators:** Ensuring all staff involved in DIRF investigations are trained in bias, cultural awareness, and the King Formula enhances fairness and consistency.
- ❑ **Feedback loops:** Sharing outcomes, themes, and lessons learned from DIRFs openly with staff and prisoners encourages continuous improvement.

Ultimately, the pilot reinforced that trust is built through action, not promises. Every step we take must show that we're listening and responding in a meaningful way. That's how we create systems that everyone can believe in.

HB: What does true racial equality in prisons look like to you, and what steps are needed to get there?

SB: True racial equality in prisons is about creating a space where every individual staff or prisoner, feels respected, heard, and valued, regardless of their background. It's about addressing disparities, ensuring access to the same opportunities, and fostering an environment where cultural differences are acknowledged and embraced. We need a system where the experiences of ethnic minorities, particularly those of young black prisoners, are not just heard but actively addressed through meaningful, sustainable change. To get there, we need more than policies; we need a collective shift in mindset, one that puts inclusion and fairness at the heart of everything we do. We need staff to engage in continuous training, leaders to champion inclusive practices, and for everyone, from

top to bottom, to consistently act with empathy and accountability. Our work must focus on breaking down barriers, whether it's through listening, offering genuine support, or ensuring equal treatment in every aspect of prison life.

HB: In your view, how can the Prison Service at large improve its approach to addressing race and equality issues?

SB: In my view, we have made some positive strides, such as new structures and leadership that encourages innovation, but there's still much work to do. It's crucial that we invest in training that goes beyond compliance, ensuring all staff understand the systemic nature of racial inequalities and how their actions, whether conscious or unconscious, contribute to these issues.

Equally important is creating open, safe spaces for both staff and prisoners to discuss race, bias, and discrimination without fear of retribution. Transparency plays a vital role here; prisoners and staff need to know that when they speak up their voices are truly heard and that there will be follow-through. We are on a journey, and we need to ensure diversity is woven into every layer of leadership and decision-making. With diverse perspectives, we can find better solutions, and I'm confident that with the leadership we have now, we will continue to try different methods, learn, and evolve together towards a fairer and more equitable environment for everyone.

HB: What message would you like to leave with our readers regarding the importance of this work in building a fairer and more equitable prison system?

SB: This work is not just about policies; it's about people. It's about the lives of prisoners and staff who walk through the gates of our institutions every day, facing a world that is often unforgiving. Racial equality in prisons isn't a luxury or an optional improvement—it's a fundamental human right. By addressing race and equality issues, we aren't just making the prison system better; we're contributing to a more just society as a whole. Change will not come overnight, but if we work together—staff, prisoners, and external stakeholders, we can build trust, improve outcomes, and create an environment where everyone has the chance to thrive. My message is simple: don't wait for change to happen, drive it. We all have a part to play in making the system more just, fairer, and equitable for everyone.

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Navigating the system: The Experiences of young Black men in prison

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For several decades, the unjust treatment of Black individuals has been noted within academic research and government reports; notably highlighted in The Macpherson Report (1999),¹ The Lammy Review (2017),² and The Casey Review (2023).³ It is understood that treatment within prisons is inadequate and insufficient, particularly for young Black men. However, academic literature and policies tends to focus on how to mitigate institutional racism that exists within the entirety of the criminal justice system (CJS), as opposed to addressing the root causes of systemic racial disparities and acknowledging the lived experiences of those who are affected by such issues.⁴ Whilst incentives and plans have been introduced to achieve an anti-racist CJS, such as The Police Race Action Plan,⁵ these plans appear to be a plaster for vast social issues. Although such incentives are in place to mitigate systemic racism within the CJS and reduce disproportionality for Black individuals in the system, these plans fail to consider the root causes of systemic racism, as well as the difference of experiences between ethnic groups; both of which are often overlooked. The authors question how UK plans and initiatives can reflect the needs of young Black men if there is a lack of rich qualitative data and therefore, there is a lack of clarity about their needs.

The relationship between ethnic minority individuals and the CJS is, and has been, fractured for decades. This comes as a consequence of decades of systemic bias and racism that has, arguably, been poorly

mitigated by incentives such as The Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Race Action Programme (RAP).^{6,7} Whilst it is difficult to measure progress on whether these initiatives are making a substantial difference due to their recent implementation, it can be questioned when the issues of systemic bias and racism will be explored in further depth across all silos within the CJS. Although the movement to address such issues shows a level of effort, there are gaps to fill, and the current work is, arguably, insufficient.

Criminal justice legislation

The tensions between ethnic minority individuals and the CJS have been felt for some time, dating back to key race-related incidents such as the 1981 Brixton Riots that were symbolic of these tensions. These riots occurred as a result of social deprivation, systemic racism and oppressive policing strategies where the use of stop and search under the 'sus' law targeted young Black men at a vastly disproportionate rate. Shortly after, the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 raised further issues into the policing of young Black men. Such incidents emphasised the urgency of addressing institutional racism, which was partially acknowledged in legislative responses like the Race Relations Act 1965 and its later amendments (1968; 1976; 2000), that prohibited racial discrimination in public institutions. Despite the fact that the issue of racial discrimination and racial bias has been prevalent for a considerable length of time, both nationally and internationally, legal acknowledgement of these issues were, arguably,

1. Macpherson of Cluny, Sir William. (1999). *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny*. HM Government.

2. Lammy, D. (2017). *The Lammy Review: An Independent Review into the Treatment of, and Outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Individuals in the Criminal Justice System*. HM Government.

3. Baroness Casey. (2023). *The Baroness Casey Review: Final Report, an independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*. Metropolitan Police Service.

4. Mirza, H.S., & Warwick, R. (2024) Race and ethnic inequalities. *Oxford Open Economics*, 3 (1), 365-452.

5. College of Policing (2022). *Police Race Action Plan: Improving policing for Black people*. College of Policing.

6. See footnote 5: College of Policing (2022)

7. HM Prison & Probation Service. (2021). *An updated response to: Race equality in probation: The experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic probation service users and staff*. HMPPS.

delayed and undermined the urgency of mitigating racial discrimination. It can also be viewed that the legislation was reactive, in responding to the rising tensions, rather than preventive, and dismantling systemic biases were not addressed.⁸ Whilst legislation has shifted, and both indirect and direct racial discrimination are now prohibited through The Equality Act 2010, race-related incidents are prevalent today; with racially motivated hate crimes accounting for over two-thirds of such offence.⁹ Although hate crime legislation sets out the penalties for such crimes, the severity of racial discrimination, both legally and morally, is perhaps not always considered by the criminal justice system.

Socioeconomic inequalities

Historically, young Black individuals have been disproportionality affected in most aspects of life; education, employment, healthcare, housing, and across the entirety of the CJS (as victims, suspects and people convicted of crime).¹⁰ The issues of disproportionality stem from social inequality faced in these sectors of society; factors that have been delved into in academic literature for several decades yet remain a significant issue today. Structural disadvantage has disproportionately affected Black communities, with young Black men often facing compounded social exclusion, which in turn correlates with increased contact with the CJS.¹¹ A significant number of Black children are excluded from school, compared with other ethnic groups,¹² creating a 'PRU [pupil referral unit] to prison pipeline' and criminalising Black children from a young age;¹³ ultimately impacting their trust and confidence in the system. There are notable parallels between trends in education and employment,

The severity of racial discrimination, both legally and morally, is perhaps not always considered by the criminal justice system.

particularly in relation to persistent racial disparities. The high rate of school exclusions for Black children impacts their knowledge and skills and overall, it can impact their employability. Black individuals in England and Wales experience significantly higher rates of unemployment, with an unemployment rate of 9 per cent compared with the national average of 4 per cent.¹⁴ Whilst the gap in unemployment may reflect historical and ongoing structural inequalities within the labour market, as well as socioeconomic disparities and biases in hiring processes, it is argued that there is some correlation between the racial inequalities faced in both education and employment.

Considering the disparities that Black individuals face within education and employment, it is not surprising that similar disparities are noted within healthcare. Despite the fact that accessing healthcare

has been an issue for some time, ethnic minority individuals experience significant inequalities in accessing both physical and mental healthcare.¹⁵ Black individuals are at a higher risk of experiencing mental illness,¹⁶ and limited access to healthcare can contribute to adverse long-term outcomes, including the increased likelihood of undiagnosed health conditions such as depression. With many young men in custody having high rates of trauma,¹⁷ and many young Black men experiencing

mental health conditions due to unjust policing experiences, it is vital that access to healthcare is drastically improved.

Reflecting on the issues of socio-economic exclusions, evidently the impact of systemic racism can have a detrimental impact on the quality of life of Black individuals. It is widely known and acknowledged that Black and ethnic minority individuals are over-policed and under-protected in the CJS. Whilst Black individuals tend to be over-policed in stop and search practices,

8. Solomos, J. (1989). *Race Relations Legislation and the Political Process*. In: *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*. Palgrave.

9. Home Office (2024). *Hate crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024*. Home Office.

10. Ministry of Justice (2024). *Statistics on Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System*. Ministry of Justice.

11. Bowling, B., & Coretta, P. (2012). Ethnicities, racism, crime and criminal justice. In M. Maguire, R. Morgan, & R. Reiner (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (5th ed). Oxford University Press.

12. Department for Education (2024). *Permanent Exclusions*. Department for Education.

13. Perera, J. (2020). *How Black Working-Class Youth are Criminalised and Excluded in the English Schol System: A London Case Study*. Institute of Race Relations.

14. Murray, A. (2024). *Unemployment by ethnic background*. House of Commons Library.

15. Kapadia, D., Zhang, J., Salway, S., Nazroo, J., Booth, A., Villarroel-Williams, N., Becares, L., & Esmail, A. (2022). *Ethnic inequalities in healthcare: A rapid evidence review*. NHS Race and Health Observatory.

16. Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2021). *Criminal justice system failing people with mental health issues – with not enough progress over the past 12 years*. HM Government.

17. Spark Inside (2023). *Being Well Being Equal: Prioritising the wellbeing of young men and young Black men in the criminal justice system*. Spark Inside.

with Black individuals being over nine times more likely to be subject to a stop and search than white individuals,¹⁸ the lack of support that Black individuals receive throughout the criminal justice processes may result in them feeling under-protected in comparison to white individuals. To further highlight the persistent disparities that occur,¹⁹ Black and ethnic minority defendants are sentenced more harshly than their white counterparts.²⁰ These are simply a few clear indicators of the systemic disparities that Black individuals are facing. Despite these disparities having been highlighted for several decades, the movement to address these issues is still ongoing. Whilst key reports were, and continue to be, published that highlight clear institutional racism in England and Wales, the findings and recommendations in these reports identify similar issues; all that are yet to be fully addressed. Although some steps have been taken to address the issues, for example, cultural awareness training provided to CJS staff, it is often questioned why there is a severe lack of movement within society to mitigate racism, racial inequality and systemic biases, and the lack of progress is not fully understood.²¹ In addition, the strategies and plans that may address and resolve some of the longstanding issues, i.e., PRAP and RAP, which have formed over 20 years following the MacPherson Report, which many argue is considerably delayed for such a widespread issue and diminishes the urgency of the recommendations listed in official reports. As such, the levels of trust and confidence within Black and ethnic minority communities have drastically decreased over the last several years, with Black individuals' trust in their local police decreasing over 10 per cent from 2017 to 2020, from 76 per cent to 64 per cent.²² Although this is reflective of some key incidents occurring during this time, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd, it can be argued that without timely and meaningful solutions, levels of trust will continue to decrease.

It is often questioned why there is a severe lack of movement within society to mitigate racism.

Whilst the awareness of racial inequalities emerges in children at an early stage of development, including the awareness of structural and political inequalities,²³ it can also be argued that the issue of institutional racism within the CJS cannot be mitigated without addressing the root causes, i.e., the sociological factors that are noted above. It must be noted that such issues are not solely faced by Black individuals, and other ethnic groups are affected by disproportionate treatment, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups, who tend to be overlooked within policies, strategies and academic literature.

Experiences within prison

The experiences of young Black men (YBM) within prison are marked by disproportionate treatment, both during imprisonment and upon release, which reflects systemic issues that permeate various aspects within the CJS. These disparities are influenced by factors such as the lack of ethnic diversity among prison staff, inadequate mental health support available both during imprisonment and upon release, and the prevalence of gang-related violence within prisons.

The underrepresentation of Black staff is an issue throughout the CJS and ultimately impacts engagement between Black individuals and the system throughout the entire criminal justice process. Currently, 4 per cent of prison staff identify as Black,²⁴ despite the fact that Black adults make up approximately 12 per cent of the prison population.²⁵ This disparity points not only to recruitment challenges within the sector, but also to wider institutional barriers that affect career progression and staff retention; both of which are vast issues. The lack of staff diversity can lead to strained staff-to-prisoner relationships, particularly for Black prisoners, who note that they experience feeling culturally misunderstood and unfairly treated.²⁶ Without ethnic representation within

18. Home Office. (2021). *Stop and search data and the effect of geographical differences*. HM Government.

19. See footnote 18: Home Office (2021).

20. Veiga, A., Pina-Sanchez, J., & Lewis, S. (2022), Racial and ethnic disparities in sentencing: What do we know, and where should we go? *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 62(2), 168-172.

21. Bansal, N., Karlsen, S., Sashidharan, S. P., Cohen, R., Chew-Graham, C. A., & Malpass, A. (2022). Understanding ethnic inequalities in mental healthcare in the UK: A meta-ethnography. *PLoS medicine*, 19(12), 1-3.

22. Office for National Statistics (2021) *Confidence in the local police*. GOV.UK

23. Jones, V., Gorell Barnes, L., Pawson, C., Podpadec, T., Vafadari, J., & Whitehouse, S. (2022). *Young people's experiences of racism and their impact on mental health and wellbeing: a report for schools*. RESPECT Project Bristol.

24. Ministry of Justice (2024). *Prison officer workforce*. Ministry of Justice.

25. Ministry of Justice (2024). *Statistics on Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System, 2022*. Ministry of Justice.

26. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2022). *The experiences of adult Black male prisoners and Black prison staff*. HM Government.

staff, Black prisoners may experience feelings of systemic exclusion; where prisoners cannot see themselves reflected in the staff that are there to support them. Although efforts have been made to improve representation, such as targeted recruitment campaigns, such initiatives remain superficial when Black staff who are employed in the Prison Service often experience racial discrimination, microaggressions and limited opportunities for progression.²⁷ This observation limits the effectiveness of diversity initiatives whilst also discouraging prospective Black applicants from joining, or current Black staff from remaining within the Prison Service. It may be argued that these issues must be addressed before creating initiatives to recruit further. The underrepresentation of Black staff within this setting is hugely impactful, and the shortage of Black or ethnically diverse mental health practitioners causes further issues; see paragraph below.

In addition, mental health support for YBM in English and Welsh prisons remains inadequate, which reflects broader systemic failures in both healthcare and the CJS. Individuals in custody experience disproportionately high rates of mental health illnesses, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and personality disorders;²⁸ and for YBM, these challenges are compounded by intersecting factors such as racism, social marginalisation, and the effects of imprisonment itself. However, the support available to Black individuals is often limited, inaccessible, or culturally inappropriate.²⁹ Similar to the lack of racial diversity within prison staff, it is unsurprising that there is also a lack of culturally competent mental health care, and the current psychological interventions and services are not tailored to reflect the cultural backgrounds or lived experiences of Black prisoners. It can be argued that the lack of adequate mental health support, and the lack of ethnic diversity in staff, are intrinsically linked. Despite the fact that Black men are at a higher risk of experiencing mental illness, as discussed previously, access to mental health services in prison continues to be inconsistent, under-resourced and not

entirely reflective of the prison population that it should support. Young people often face difficulty in obtaining timely assessments and treatments, due to mental health services becoming overstretched.³⁰ Whilst these issues affect all individuals who are imprisoned, they are particularly consequential for young Black men, who experience disproportionate treatment throughout the criminal justice process. It is vital that mental health is not viewed in isolation from broader prison conditions, and the specific factors that disproportionality affect Black prisoners are considered.

It is evident that existing social inequalities, such as the over-policing of Black communities, exacerbates the challenges that young Black men face as they enter the prison system, where they are further marginalised. In this environment, they are often subject to institutionalised racism, prison violence and gang affiliations, which are often racialised. With YBM prisoners often experiencing feelings of exclusion, gang membership can be seen as a way to secure safety.³¹ Often, YBM are both victims and perpetrators of gang-related violence, which has an impact on the rehabilitation process for many, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Without timely and meaningful solutions, levels of trust will continue to decrease.

Rehabilitation

Despite the fact that reducing reoffending and assisting individuals with societal reintegration are vital, rehabilitation programmes in English and Welsh prisons are often underfunded and poorly implemented, resulting in limited success in supporting reintegration and minimising reoffending.³² YBM are particularly impacted by this, as they experience challenges within the prison, but also upon release, specifically in securing housing and employment.³³ The challenges of reintegration highlight the urgent need for systemic reform, including, but not limited to, increased funding for rehabilitation programmes; improved training for prison staff; and a comprehensive support system that continues to support individuals beyond prison.

27. See footnote 2: Lammy (2017).

28. Murie, M., Marr, C., Kasinathan, J., Lloyd, T., & Dean, K. (2025). The Mental Health of Young People Entering Custody: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Child Youth Forum*, 2-6.

29. Memon, A., Taylor, K., Mohebati, L., Sundin, J., Cooper, M., Scanlon, T., & de Visser, R. (2016). Perceived barriers to accessing mental health services among black and minority ethnic (BME) communities: a qualitative study in Southeast England. *BMJ Open*. 6(11), 1-6.

30. Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition. (2023). *Children and young people's mental health: An independent review into policy success and challenges over the last decade*. Local Government Association.

31. Crewe, B. (2009). *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*. Oxford University Press

32. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *National Preventive Mechanism: Thirteenth annual report 2021-22*. HM Government.

33. Robertson, L., & Wainwright, J.P. (2020) Black boys and young men's experiences with criminal justice and desistance in England and Wales: A literature review. *Genealogy*. 4(2), 2.

A key issue that contributes to the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation programmes is the lack of training and continuous professional development opportunities for prison staff.³⁴ Due to the lack of ethnic diversity amongst prison staff, it is vital that appropriate cultural competency training is provided. Without sufficient training, individuals can feel misunderstood and mistrusted, particularly YBM, ultimately impacting their engagement with rehabilitation both whilst in prison and upon release. Many YBMs who enter prison have history of trauma and mental health issues, and arguably, the need for sufficient support is particularly vital for this demographic. The lack of training mainly comes as a result of insufficient funding amongst the CJS, particularly impacting HMPPS. Whilst this is a considerable barrier, it is one that must be reviewed, as tailored mental health support and rehabilitation programmes are known to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.³⁵

Furthermore, YBM experience difficulties reintegrating into society as a result of the socio-economic disadvantages that they experience (discussed in the section *Socioeconomic inequalities*). Black individuals are disproportionately represented among prison leavers who experience housing instability upon release, which may significantly increase the likelihood of reoffending.³⁶ Without stable accommodation, individuals will struggle to access other reintegrative support services such as healthcare, education, or employment, due to these services requiring the individual to provide a fixed address. Due to the current housing crisis in England and Wales 'at least 8.5 million people in Britain are living with some kind of unmet housing need' (p. 8).³⁷ With difficulties in securing accommodation, or being in accommodation that is

not fit for purpose, rehabilitation for YBM becomes even more difficult.

Although employment is a clear barrier for all individuals upon release, with the disadvantages that YBM already face, employment is significantly more difficult for YBM. Applicants with a criminal record are less likely to be hired, and there is a particularly strong reluctance for employers to hire convicted Black individuals.³⁸ Pager's study, based on New York City data, showed that Black applicants with a criminal record are less often invited to interview, and receive fewer opportunities from employers — compared to white applicants with a criminal record.³⁹ While specific England and Wales-focused longitudinal data is more limited, similar patterns of racial disadvantage are acknowledged.⁴⁰ With YBM experiencing difficulties with employment more generally, the addition of holding a criminal record makes gaining employment upon release near impossible, meaning YBM are at a greater risk of poverty, social exclusion and reoffending.

As a result of the difficulties that YBM face within society generally, and within the context of the CJS specifically, the psychological and social consequences are not to be overlooked. As discussed, mental health support tends to be lacking, but particularly post-release mental health support. With Black individuals' possessing a high reoffending rate of 26 per cent, mental health support to support reintegration and minimise reoffending is extremely vital.⁴¹ Furthermore, many Black individuals highlight that they experience intense surveillance and marginalisation upon release, highlighting the 'urgent need to take seriously the racialisation of crime' (p. 11).⁴² Providing adequate and worthwhile mental health support is particularly urgent for young Black men, who

These plans fail to consider the root causes of systemic racism, as well as the difference of experiences between ethnic groups.

34. See footnote 28: Murie, M., Marr, C., Kasinathan, J., Lloyd, T., & Dean, K. (2025).

35. O'Shea, N., & Bell, A. (2021). *A spending review for wellbeing: The case for investment in children's mental health*. Centre for Mental Health.

36. Ajai-Thomas, C. (2024). *Young Black People's Experiences of Homelessness in London: Homelessness and Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities in the UK: A knowledge and capacity building programme*. Heriot-Watt University

37. Kiberd, E., & O'Conner, A. (2024). *The Foundations of The Housing Crisis: How Our Extractive Land and Development Models Work Against Public Good*. New Economics Foundations

38. Pager, D., Western, B., & Sugie, N. (2009). Sequencing Disadvantage: Barriers to Employment Facing Young Black and White Men with Criminal Records. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 623(1), 1-19.

39. See footnote 38: Pager, D., Western, B., & Sugie, N. (2009)

40. See footnote 30: Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition. (2023).

41. Ministry of Justice (2024). *Reoffending [data set]. Ethnicity facts and figures. HM Government. Reoffending - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures*

42. Williams, P., & Clarke, B. (2018). The Black Criminal Other as an Object of Social Control. *Social Science*, 7(11), 1-14.

experience a lack of trust in the CJS from a young age, and this level of trust often tends to continue to decrease (see section *Criminal justice legislation*).

Overall, reintegration and rehabilitation for young Black individuals is vital but a political and structural challenge. The factors discussed above, housing instability, limited/a lack of employment opportunities, institutional discrimination, and a lack of tailored support services, all contribute to high reoffending rates and poor post-prison outcomes. The authors argue that in order to address these issues, there must be a concerted effort by policymakers and criminal justice institutions to invest in equitable housing access, fair employment practices, holistic reintegration programmes and solid mental health support services that recognise the unique experiences of young Black men in the CJS.

Recommendations

To address the persistent disproportionality and adverse experiences of YBM within England and Wales prison systems, a comprehensive and structural approach is required, one that acknowledges the intersectionality of race, age, and systemic disadvantage.

1. **Plans that reflect unified strategies and approaches:** Whilst there is some movement to address racial disproportionality, for example, the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) and the HMPPS' Race Action Programme (RAP), these plans both have different focuses in relation to ethnicity and therefore create differences in treatment. With the PRAP focusing on improving policing for Black individuals, and the RAP focused on improving outcomes for Black and ethnic minority individuals, these plans are disparate. Although some movement, i.e., creating such plans, is useful to improving community engagement, trust and confidence in the CJS, the authors argue that the initiatives and plans must correlate with one another. This ensures that individuals receive the same treatment, access to services and support throughout the CJS, rather than differing approaches.
2. **Responding to the needs of all ethnic communities:** Furthermore, there must be a strong focus on the experiences of prison by ethnicity; although, not solely focusing on
3. **Improved training opportunities:** With young Black and mixed heritage individuals often having complex presenting needs,⁴⁴ there is a pressing need to expand rehabilitation programmes that align with the cultural and social experiences of young Black men. Such programmes should reflect the lived experiences of individuals, and incorporate community-led approaches, which may help shape policy and practice, and engagement and reduce reoffending. The authors stress that mentorship and education, particularly programmes such as Offending Behaviour Programmes, within prisons must be expanded, with individuals receiving mentoring from an individual with a similar ethnic background to understand the lived experience. In addition, training programmes must also consider the needs of individuals, such as age, with older individuals facing challenges in engaging in prison training programmes and activities.⁴⁵ Furthermore, employing local external organisations to deliver this training may improve community engagement, as well as career prospects for individuals' post-release.
4. **Stronger legislative accountability:** Whilst the current legislation, outlined in section *Criminal justice legislation*, provides legal frameworks for addressing discrimination and

Black individuals. A large proportion of the academic literature based on race and crime focuses on Black individuals, and whilst it is important to have a strong focus on Black individuals due to the pertinent issues that are present within disproportionality in the CJS, the literature must also give attention to other ethnic minority groups. Often other ethnic minority groups tend to be overlooked within policy and practice as a result, for example, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals who experience racism and discrimination within prisons.⁴³ The inclusion of all ethnic groups will allow solid plans to drive forward fair and just treatment for all individuals who have experience within the CJS. Whilst some work has been done to acknowledge the lived experience of other ethnic groups, minimal work has been done to make a considerable difference to public trust and confidence in the CJS.

43. Gavin, P. (2019) 'Prison is the worst place a Traveller could be': The experiences of Irish Travellers in prison in England and Wales. *Probation Service*, 16 (1).

44. See footnote 22: Office for National Statistics (2021)

45. Gavin, P., Porter, C. N., & MacDonald, F. (2024). A Review of the Healthcare and Social Care Needs of the Older Prisoner Population in England and Wales. *Social Sciences*, 14(1), 4.

protecting marginalised groups, the legislation does little to proactively mitigate the occurrence of such incidents. The enforcement of these laws is often inconsistent, with incidents being underreported or inadequately investigated.⁴⁶ The legislation, therefore, is viewed by the authors as reactive rather than preventive; rather than addressing the root causes or promoting preventative education, it instead seeks to punish people convicted of crime following an incident. Criminal justice agencies must be held accountable when the legislation fails to achieve its intended impact.

Although these recommendations have been put forward by many official reports and academics, it is vital that feasible and timely responses are provided. Not only will this help to improve levels of trust and confidence between ethnic minority individuals and the CJS, it will also ensure that services are held to account if deadlines are not met. Overall, there is a lot of progress yet to be made and without the support of the policymakers, many of the issues raised will continue — for several more decades.

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46. Clayton, J., Donovan, C., & Macdonald, S. (2016). A critical portrait of hate crime/incident reporting in North East England: The value of statistical data and the politics of recording in an age of austerity. *Geoforum*, 75(1), 68.

Equality, diversity and inclusion champions: An interview with Manisha Guru

Manisha Guru was accepted for the position of an NHS Assistant Psychologist at HMP Long Lartin in November 2022. She previously worked in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Low Secure Unit and Adult Acute Service within the private mental health sector. She has also been an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion champion for Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (Inclusion) since December 2023. She was interviewed by **Dr Hannah Bennett**, who is the Guest editor of the Prison Service Journal Special Edition on Race in Prison.

The interview was conducted in Summer 2024.

HB: Tell me about the role of an EDI Champion? What does it involve?

MG: An Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Champion's main responsibility is to support delivery of the Trust's EDI Strategy and Action Plan and help to drive behavioural and cultural change across the organisation. These aims are achieved by raising awareness of EDI and the Trust's related strategy and action plan, developing and implementing anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices, and supporting cultural transformation.

This includes partnering with the Care Group EDI Working Group to implement local EDI initiatives, serving as the departmental point of contact for EDI issues, and encouraging staff to voice concerns about service delivery and staff experiences. The role also entails promoting adherence to relevant EDI policies and guidelines, sharing information about Trust initiatives and opportunities, encouraging staff to join Trust and Integrated Care System (ICS) equality networks, and supporting inclusive practices both within their service areas and across the Trust.

HB: What do you see as the role of the EDI Champion?

MG: In my role as an EDI Champion, I am passionate about promoting diverse and inclusive services for our clients, the families and carers involved, and staff members. For me, this means having the consideration for fairness and inclusivity. It is about recognising we are all worthy human beings who are entitled to equal considerations regardless of perceived or real differences in any of our protected characteristics such as ethnic origin or social status.

I feel privileged to be part of a network where we can consider ways to improve awareness, provide an outlet for clients and staff alike to raise EDI issues and

help empower all parties to be supported in instilling positive change. I feel it is important to understand the tools that are required to remove the oppressive barriers that marginalise people's experience. This has shaped my holistic approach, allowing me to focus on 'what's happened to you' and avoid labels when assessing and delivering services. We need a more critical understanding of power and privilege, and a commitment to change the system in a way that allows for true equity and moral consideration for all. To allow this change to happen, it is important for me to capture unique perspectives and ensure diverse voices are heard.

HB: How do you ensure that the voices of prisoners from diverse racial backgrounds are heard and acted upon?

MG: If we consider the process of referral and engagement with our services, as an NHS department, separate to the prison disciplines, we encourage anyone seeking mental health or substance use needs to access our services. Our name 'NHS Inclusion' and the way in which we conduct ourselves professionally underpins the values that anyone can be assessed for suitability to use the service. We also promote that our service is a 'safe and confidential space', which provides residents a platform to discuss any concern in relation to our service.

For new transfers into the prison, we make a conscious effort to see residents within 5 days of arriving, to identify if there is a need for our services. However, we do not just stop here; if we feel the resident needs access to other disciplines like chaplaincy, as faith may be protective for them, then we support by signposting to the relevant spaces.

We have residents who may not be able to communicate their needs due to language barriers. To overcome this, we have a language poster, 'Language Line', which helps to indicate what their main language is, and from this, we work with the prison to access

interpreters. I recall a particular case in this prison, where a resident was of Romanian heritage and presented with mental health difficulties. An interpreter was organised and prison officers who spoke the language willingly came forward to support. Our dedication to support all individuals allowed early intervention work to reduce any risk to self and others.

Once individuals are taken onto our caseload, we use resources such as the 'Mental Health Recovery Star'. This tool includes sections to capture ethnicity and different domains of life that indicate what is important to know about the individual's identity. To share some examples, the Recovery Star includes talking through social networks, relationships, identity and self-esteem, which all function as prompts to explore needs.

We are a service that is always evolving around the needs of our residents. To ensure our service is fit for purpose, we routinely capture feedback via our 'Treatment Feedback Forms'. A vital question asked within this survey is 'have you been treated with dignity and respect?' From previous surveys processed, a large majority have felt supported through accessing Inclusion. In addition, Inclusion have collaborated with Care Opinion.

This independent website allows the residents to share a story about their experience of the care by Inclusion. This gives residents a voice to share what has been good, what could be different and allows ways that lead to change for our service.

HB: How does your role relate to race in prison?

MG: In the Equality Act (2010), race can mean your colour, or your nationality (including your citizenship). It can also mean your ethnic or national origins, which may not be the same as your current nationality. Within the Prison Service, and more specifically in HMP Long Lartin, a large majority of the residents belong to Asian, black and Eastern European communities. In my role as an EDI champion, combined with my role as an Assistant Psychologist, it is important to consider the unique experiences of an individual's lifeworld and work together to create a space of psychological safety.

When people come to their therapy sessions, it is vital for me to create an environment that enables them

to feel safe to speak about their personal lives. It is our responsibility to use our privileged position as a professional to open doors to discuss difficulties, it is only then that individuals feel empowered to speak up. In the same vein, people need to be provided with psychologically safe places to explore and have difficult conversations about racism in general and structural racism. It is via these outlets that concerns related to race may be captured. It is then my responsibility to safeguard the individual by alerting the prison's Safer Custody department situated within the prison.

HB: Can you tell me about the continuous professional development training on Cultural Competency that you accessed via the 'Bespoke Mental Health', and what changes were implemented from this, particularly around race in prison?

MG: Weaver described culture as like an iceberg: on the surface level, we can explicitly observe and learn about a person's culture by considering their language, traditions, clothing, food and drink.¹ However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. On a deeper level, there are certain features about a culture that would take commitment and time to uncover and understand. It is for this reason that I chose to attend the 'Cultural Sensitivity in Clinical Practice' workshop delivered by Dr Reena Vohora (Consultant Clinical Psychologist). A key part of this workshop highlighted how healthcare professionals often opt out or simply do not ask culturally responsive questions due to time constraints or fear of getting things wrong.

The training empowered me to consider how our treatment towards clients could be more inclusive. I did some research into important questions about a person's identity, in line with the 'Social Graces',² and fine-tuned our clinical assessment tool to include more culturally responsive questions. From these assessment questions, a formulation is produced. In clinical practice, formulations are used to communicate a hypothesis about the cause and nature of the clients presenting problems. This then provides a framework for developing the most suitable treatment approach. When considering a formulation for clients, I recognised how one's culture and religious beliefs can

We need more a critical understanding of power and privilege, and a commitment to change the system.

1. Weaver, G. R. (1986). Understanding and coping with cross-cultural adjustment stress. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Cross-cultural orientation: New conceptualizations and applications* (pp. 111–145). University Press of America.
2. Burnham, J. (2012). Developments in Social GRRRAACCEEESSS: Visible–invisible, voiced–unvoiced. In I. Krause (Ed.), *Culture and reflexivity in systemic psychotherapy: Mutual perspectives* (pp. 139–160). Karnac Books.

impact the way mental health difficulties are understood. I came across a paper by Rathod et al which covered the role of culture in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.³ This provided useful prompts to understand unconditional beliefs and values of cultures that underpin individual's behaviours.

HB: Can you share any specific examples of how the culturally responsive questions have led to better outcomes for prisoners?

MG: I once worked with a client who was of black heritage. Through asking about what is important about his identity and culture, he shared that his faith is less common within the prison population and that he had concerns about how this may open him up to being vulnerable amongst other residents who have a more renowned faith group. The client raised concerns about risk of safety. As a precaution, with the resident's consent, the Safer Custody prison department and my team were alerted of a potential safeguarding concern. This helped to explore provisions that could be put in place to reduce and manage risk.

HB: Thank you; this is great to hear. What do you see as the strengths of the current prison system in addressing racial issues?

MG: I cannot comment on how other disciplines operate within the prison system. As I work with an Integrated Mental Health and Substance Misuse team, embedded within the Prison Service, I feel our services are set up to underpin NHS values, ensuring that everyone has equal access to care and resources, and that no one is left behind. To mitigate any issues concerning race, the service works in a way to empower the need for co-production that is involving people in their care and providing an equal level of respect and dignity.

To evidence this, I once worked with a client at HMP Long Lartin, who was of Gypsy heritage. His culture and social identity was of importance to him and by acknowledging his protected characteristic, it was felt that the therapeutic alliance strengthened, and the client opened up more about his cultural identity. The benefit of understanding the personal impact of culture and being aware of our own assumptions,

biases, thoughts and feelings with ourselves and others is impactful because as self-awareness increases, acceptance of others increases.⁴ By acknowledging the client's identity, the client was able to share their appreciation for nature and how this was a key feature of his community lifestyle. Holding his life views and values in mind, his therapy intervention was collaboratively adapted to align more with his identity. This was evidenced to have a positive impact in reducing psychological distress and enhancing psychological wellbeing.

HB: In many prisons, racial tensions and disparities are significant cultural issues that can impact the safety and rehabilitation of people living in prison. Could you discuss the primary racial challenges faced within the prison system, and how do you believe these issues can be effectively addressed to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment? Specifically, what strategies or tools would you implement to facilitate a culture change that reduces racial conflicts and promotes understanding and cooperation among diverse prison populations?

MG: The punitive environment within a prison may unconsciously oppress some individuals more than others. The regimented and disciplinary features of prison operations may reinforce a 'one size fits all'. However, without taking the time to gain an in-depth understanding of a prisoner's background, this may lead to misinterpretation of why certain behaviours by a prisoner are carried out. This could then cloud staff's judgements of prisoners, where they are then categorised into being the 'good, idealised' prisoners versus the 'bad, devalued' prisoners. This can then inadvertently feed unfavourable attitudes, prejudices and discriminatory beliefs about the prisoner(s).⁵ Such unhelpful relationships between the prisoner and staff can unintentionally reinforce the prisoner's difficulties, resulting in inconsistent support and invalidation of the difficulties presented. Consequently, staff may end up inadvertently triggering prisoners and problematic behaviours continue to escalate.

There is compelling evidence to show that change is possible despite the known barriers in prisons and

It is important for me to capture unique perspectives and ensure diverse voices are heard.

3. Rathod, S., Kingdon, D., Pinninti, N., Turkington, D., & Phiri, P. (2015). *Cultural adaptation of CBT for serious mental illness: A guide for training and practice*. Wiley-Blackwell.
4. Speight, S. L., Myers, L. J., Cox, C. I., & Highlen, P. S. (1991). A redefinition of multicultural counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*(1), 29–36.
5. Birmingham, L. (2003). The mental health of prisoners. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 9*(3), 191–199.

there is real potential to address safety and disempowerment issues.⁶ One way I feel this change could be made is by acknowledging the need for awareness and education of working with and amongst people of diverse backgrounds. I feel this should be a key feature of staff training across all disciplines, as part of their induction to prison work. I also feel that there should be more outlets for all disciplines to 'speak up' about witnessed discrimination and/or prejudiced beliefs. We need to actively discourage behaviour that does not align with the attributes that His Majesty's Prison Service stands for. Equally prisoners should be empowered to share racial conflicts with trusted members of staff, and it should be everyone's responsibility to ensure anti-racist practices flourish within the Prison Service.

HB: So, there is a role for the prisoner in promoting racial equity and reducing racial conflicts...

MG: With the relevant resources provided, prisoners could be empowered to celebrate diversity. As an EDI champion, I promote EDI events within my team. I feel it would be worthwhile to have these displayed on the wings as well to encourage curiosity and open communication about various identities. I have recently learnt that the chaplaincy department within our prison are part of the Equality Action Team. They regularly consider significant religious events and organise gatherings for prisoners. As a suggestion, it may help prisoners to co-facilitate talks on significant events in relation to their race and faith groups. This could be done collaboratively with the Education department, namely religious studies and history. By raising awareness and providing spaces to unpick unconscious biases may be one way to get a better understanding of diversity and promote inclusivity.

HB: How do you think the approach to race in prisons will evolve over the next five years, and what changes do you hope to see?

MG: This is a big question but a very important one to ask. I hope race is factored in and considered from the very beginning of an individual entering prison. All prison and civilian staff should have mandatory training, which covers the need to respect all nine protective characteristics as outlined by the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins), religion or belief (including lack of belief), sex (i.e. being male or female), sexual orientation).

From reception, initial assessment, intervention work and evaluation of services, the voice of all prisoners from diverse backgrounds should be captured and include questions of how we can better understand their race and the experiences that come with it. It may be helpful to capture their voice in their profile under such titles as 'spiritual and cultural needs'. These are all simple but effective methods towards a positive culture change within prisons.

HB: How has your role as an EDI Champion affected your views on race and equality, both professionally and personally?

MG: My race is a big part of my identity. Growing up in a low socio-economic area, I found myself surrounded by people with the same ethnic background. Naturally, this brought up the feelings of belonging and inclusivity because we shared the same understanding, culture, and way of life. This sense of belonging was slightly disrupted when I moved out of my hometown and began to progress with my career. I came to work in a prison, where in my team I was the only ethnic minority, and somehow this heightened my sense of identity. I wanted to use my history and life experiences as an ethnic minority to encourage others to embrace their identity. I wanted all staff and prisoners to feel a sense of safety concerning EDI matters so when the role of an EDI champion came up, I knew this was my calling.

HB: What keeps you motivated to continue working on these challenging issues within the prison system?

MG: I recognise that promoting a culture change within prisons is a challenge within itself; however, it is my morals and values that have carried me through. My ability to share compassion for prisoners and staff helps me to recognise and reflect on unique adversities, and how distress is experienced. My devotion to working collaboratively helps to consider the importance of comprehensive and holistic treatment, working together with the prison to achieve better outcomes. Lastly, the respect I hold for any and every person, irrespective of who they are or where they are from, encourages me to hear stories, learn about new experiences and unpick my curiosity, which helps to answer an important question: what can I be doing to contribute to a sense of safety for all with EDI matters?

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6. Bradley, K. (2017). Speech during the 'Prisons: Overcrowding' debate, House of Lords, 7 September 2017.

Black prisoners, safety and risk

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Black men in prison are exposed to heightened levels of violence as both perpetrators and victims;² at the same time, they are much less likely to harm themselves or to report vulnerabilities or victimisation from other prisoners.³ These apparently contradictory findings have been replicated many times, causing concern and confusion.

In order to provide a route into understanding them, I explore the experiences of adult male Black prisoners within a historical and theoretical frame. I believe these dimensions can help us to better understand the disproportionality and mistrust that continue to characterise the prison lives of many Black people and inform meaningful practical responses. I draw on various sources but particularly the 2022 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) thematic review of the experiences of Black prisoners and Black staff,⁴ which looked closely at experiences of safety. A premise of this exploration is that assessing and managing risk of harm relies on good professional relationships that promote self-expression and open communication between staff and prisoners. When these relationships are distorted by prejudice, fear, suspicion or cultural misunderstanding, physical and psychological safety are compromised.

Force against Black prisoners: A worsening story

'I think there's a widespread unconscious understanding of the black male as aggressive, and of the black body, and yes, it does create more use of force.' (Black staff)⁵

Staff use force against Black prisoners more than against other groups, especially the most extreme types of force represented by PAVA spray and batons.⁶ This disproportionality has grown and become strongly embedded: at the time of the HMIP review, young adult Black prisoners in the 18-24 age group were three times more likely than other ethnic groups to be struck by batons, and twice as likely to be sprayed with PAVA.⁷ However, a major study published in 2025 by Grant J. Bosworth et al. found that Black prisoners were over eight times more likely than White prisoners to be struck by a baton and over six times more likely to be sprayed with PAVA.⁸ This situation is likely to get worse with the recent government announcement that PAVA is to be permitted in young offender institutions; around a quarter of all children in custody are Black and a further 18 per cent are of mixed ethnicity.⁹ Similarly, proposals to make tasers available in some prisons are likely to follow the same pattern, affecting Black prisoners more than others.

1. This article is written in a personal capacity. I am grateful to Liz Dixon, Mary Bosworth, Peter Dawson and the peer reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.
2. Ministry of Justice. (2023). *Violence Involving Prisoners*, last updated 8 August 2023. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/prison-and-custody-incidents/violence-involving-prisoners/4.1/#by-ethnicity-over-time-assailants-only>
3. HMIP. (2022). *The Experiences of Adult Black Male Prisoners and Black Prison Staff*. HMIP.
4. See footnote 3: HMIP (2022).
5. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are taken from fieldwork data gathered for: HMIP (2022). *The Experiences of Adult Black Male Prisoners and Black Prison Staff*. HMIP. This article draws on the original data, which were not necessarily included in the published report.
6. Pelargonic acid vanillylamide, sometimes referred to as pepper spray.
7. These data were from 2018 to 2021.
8. Bosworth, G.J., Watkinson, C. Wilkinson, K., Summerson, F., Christian, R. & Travers, R. (2025). *Use of Force: An Exploratory Analysis of Use of Force in Prisons 2018-2023*. HM Prison and Probation Service. The report also considered the experiences of women and found that those with a Black (and mixed ethnicity) identity experienced greater planned force (16% of all force) compared to White women (10%), and that Black women were much more likely to experience force as a result of fights or assaults (22% compared to 15% for White women), and much less likely to experience force after self-harm (3% compared to 18% for White women). See also, Prison Reform Trust. (2023). *Equality incapacitated: the disproportionate impact of PAVA spray on Black, Muslim and disabled prisoners*. Prison Reform Trust: <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/the-disproportionate-use-of-pava-spray-in-prisons-has-become-normalised/>
9. Youth Justice Board. (2025). *Youth Justice Statistics: 2023-2024*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024#children-in-youth-custody>

Echoing previous reviews,^{10 11} Bosworth et al identify shortcomings in governance of the use of force. These include insufficient body-worn camera footage of incidents, poor use of ethnicity data to understand the problem and lack of protected time for the important role of specialist use of force coordinators, all of which undermine confidence in systems of accountability. They further criticise a lack of investigation and discussion of why force was happening in the first place, which in some respects is the most damning finding, and goes to the heart of concerns around disproportionality.

Why is use of force so disproportionate?

'I feel like black prisoners have been looked at as more dangerous than other people even though they are not sometimes a darker skin person might be looked at by a fair skinned white person as scary or unapproachable.' (Black prisoner)

'They'll go for the black guy first.' (Black prisoner)¹²

Effective de-escalation of incidents relies on the ability of staff to communicate confidently with prisoners, and good relationships support that communication. White staff told us how hard they tried to treat people equally and professionally, but some also recognised they had difficulties in communicating effectively with Black prisoners. Many had little insight into why they were often unable to do so and were confused and concerned, uncomfortable feelings that led some to keep a greater distance. A helpfully honest if disturbing insight from some White staff was that they were more likely to resort to force against Black prisoners, and to do so more quickly, because they found it harder to judge the intent or seriousness of their behaviour. There was a strong tendency for staff to talk about Black prisoners in terms primarily of threat:

'They take over certain areas, don't they, they've taken over, like, the smoking shelters and stuff like that... going in and playing

dominoes... it just feels like they, you know, they don't welcome anyone else in' (Staff group)

Black staff generally agreed that their White colleagues were more likely to overreact to Black prisoners:

'[if you review use of force incidents] you will then realise really quickly that black prisoners are more likely to be dealt with heavy-handedly.' (Black officer)

Suspicion and weaker relationships between many White staff and Black prisoners were therefore having a direct impact on the escalation of perceived risk and use of force.

Staff who were asked about relationships with Black prisoners immediately started to talk about them as gang members.

'... they're quick to press their bell and get ... me wrapped up than say John next door, because they feel, like, they can talk to John, because John's not as much of an animal and they feel they can get him behind his door... they just need educating more than anything.' (Black prisoner)

Black prisoners also felt that staff were likely to use disproportionate force when reacting to incidents involving them because of the stereotype of them being strong, violent and aggressive, especially if they were in younger age groups. Some described this as a culmination of labelling through their lives. For example, some told us that at school their teachers were afraid of their difference, stereotyped them as aggressive and punished them more swiftly and harshly than was justified by their behaviour. One Black prisoner spoke of this 'fear factor' in prisons, by which he meant that staff tended to believe threats from Black prisoners more than White prisoners.

'If a white inmate and a black inmate react the same way, they'll say one is vulnerable but one is aggressive... they would class me as aggressive but the white one as vulnerable.' (Black prisoner)

10. E.g. see Ministry of Justice. (2008). *Race Review 2008: Implementing Race Equality in Prisons – Five Years On*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/294157/1000439race_review_part_1.pdf

11. Lammy, D (2017) *The Lammy Review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lammy-review-final-report>

12. See footnote 9: Bosworth et al. (2025): p.45.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was some evidence that Black prisoners felt they had to resist or 'stand up to' staff, which may have contributed to more incidents, and more force. Both Black and White staff believed that Black prisoners were in some cases accepting or even trying to live up to the labelling of them as aggressive or dangerous and were more likely to be violent as a result. As one Black officer put it, 'OK, if that's the stereotype, I'll act up to it, I'll become that person'. One prisoner explained how he had decided to become a 'dangerous Black man' to protect himself:

'They were harassing me, left right and centre... I just had to give them what they wanted... I'm a good guy, they thought I was aggressive, so I just went on aggressive to them... 'you want to see a menace, I'll show you a menace.' (Black prisoner)

Gang assumptions

Organised criminal activity is one of the most serious threats to the stability and safety of prisons today. However, evidence for the widespread presence of gangs organised primarily around ethnicity is thin and, as Coretta Phillips noted over a decade ago, cultural groupings are easily confused with whatever people think that a gang might be.¹³

Many Black prisoners in the HMIP study felt that damaging assumptions were still made about their risk in relation to gang membership, even when they had no gang affiliation or involvement in violent or drug offences. They felt they were seen not as individuals, but rather as possessors of various risk identifiers such as gang member, Black, young or Muslim.

The strength of the association between Black prisoners, gangs and violence was clear from our staff interviews: in one group interview, staff who were asked about relationships with Black prisoners immediately started to talk about them as gang members. They found it difficult to move beyond this theme, even when it became obvious that they had no factual basis for the gang affiliations they were asserting. At the same time, none considered that there might be White gang members in the establishment.

The tendency of White staff to assume gang membership and then use it as a lens through which to view all interactions with Black prisoners was also a concern raised by Black staff.

'Seeing black young men in a group, white staff will think, '...they're up to something', without seeing the bigger picture.' (Black staff)

Black prisoners believed that their progression through the prison system could be affected by the gang member label, which could hinder opportunities for early release or work. It corroded staff-prisoner relationships and undermined prisoners' motivation.

One man, annoyed that staff had automatically assumed he was a gang member, told us he had stopped all non-essential communication with them.

Risk assessment is clearly an essential part of what prisons do, but both prisoners and Black staff told us that staff were interpreting unexpected, hard-to-understand or discomfoting behaviours as indicators of risk rather than difference or need. Such findings revealed the need for more institutional engagement with the way in which risk is ascribed to Black prisoners, along with a stronger understanding of the powerful

impact of security departments on the experiences of people in custody.

Self-harm and mental health

*'Jamal was perceived to be a gangster, nothing more. And the perception that gangsters don't have substance misuse issues or thoughts of self-harm meant he was left alone to figure out how to get through his stretch alone.'*¹⁴

Black prisoners have historically been less likely than other ethnic groups to harm themselves in prison. This trend is especially pronounced in relation to White prisoners whose rate of recorded self-harm is more than five times higher.¹⁵ Similarly, the rate of self-

Staff were interpreting unexpected, hard-to-understand or discomfoting behaviours as indicators of risk rather than difference or need.

13. Phillips, C. (2012). *The Multicultural Prison: Ethnicity, Masculinity, and Social Relations among Prisoners*. Oxford University Press.

14. Kirwin, A. (2022). *Criminal*. Trapeze, 169.

15. These published data were last updated in 2023 but relate to 2020, when Black prisoners had a rate of self-harm of 150 per thousand prisoners compared to 823 per thousand for White prisoners. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/prison-and-custody-incidents/self-inflicted-deaths-and-harm-in-prison-custody/latest/>

inflicted deaths among Black prisoners in 2024 (0.1 per 1000 prisoners) was lower than that for White prisoners (1.3) and all other ethnic groups combined (0.3).^{16 17} Black prisoners are also less likely to report mental health problems,¹⁸ reinforcing the impression of resilience and indicating the presence of as yet little understood protective factors.

There was indeed a common theme in Black prisoners' accounts of personal resilience and a sense of pride about their ability to endure stress, themes that have also emerged from research with young Black men in other settings.¹⁹ For example, one man said that Black people carried with them the history of their predecessors 'who have been through worse' and felt they should not complain about what they were going through. Another reflected a sense of genuine confusion about the concept of mental vulnerability.

'I don't know if anyone in my family has ever suffered with mental health, they haven't brought it up, never mentioned it so coming here and hearing these people suffer from ADHD, schizophrenia, all of that, I'm like what is all that, so if they [i.e. other Black prisoners] have similar upbringings to me, which a lot of them do, they probably just wouldn't even see it as mental health, they will just see it as, that's the way of life and this is what I'm going through.' (Black prisoner)

Prisoners also said that many Black people would neither recognise nor acknowledge psychological insecurity because talking about mental health was seen as 'shameful'.

'Black people have this pride like 'yeah I'm the man', they don't want to be seen as weak and if you demonstrate vulnerability that shows you're weak.' (Black prisoner)

Others were unwilling to share concerns with staff because of mistrust and poor treatment:

'I feel degraded by some staff — this is why people don't want to share their personal things like self-harm.' (Black prisoner)

'...prisoners do not want to confess their vulnerabilities to officers, because officers can then use that against them.' (Black prisoner)

Black prisoners generally said they relied on the help of peers, or the distraction and discipline provided by prison activities to manage stress. They did not trust staff to respect confidentiality and were concerned that knowledge of mental health problems might lead to victimisation from staff or other prisoners. As a result, some felt that staff accepted the 'strong' self-image too readily, reinforcing the expectation that Black prisoners did not need support, which in turn discouraged prisoners from sharing concerns as they did not feel

they would be taken seriously. This also embedded shallower relationships between Black prisoners and staff.

Staff accepted the 'strong' self-image too readily, reinforcing the expectation that Black prisoners did not need support.

'A lot of prisoners have learned, via school and experiences in the community, that there is no point asking for help because you won't get the support you need, people make assumptions about you.' (Black manager)

The situation was compounded by a fear of admitting to mental health problems in case that amplified perceptions of unpredictability and risk, encouraging the 'dangerous Black man' stereotype. During one prisoner group interview, Black prisoners were particularly concerned about being heavily medicated through depot injections, which was why they all said they would not seek help from the prison for their mental health. The Black actor and presenter David Harewood, who experienced a psychotic breakdown, addresses this point in his own account of hospitalisation:

'In my own records I'm described as a 'large Black man' and it's also interesting to note the

16. Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: Deaths in Prison Custody to December 2024 Assaults and Self-harm to September 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-september-2024/safety-in-custody-statistics-england-and-wales-deaths-in-prison-custody-to-december-2024-assaults-and-self-harm-to-september-2024>

17. Self-inflicted Deaths and Harm in Prison Custody. (2023). <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/prison-and-custody-incidents/self-inflicted-deaths-and-harm-in-prison-custody/latest/#by-ethnicity-over-time-self-harm-in-prison-custody>

18. See footnote 3: HMIP (2022).

19. E.g. see Meechan, H., John, M. & Hanna, P. (2021) Understandings of mental health and support for Black male adolescents living in the UK, *Children and Youth Services Review* 129, 106192.

*very high doses of drugs I received... at levels four times the current recommendations.'*²⁰

A troubling consequence of such concerns is that when Black prisoners did need help from staff, they may not have felt that they could ask for it. As a result, unrecognised trauma often came to light only when a person's mental health had deteriorated significantly. There is a wealth of evidence that Black people are generally underrepresented in primary mental health care services and overrepresented in crisis pathways and compulsory detention.²¹ Harewood again makes this point well:

*'Black people are reluctant to seek help because they regularly experience not being heard and they fear they will be overmedicated instead of treated. To voluntarily enter the mental health system as a Black man ... is to place yourself in an extremely vulnerable position... like me, so many Black men only enter the mental health system at a point of crisis rather than seeking help at an earlier stage.'*²²

Black men's reluctance to seek mental health support in prison, reflects a quite reasonable fear of mistreatment and racism, as much as any 'cultural' differences, while their lower likelihood of self-harming appears to result from a combination of individual cultural beliefs and a tendency to find support from peers. At the same time, the desire to rely on friends with whom they shared a positive group identity, puts Black prisoners at greater risk of being judged to be conspiring nefariously and/or to be gang members. Negotiating such complex relational dynamics places Black prisoners under unusual mental strain. There is also some evidence staff overestimate the resilience of Black prisoners and insufficiently understand how vulnerability can find expression in multiple ways that do not involve direct self-harm.

Making sense of experience

While there is well-established and growing evidence that Black prisoners have different experiences

of prison life to other ethnic groups, there have been few attempts to find a conceptual frame that can help us to better understand and use such findings to change behaviours. As ever, the best place to start is the accounts of people who have direct experience.

Many Black prisoners and Black staff in the HMIP study used historical and political lenses to learn about shared experiences of discrimination and resilience. For example, one Black officer told us that his experiences of being excluded and undermined by White colleagues had set off a deep psychological distress at being seen as 'inferior'. As he struggled to understand and find meaning in his experiences, he said that he read about the concept of 'post-traumatic slave syndrome', a term coined by US academic Joy de Gruy to help explain

contemporary attitudes, behaviours, vulnerabilities and strengths of African Americans. She argues, for example, that a reluctance of Black parents to praise their children and recognise their worth today is rooted in the terror of them coming to the attention of slave masters who might take them away to be raped or exploited in other ways. This rational

historically specific response has, she suggests, been unconsciously transmitted down through generations, with implications today for the confidence and progress of Black people, internalisation of racist beliefs, confusion and anger.²³

The fact that the prison officer who read this was not an American himself was irrelevant — the analysis resonated and provided the solace of a group identity that could start to explain his psychological distress: 'As Black people we are still going through the pain of slavery'. The cultural echoes of slavery and links with the US were also present in discussions with other interviewees. A Black officer said he had been called a 'cotton-picking n***' by a White prisoner, while a Black prisoner spoke contemptuously of other Black prisoners on his wing who had a good relationship with staff, describing them as 'house-n***s'. Events taking place in the cultural powerhouse of the US both today and in the past reverberate in the UK: in one prison a Black senior manager described feeling despondent when, four days after the death of George Floyd in the US — at a time when solidarity protests were erupting across the UK — she had to deal with the anger caused by a

In a very direct fashion, Black identity therefore creates vulnerability for Black prisoners.

20. Harewood, D. (2021). *Maybe I Don't Belong Here: A Memoir of Race, Identity, Breakdown and Recovery.* Bluebird, p.195.

21. Bansal, N., Karlsen, S., Sashidharan, S. P., Cohen, R., Chew-Graham, C. A., & Malpass, A. (2022). Understanding ethnic inequalities in mental healthcare in the UK: A meta-ethnography, *PLoS Medicine*, 19(12). <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1004139>

22. See footnote 19: Harewood (2021), p.196.

23. Degruy, J. (2017). *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Revised Edition: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing.* Joy Degruy Publications Inc, 29-30.

White officer saying to a Black prisoner, 'hurry up and get your lunch or I'll kneel on your neck for nine minutes', a comment defended as a 'joke' and 'banter'.

While US experiences are relevant, the UK has its own history of slavery, combined with a profound legacy of colonial domination that was predicated on the psychological and physical oppression, largely of Black and brown people. The empire persisted long after the end of slavery, as other ways of sustaining economic domination were prioritised including indentured labour or debt bondage. Slavery and colonial domination did not take place because of racism. 'Race' is a biologically meaningless term invented in the seventeenth century as a way for colonists and slave-owners to justify the subjugation and enslavement of 'non-White' people.²⁴ Classifying people according to the social construct of race was a way to help neutralise reservations about exploiting others for profit, while prison was widely used to enforce compliance with the colonial project.²⁵ The denigration of Black people and cultures, and the assertion that they were dangerous to civilised White society therefore formed an important part of the imperialist and slave-owning playbook.

In his work on Black men's experiences of prison rehabilitation, Jason Warr explores how racist tropes such as that of 'the sexually bestial and violently aggressive Black man' affect Black prisoners' experiences today and shape 'how 'Blackness', as a colonial imposition, is constructed from ideas of threat and risk'. His interviewees describe how 'being a Black man, speaking like a Black man, and performing their Blackness' was not persuasive enough for them to progress through the prison and parole system because 'it was not what 'rehabilitation' looked like'.²⁶ Black men in Warr's research also found it almost impossible to tackle what they saw as unconsciously racist attitudes towards them for fear of confirming such tropes or being seen to 'play the race card',²⁷ which also emerged strongly from the HMIP study.

'... if you use the race card — well basically, you are not allowed to use it... They get

triggered by it and then they get hands on.'
(Black prisoner)

Colonialism had created a situation where at the turn of the 20th century much of Britain had what Robert Winder refers to as 'crude racial instincts',²⁸ with a sense of national identity largely defined in relation to its superiority over colonised peoples.²⁹ In his book on the making of modern Britain, the journalist Andrew Marr also points out that the highly influential eugenics movement of the early 20th century originated in the UK and had strong support among the established elite. He argues that the main difference between the racism of the British in the 1930s and 1940s and that of the Nazis, was that in the eyes of the British elite 'the Germans overdid things, and were too rough'.³⁰ Otherwise, the belief of racial superiority was similar in both nations, and to an extent resonates today in our collective unconscious — this is in line with Jung's theory of 'racial memory', which assumes that embedded in different cultures and societies are memories and myths which make up an essential part of the collective identity and worldview of that society.³¹

In a very direct fashion, Black identity therefore creates vulnerability for Black prisoners, but there are as yet few criminological tools of analysis that can help us to understand this distinct experience. The idea of a 'Black criminology' has been proposed as one response to such shortcomings. Once again, it emerged from the US where academics were concerned about the limitations of traditional criminology in explaining the experiences of Black African Americans^{32 33} and has been further explored from a UK perspective, notably by Coretta Phillips.³⁴ Black criminology challenges the assumption that all ethnic groups commit crimes for more or less the same reasons under the influence of similar motivations, and instead posits that African Americans who commit crimes have unique racialised experiences which produce their offending.³⁵ In this view, general theories of crime cannot adequately explain Black experiences of criminal justice because they have edited out the dimension of racism.

24. Rattansi, A. (2000). *Racism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

25. For further discussion, see Bhui, H.S. (2024). *What Are Prisons For?* Bristol University Press, p.44.

26. Warr, J. (2022). Whitening Black Men: Narrative Labour and the Scriptural Economics of Risk and Rehabilitation, in *The British Journal of Criminology*, 63(5), 1091–1107, 1102.

27. See footnote 25: Warr (2022), p.1104.

28. Winder. (2004: 251). also cites accounts suggesting that Britain was nevertheless still more accepting of ethnic difference than many other countries, including the US and other Europeans; at the turn of the 20th century, it was, he argues 'an incomparably open country. There were Jews in Parliament, Germans and Italians in boardrooms, Indian civil servants and doctors, lawyers and even African missionaries'.

29. See footnote 27: Winder (2004).

30. Marr, A. (2010). *The Making of Modern Britain*. Pan Macmillan, p.342.

31. Vannoy Adams, M. (1997). *The Multicultural Imagination: 'Race', Color, and the Unconscious*. Routledge.

32. Russell, K. (1992). Development of a Black Criminology and the Role of the Black Criminologist, *Justice Quarterly* 9, 667–683

33. Unnever, J., Gabbidon, S. & Chouhy, C. (Eds.) (2019). *Building a Black Criminology: Race, Theory, and Crime*. Routledge.

34. Phillips, C. (2023). Black Criminology, *The Routledge International Handbook on Decolonizing Justice*. Routledge, 448-458.

35. See Unnever, J and Owusu-Bempah, A (2019). A Black Criminology Matters, In J. Unnever, S. Gabbidon and C. Chouhy (Eds.) *Building a Black Criminology: Race, Theory, and Crime*. Routledge, 3-28.

*'Threats to and assaults on a person's racial, ethnic, or cultural integrity can produce psychological symptoms of depression, anxiety, distress, and even trauma, as well as having a detrimental effect on physical health they are also essential for understanding causal pathways into offending.'*³⁶

In her discussion of the value of a Black criminology, Phillips describes how she showed H, a Black British research interviewee, a photograph of a Black man being arrested during the London riots of 2011. He was surrounded by seven police officers but smiling at the photographer. She asked H what the image brought to mind, and his answer was, 'They're scared of him', evidently perceiving the terror of White police officers in their contact with a young Black man rather than a lone man under their control. Phillips offers this vignette as part of her argument for a Black criminology, and it resonates with the sense of threat and of being threatened that has been identified in multiple studies of Black people's experiences in prisons.

Finding ways forward

This article is not arguing for an ossification of ideas or of notions of identity, nor is it suggesting that we should assess the situation of Black prisoners only through the prism of historical oppressions. The social worlds of prisons are ever-changing and the way that people in prison feel is changing with them. For example, the recent recruitment of substantial numbers of foreign national prison officers, especially from Nigeria, brings new and as yet little explored dimensions to debates about race and power in prisons. My point is that we have yet to fully understand 'older' concerns about racial identity and racism, and this undermines our ability to respond effectively to their impact on prison life.

History matters in helping us to understand the dynamics of risk and safety in relation to Black prisoners. Prisoners' experiences are influenced by complex historical and psychological factors which are not easy to discuss or even identify. They undermine mental health, confidence and motivation, and lower the expectations that prisoners and staff have of each other. This process can become self-fulfilling — for

example, by discouraging staff from offering mental health support, which leads to a more acute crisis for the prisoner, and subsequently a greater risk of conflict and violence. The prison community must also contend with the fact that Black prisoners have often had poor experiences of schools and other criminal justice agencies, which means that their trust in state institutions is already low. An appreciation of how the past influences current attitudes and behaviours can help us see why force, violence, unrecognised vulnerability and trauma are all disproportionately prominent themes in Black prisoners' experiences.

In this light, we can see with fresh eyes the importance of events that aim to enhance communication and reinforce positive identities. These include now common celebrations of Black History Month and, in some prisons, the preparation and sharing of cultural foods, which has great potential to bring prison communities closer together by leveraging the deep emotional resonance of food.³⁷ Specific interventions that recognise the impact of trauma are also valuable; for example, the positively evaluated 'Changing the Game' programme at HMIP Isis is designed specifically for high-risk young Black prisoners and is premised on the knowledge that many have high levels of unaddressed trauma.³⁸ Initiatives such as these are the groundwork that can make a difference at moments of crisis, when the risk of a violent incident is brewing, force is being considered or a prisoner is debating whether to seek help for their deteriorating mental health.

In her discussion of how mindsets can be changed, Jessica Nordell points out that most people do not go to work to hurt others or discriminate; but those who intend and value fairness may still act in discriminatory ways. Having biased associations, she points out, does not mean that you are a bad person, simply that you exist in a culture.³⁹ A test of professionalism is having the willingness to explore the potential consequences of that culture and then finding spaces to enhance empathy and communication. The value of considering the research and theory on Black prisoners' experiences therefore seems clear for all those working in prisons.

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36. See footnote 32: Phillips (2023), p.454.

37. See footnote 3: HMIP (2022).

38. See HMIP (2020). *Minority Ethnic Prisoners' Experiences of Rehabilitation and Release Planning*. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240418085413/https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/inspections/minority-ethnic-prisoners-experiences-of-rehabilitation-and-release-planning/>

39. Nordell, J. (2021). *The End of Bias*. Granta.

Between borders and bars: Citizenship, othering and penal governance in Italy¹

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At the turn of the 1990s, Italy shifted from a country of emigration to a country of immigration, which changed the composition of the prison population. The lack of a concrete effort to integrate the newcomers, and the informal approaches adopted to manage migrations, have made them easy targets for the criminal justice system.² Without going into too much detail, Italian politics makes migrants alien bodies that frequently are physically present within Italian territory, informally engaged with the Italian society, but formally ignored by state agencies; this approach to the governance of human mobility further contributes to the disproportionate number of migrants incarcerated.³ Data shows that despite making up about 11 per cent of the Italian population,⁴ migrants represented almost one-third of all people incarcerated in 2024.⁵ More specifically, over the past 30 years, non-Italian prisoners have comprised an average of 31.8 per cent of the prison population.⁶ Additionally, the overrepresentation of migrants in Italian prisons is not equally distributed. For example, in the prison facilities of the industrialised northern regions, migrants can represent up to 60 per cent of the incarcerated population. In contrast, in the southern areas they represent, on average, less than one-fourth of the prisoner population.⁷ These figures emphasise how migrants have

become a deeply embedded part of the Italian prison system and, more broadly, of the country's penal landscape, especially in the northern regions.

By examining Italy's approach to migration management, we can observe a blending of administrative and criminal legal frameworks that has shaped national migration policy and control.⁸ One of the key outcomes of this convergence is the erosion of criminal law protections for non-EU migrants, paired with repressive administrative measures such as expulsion procedures and non-criminal detention. However, scholars analysing the Italian case note that imprisonment often does not result in deportation but instead leads to a return to irregularity. In this context, the intertwining of criminal and administrative policies appears to push migrants into informal, rather than illegal, economic sectors. Yet these precarious trajectories undermine the emancipatory aims of migration, reinforcing conditions of extreme marginalisation and forms of social harm.⁹ Importantly, this does not necessarily signal a policy of outright exclusion. Instead, it represents a model of subordinated inclusion, closely aligned with the core strategic functions of incarceration as instruments of migration control. These forms of marginalisation do not simply reflect exclusion from the legal system but reveal how legal status, and especially citizenship, functions as a shifting boundary within prison governance. In this context, citizenship becomes a

1. Simone Santorso wrote sections 'The distinctive features of the current Italian prison system', 'The Prison Experience of Migrants: Othering, Deterrence and the Citizenship Line', and 'Conclusion'. Alvise Sbraccia wrote the 'Governance Practices and the Citizenship Line (Transfer, Radicalisation, Self-Harm)' section.
2. Quassoli, F. (2003). Migrant as criminal: The judicial treatment of migrant criminality. In K. Koser & R. Black (Eds.), *Controlling a new migration world* (pp. 150–170). Routledge.
3. Sbraccia, A. (2007). *Migranti tra mobilità e carcere: Storie di vita e processi di criminalizzazione*. FrancoAngeli.
4. ISTAT. (2023). *Popolazione quasi stabile grazie alle immigrazioni dall'estero*. Retrieved March 29, 2024, from <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/289080>
5. Associazione Antigone. (2024). *I numeri della detenzione. Nodo alla gola – XX Rapporto di Antigone sulle condizioni di detenzione*. Retrieved November 19, 2024, from <https://www.rapportoantigone.it/ventesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/i-numeri-della-detenzione/>
6. See footnote 3: Sbraccia (2007).
7. Ministero della Giustizia. (2025). *Statistiche*. Retrieved April 10, 2025, from https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14_1.page?contentId=SST1450708
8. I.e., Fabini, G. (2019). Internal bordering in the context of undeportability: Border performances in Italy. *Theoretical Criminology*, 23(2), 175–193.
9. Soliman, F. (2021). States of exception, human rights, and social harm: Towards a border zemiology. *Theoretical Criminology*, 25(2), 228–248.

dynamic marker that structures access to rights, protections, and recognition, both inside and outside the carceral space.

Over the past two decades, efforts to produce qualitative sociological knowledge within the Italian prison system have brought researchers face-to-face with the core narrative threads of systemic transformation and adaptation. At the heart of this account is the emergence of an archetypal figure—one that has become predominant in many regions: the prisoner with nothing left to lose. This is most often embodied by the migrant, labelled *clandestino*,¹⁰ and portrayed as a marginalised, socially disadvantaged individual who ultimately becomes the undisciplined prisoner, perceived as unable to ‘do their time’. Their ‘foreignness’ includes a component of cultural disorientation and linguistic lack of proficiency, which can trigger discriminatory attitudes among fellow inmates, creating friction due to differences in communication styles and habits (such as food preferences, media consumption, etc.). These new subjectivities have gradually drawn the attention of those in the field, experts, and practitioners, primarily due to their potential threat to prison order.¹¹

In the following pages, we argue that citizenship status must be examined alongside incarceration conditions to fully understand the prison experience and its uneven impacts. This paper aims to lay the ground for a theoretical framework in which the process of othering, particularly as it relates to citizenship and mechanisms of subordination, serves as a central tool of prison governance. Our aim is twofold: first, to offer a framework for examining how prison practices reinforce processes of othering and shape the lived experiences of migrant communities behind bars; second, to highlight how, within the carceral setting, citizenship, often positioned as a boundary between

belonging and exclusion, generates trajectories of subordination that extend beyond prison walls. We seek to establish an analytical lens for exploring how citizenship status informs prison governance and the social dynamics within incarcerated populations—and, conversely, how carceral experiences reshape the meaning and lived reality of citizenship itself. We refer to this reciprocal relationship, where incarceration shapes and is shaped by legal status, access to rights, and social recognition, as the *citizenship line*.

The prison experience of migrants: Othering, deterrence and the citizenship line

As we will explore in the following pages, everyday interactions and governance practices within prison settings are deeply shaped by racialised dynamics.¹²

Migrants, in particular,¹³ are subjected to heightened surveillance,¹⁴ spatial segregation, and, in general, to differential treatment.¹⁵ They also face restricted access to entitlements, benefits and rehabilitation programmes, reinforcing their marginalised status within the carceral system.¹⁶ This racialised mode of governance, shaped by social constructions of citizenship and national belonging, not only deepens systemic inequalities but also solidifies hierarchies that define forms of subordinated inclusion.

While the Italian prison system has become, thus, an essential space for the production and reproduction of borders, according to the crimmigration framework, these seem not to be centred on exclusionary strategies, but rather on forms of subordinated inclusion in which informal practices merge with formal rules and discretionary policies enforcement.

The increasing diversity within the Italian prison system, where multiple nationalities are forced to coexist in confined spaces,¹⁷ reshapes classic notions of

In this context, the intertwining of criminal and administrative policies appears to push migrants into informal, rather than illegal, economic sectors.

10. A derogatory term used in reference to undocumented migrants.

11. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A., & Hay, W. (1996). *Prisons and the problem of order*. Oxford University Press.

12. Bloch, S., & Olivares-Pelayo, E. A. (2021). Carceral geographies from inside prison gates: The micro-politics of everyday racialisation. *Antipode*, 53(5), 1319–1338.

13. While this affects all migrants, North Africans and sub-Saharan are disproportionately impacted compared to Eastern Europeans and Balkan nationals.

14. Huhta, H. (2024). *Ethnicity, Race and the Prisoner Community*. Palgrave Macmillan.

15. Santorso, S. (2016). La città carceraria: spazio, comunità e processi di etnicizzazione. *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*, 9(2), 227–248.

16. Sbraccia, A. (2007). More or less eligibility? Prospettive teoriche sui processi di criminalizzazione dei migranti irregolari in Italia. *Studi sulla Questione Criminale*, 2(1), 91–108.

17. The most represented nationalities are Morocco, Romania, Albania, Tunisia, Nigeria, Egypt, Senegal, and Algeria (Ministero della Giustizia, 2025).

prison hierarchy and group identity.¹⁸ The intersection of socio-economic marginalisation and cultural essentialisation contributes to the construction of racialised hierarchies among prisoners, often organised around national identity and perceived belonging.

In navigating this fluid and heterogeneous environment, and in their efforts to maintain order, prison staff exercise significant discretion in the enforcement of entitlements and benefits granting. They often adapt their approach based on group dynamics, which not only sustains but also actively produces new internal hierarchies. This discretionary power allows prison administrations to calibrate both the intensity and quality of incarceration, thereby making it more tolerable for some groups while harsher—and thus less eligible—for others, usually the ones deemed to be potential troublemakers. In doing so, prison practices deepen existing social divisions and inequalities.¹⁹

This discussion builds on the premise that implementing a purely deterrence-based model, such as the *less eligibility* doctrine, is particularly difficult in the Italian context. This is largely due to the Italian Constitution, which enshrines rehabilitation as the primary aim of punishment (Article 27, paragraph 3). As a result, prison confinement in Italy may oscillate between functioning as a residual form of welfare and reinforcing segregation along territorially defined citizenship hierarchies.²⁰

In this sense, we argue that citizenship serves as one of the selective levers around which the contemporary prison governance, and hence experience, are structured. Therefore, the management and organisation of migrants behind bars actively contribute to the dialectic between more and *less eligibility* principles. In prisons across Northern Italy, where migrants are substantially overrepresented and overcrowding is acute,²¹ the social construction of migrant otherness has reshaped these institutions into microcosms structured around what we define as the

citizenship line. This concept captures specific dynamics of prison governance, in which formal and informal mechanisms intertwine with national identity to regulate those perceived as ‘unable to do their time’ and as having ‘nothing to lose’. The latter label carries significant institutional implications: individuals perceived as having nothing to lose are often treated as inherently ungovernable or unresponsive to rehabilitative interventions. This perception justifies more rigid control, intensified surveillance, exclusion from incentive structures, and frequent disciplinary transfers, while simultaneously absolving the institution from investing in their reintegration. Rather than being

recognised as a result of structural deprivation, this status is framed as a behavioural disposition, leading to a governance logic that prioritises containment over rehabilitation. In this sense, the ‘nothing to lose’ classification functions as a shorthand for disposability within prison management, a way to rationalise neglect and differential treatment under the guise of risk management and institutional pragmatism. Defining an internal citizenship line means confronting how prison governance produces pathways of subordinated inclusion, particularly through differential assessments of dangerousness, the spatial distribution of convicted people, variations in wellbeing, and the allocation of scarce rehabilitative resources.

To conclude, by engaging with the idea of citizenship as a tool of prison organisation, we argue that interpreting the *less eligibility* principle solely as a mechanism for inflicting discomfort is overly reductive. Instead, our analysis of the Italian

case reveals how this logic permeates the internal dynamics of carceral settings, operating as a mode of governance through the selective application of deterrence-like informal practices and policy enforcement shaped by the social construction of citizenship. Within this context, the citizenship line

Their ‘foreignness’ includes a component of cultural disorientation and linguistic lack of proficiency, which can trigger discriminatory attitudes among fellow inmates, creating friction due to differences in communication styles and habits (such as food preferences, media consumption, etc.).

18. Jacobs, J. B. (1974). Stratification and conflict among prison inmates. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 66(4), 476–482.

19. See footnote 15: Santorso (2016).

20. See footnote 14: Huhta (2024).

21. Santorso, S. (2023). *The Politics of Prison Crowding: A Critical Analysis of the Italian Prison System*. Routledge.

emerges as a hybrid of formal and informal governance strategies designed to differentiate, manage, and subordinate migrants' experiences of incarceration, with the ultimate goal of maximising order and guaranteeing systemic reproduction.

Governance practices and the citizenship line

The integrated regulatory mechanisms characteristic of the analytical framework we propose here follow the foreigner who experiences prison both in pretrial detention and following a criminal conviction. The effects of internal confinement, which resonate with the broader perspectives of border criminology, are partially defined by the specific function that prison assumes as an institution for containing non-native marginality. At the same time, however, they also stem from drawing distinctions within the single prison's governance. These distinctions take the form of specific practices for managing internal order.

However, it is not possible to limit the analysis of these distinctive strategies to their formal dimension, that is, to refer them solely to legal norms, policies and administrative provisions derived from written texts (laws, regulations, prison administration guidelines, etc.). These factors may vary in relevance, but they inevitably intersect with the governance arrangements that prison studies consistently link to informal methods of reproducing internal order,²² mechanisms of negotiation and co-governance,²³ the reward-and-punishment logics that permeate closed institutions and, more generally, the operational dynamics of relationships between staff and incarcerated individuals. The interpretative difficulties that define the problem of prison order thus extend to the analytical attempt we are proposing. The issue can be framed in terms of a regulatory multiplicity that resists sociological generalisation.

Certainly, one could argue that, for example, in perfect alignment with the theoretical framework of crimmigration, the formal impossibility for illegalised

migrants to access probation pathways produces a direct discrimination effect with evident material and symbolic consequences. Similarly, the irregularity of their legal status corresponds to a selective response that makes them more likely to be subjected to pre-trial detention.²⁴ As noted, the formal mechanisms of exclusion ultimately stand in stark contradiction to the principles of rehabilitation and social reintegration, which, within the legal framework of contemporary Italian migration policies, are not objectives to be pursued but conditions to be systematically denied. However, empirical research on confinement practices within this framework reveals ambivalent and often contradictory dynamics. In the following examples, drawn from empirical fields explored by the authors in recent years and selected here for their relevance in shaping prison order, we seek to account for these complexities.

Ethnic wings

Over the last quarter-century, the most evident materialisation of internal boundaries within the detention system has been the so-called ethnic wings.²⁵ This construct has now systematically entered the national penitentiary jargon. Sociological research on this form of institutional but entirely

informal confinement presents a differentiated and ambivalent picture.

First, it is necessary to observe that such a criterion for allocating detainees is not universally adopted. Its implementation is predominant in regions where the foreign component is either the majority or otherwise significant. Even in these cases, however, its configurations vary, reflecting distinct needs. It is not always feasible (or deemed appropriate) for the governance of a given prison to establish an 'Italian wing'. In limited cases, the internal organisation aligns with a division based on citizenship. This is particularly true when it becomes evident that a generically 'foreign wing' could fuel variable-geometry incompatibilities, meaning conflicts shaped by the relative size of different groups. For example, the institutional perception of racism among Eastern European

The social construction of migrant otherness has reshaped these institutions into microcosms structured around what we define as the citizenship line.

22. Jewkes, Y., Bennett, J., & Crewe, B. (2016). *Handbook on Prisons*. Routledge.

23. Sozzo, M. (2022). *Prisons, Inmates and Governance in Latin America*. Palgrave Macmillan.

24. Sbraccia, A., & Vianello, F. (2017). Sistema penitenziario e discriminazione. In A. Alietti (Ed.), *Razzismi, Discriminazioni e Disuguaglianze*. Mimesis.

25. See footnote 14: Huhta (2024).

detainees toward African, South American, or Asian prisoners is common. These fractures are often addressed by creating white but mixed wings, where the prevailing concept is greater compatibility between Italian and Eastern European prisoners. The more consolidated form of the 'Maghrebi wing' may not be practised when intraregional conflicts, such as those between Tunisians and Moroccans, have been imported into the prison from competition in illegal economies. Similarly, Black (sub-Saharan) wings may present comparable management challenges, making the coexistence of North African and sub-Saharan detainees problematic.

Other transversal factors, such as religious affiliation, linguistic competence, and membership in structured criminal organisations, can also influence the overall allocation criteria. Within this framework, the boundary of citizenship is rearticulated discontinuously in relation to other elements of homogeneity. Nonetheless, a general tendency toward the aggregation of detainees of Italian nationality remains operational. To some extent, this also applies to individuals of Italian descent, considering the inevitable increase of second-generation detainees.²⁶

This trend will likely further complicate the understanding of prison governance practices in Italy shortly. At present, we can highlight how the citizenship boundary significantly overlaps with a possible internal class distinction within the prison. Native detainees typically have greater economic and relational resources (such as family and friends in the territory), which undoubtedly allow them to mitigate the punitive effects of incarceration and face imprisonment under less severe conditions of social isolation.²⁷

From an intersectional perspective, it is also evident that these dynamics correlate with racialised boundaries. Consider, for example, the substantial Romanian component of the incarcerated population. Identified as white (and Christian), they have benefited from Romania's entry into the EU, avoiding

deportability and stigmatisation reserved for undocumented non-EU migrants.²⁸ Their geopolitical status reflects broader inclusion prospects that partially extend to many Albanians (white) residing in Italy for decades. These groups' regularisation and relative occupational stabilisation generate deeper social ties in Italy, leading to a socio-economic approximation to Italian detainees.

Returning to penitentiary jargon, internal boundaries seem to distinguish between prisoners who have something to lose and those who have nothing to lose. This brings us back to governance, but once again, linear interpretations are not feasible. Ambivalence reigns supreme, and trends can at best be traced along two fundamental axes: security and solidarity, both

shaped through research interactions with individuals holding directive roles within institutions (such as governors, prison officers' boards, prison NHS management, etc.).²⁹ These individuals must, in some way, justify themselves in the face of the ethnographic evidence of ethnic wings, which in themselves contradict the universalist principle that should characterise penal execution.³⁰ Alternatively, if they have chosen not to adopt a criterion of ethnic distinction, they may provide insights into the reasons behind their minority choice.

On the security front, conflicting narratives emerge: for the first group (the majority),

homogeneous wings limit the problem of interethnic conflict and allow staff to work in a calmer and safer environment. For the second group (the minority), ethnic wings serve as a logistical and cultural support for the formation of homogeneous factions that will later clash, making the prison more insecure, especially in shared spaces dedicated to educational and recreational activities. Regarding internal solidarity among inmate groups—a key element of the 'convict code',³¹ widely recognised as strategic by those who manage Italian prisons—the ambivalence remains: for the first group, solidarity has limited general significance and is strongly amplified by the

The ethnicised concentration of material and relational poverty can only encourage the stabilisation of spaces and cultures of discrimination, simultaneously.

26. Associazione Antigone. (2024). *Stranieri*. Nodo alla gola – XX Rapporto di Antigone sulle condizioni di detenzione. Retrieved November 19, 2024, from <https://www.rapportoantigone.it/ventesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/>

27. Santorso, S. (2015). La perception de la peine d'emprisonnement entre privation et solidarité. *Déviante et Société*, 39(2), 171–188.

28. De Genova, N., & Peutz, N. (2010). The Deportation Regime: *Sovereignty, Space and Freedom of Movement*. Duke University Press.

29. Sbraccia, A. (2016). Galere clandestine: la linea del colore. In Associazione Antigone (Ed.), *XII Rapporto sulle Condizioni di Detenzione*. Infinito.

30. See footnote 15: Santorso (2016).

31. Trammell, R. (2012). Enforcing the Convict Code: *Violence and Prison Culture*. Lynne Rienner.

convergence of habits and cultural, linguistic, and religious references that materialise through 'ethnic wings'. For the second group, the concept of solidarity must be traced back to a universalist and materialist framework, since solidarity is based on exchange, and under conditions of deprivation, it cannot materialise in wings where there are no resources to share.

These positions, naturally, assume an ideal-typical value here. As mentioned, the empirical observation of these governance models points to mixed solutions, gradual adaptations, and emergency responses. Additionally, these very approaches may change due to replacements of senior figures within institutions, as well as the turnover of managerial roles. Likewise, significant variations in the socio-demographic composition of prisoner population can lead to inconsistent management responses.

Despite these variables, in our view, the universalist and materialist vision of solidarity among inmates appears crucial in general terms.³² The ethnicised concentration of material and relational poverty can only encourage the stabilisation of spaces and cultures of discrimination, simultaneously identifying desperate and conflict-ridden wings that will then be subjected to purely containment-focused interventions (either through force or pharmacological means). This strategy may align with a rationale for optimising the allocation of scarce rehabilitative resources, directing them toward convicted people housed in less deprived wings, thus exacerbating the discriminatory effects mentioned above.³³ A distinctive managerial logic, yet one that is geared toward selecting individuals on whom to impose an abnormal level of institutional violence. The implications of such an approach for the internal order, beyond any political evaluation, ultimately configure a dramatic horizon.

Allocating prisoners based on their origins to maximise order and limit resource access is perhaps the

most explicit manifestation of ethnicisation within the prison—something we conceptualise through the notion of the citizenship line. However, this can also be understood as a metonymic expression of a more pervasive selectivity embedded in prison practices, which further substantiates our argument. While a comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this section, we briefly outline those practices we consider most significant and deserving of further research: transfers, radicalisations, and self-harm.

Transfers

To address major challenges in the Italian prison system, a fundamental measure is the practice of transferring inmates—sometimes based on regional proximity, other times spanning hundreds of kilometres across the national territory.³⁴

The first issue concerns the disparity in overcrowding rates, which tend to be higher in central-northern regions. These more industrialised regions, richer in opportunities and with a higher proportion of foreign residents, have also offered people broader access to illegal economies.³⁵ These dynamics have led to a correlation between higher overcrowding and the overrepresentation of non-Italian prisoners, a pattern that has been 'corrected' by prioritising their

transfer to southern facilities as part of decongestion efforts. Over the past three decades, thousands of individuals have been relocated based on a problematic assumption: that the unemployed, the homeless, and those without social ties in a given area would suffer less from being uprooted. Empirical evidence, however, challenges this narrative,³⁶ instead highlighting how these individuals had social and emotional relationships within the territory—relationships that were simply unrecognised by institutions because they were informal. This was especially due to the precarious living conditions and legal status of these individuals. In this perspective, the effects of displacement are real and are

Allocating prisoners based on their origins to maximise order and limit resource access is perhaps the most explicit manifestation of ethnicisation within the prison.

32. See footnote 26: Santorso (2015).

33. See footnote 15: Santorso (2016).

34. Paoletti, E., & Costantini, M. S. (2023). *Sradicati. I trasferimenti delle persone detenute - Diciannovesimo rapporto sulle condizioni di detenzione*. Retrieved April 10, 2025, from <https://www.rapportoantigone.it/diciannovesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/i-trasferimenti-delle-persone-detenute-e-il-lavoro-del-difensore-civico/>

35. Foot, J., & King, R. (2001). San Salvario, Turin: the creation of a dangerous place 1990–99. *Liverpool Studies in European Regional Cultures*, 9, 206–230.

36. Verdolini, V. (2022). *L'istituzione reietta: spazi e dinamiche del carcere in Italia*. Carocci

produced to manage overcrowding rates across the national prison system in a discriminatory manner.

The second major issue concerns disciplinary transfers, which are closely linked to the internal order crisis previously described. This practice involves the continuous rotation of the most oppositional, unruly, and violent prisoners, who are placed, often for short periods, in the most restrictive wings of various facilities. Their perpetual movement between prisons has given rise in institutional jargon to the now-archetypal figure of the *camminanti* (walkers).

The effectiveness of this approach to managing disciplinary emergencies is highly questionable: while it may temporarily defuse conflicts, at a systemic level, it simply perpetuates the circulation of the most conflictual prisoners among different facilities. Unable to integrate into the reward-based mechanisms that sustain the fragile equilibrium of correctional institutions, these mobile prisoners are predominantly foreign. The confinement they experience takes on a rotational character, preventing any continuity in rehabilitative programmes and ensuring their placement in the most restrictive and punitive wings of the various prisons they pass through.³⁷

Radicalisation

At the intersection of governance practices that emphasise strategies of allocation and distinction within prison spaces lie the policy frameworks shaping Italy's efforts to combat radicalisation, both as a broader political phenomenon and as a specific consequence of incarceration.³⁸ While we have addressed the contradictions of this dual purpose elsewhere,³⁹ we focus here on how these strategies combine formal legal frameworks with informal mechanisms, producing distinctive material and symbolic effects on foreign detainees.

Religious identity,
geographic origin,
and racial
classification
decisively shape the
'non-Italian
prisoner' that
emerges from the
citizenship divide.
In effect, it grants
immunity from
suspicion to white
foreign inmates of
European descent.

Contemporary discussions on prison radicalisation often rest on a problematic assumption: that prisons are ideal spaces where already radicalised individuals encounter others deemed particularly susceptible,⁴⁰ thus creating fertile ground for proselytising and extremist recruitment. While this hypothesis holds historical validity, it requires closer scrutiny in light of insights from prison studies, such as the pervasive police control and intelligence operations enabled by institutional confinement.⁴¹

What is relevant here is how, even in Italy, these so-called 'dangerous encounters' are primarily associated with jihadism, leading to the overshadowing of other forms of radicalisation. This focus frames the issue within the citizenship divide, further fragmented along internal lines, with the primary concern in Italy being individuals of Maghrebi descent, alongside those of Middle Eastern and Sub-Saharan African origin,⁴² who are seen as combining criminal and terrorist threats, in contrast to prison conversions to Islam observed elsewhere.⁴³ This process—undeniably ideological—seems to confirm an intersectional theoretical perspective: it highlights how religious identity, geographic origin, and racial classification decisively shape the 'non-Italian prisoner' that emerges from the citizenship divide. In effect, it grants immunity from suspicion to white foreign inmates of European descent.

In response to radicalisation, the Italian prison system has implemented high-security wings, with a portion for jihadist-linked individuals, where religious affiliation and geographic origin create an informal subfield to prevent proselytising. To monitor radicalisable individuals, a mixed strategy of increased surveillance and dispersal across prisons is used, often aligning with the informal ethnic-winging system, particularly in wings populated by North Africans, which contradicts the goal of limiting jihadist influence.

37. Torrente, G. (2016). Saper farsi la galera: pratiche di resistenza (e di sopravvivenza) degli immigrati detenuti. *Sociologia del Diritto*, 1, 109–133.

38. Khosrokhavar, F. (2016). *Prisons de France: Violence, Radicalisation, Déshumanisation: Surveillants et Détenus Parlent*. Robert Laffont.

39. Sbraccia, A. (2017). Radicalizzazione in carcere: sociologia di un processo altamente ideologizzato. *Antigone*, 12(1), 173–200.

40. Due to their social conditions and psychological makeup.

41. Hamm, M. (2013). *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat*. NYU Press.

42. See footnote 20: Santorso (2023).

43. See footnote 37: Khosrokhavar (2016).

Scepticism surrounding prison radicalisation stems from the belief that religious practices have a calming, rehabilitative effect, and the perception that the criminal profiles of marginalised, petty criminals do not align with high-risk extremists.⁴⁴ While prison personnel's views often diverge from alarmist political and media narratives, security-focused governance strategies still reinforce distinctions that disproportionately affect foreign detainees, perpetuating a system of institutional containment both materially and symbolically.

Self-harm

In recent years, the Italian prison system has seen a significant rise in suicidal incidents, with foreign prisoners statistically overrepresented, while the broader issue of self-harm appears to be particularly alarming where foreign prisoners make up 50 per cent to 60 per cent of the incarcerated population.⁴⁵ In the absence of definitive references, a dominant institutional narrative among prison staff frames self-harming behaviours among North African prisoners as culturally motivated, encapsulated in the phrase 'It's their culture,' and suggests these actions are carried out for instrumental reasons, without a historical or anthropological basis. As a result, these behaviours are systematically ethnicised and essentialised: rather than being linked to harsher detention conditions or bleak and minimal life prospects, they are instead framed as acts of culpability—disrupting internal order, increasing staff stress levels, and straining institutional relationships.

A similar lack of transparency is evident in the field of pharmacological containment practices. With few exceptions,⁴⁶ accessing statistical data to confirm the hypothetical patterns derived from ethnographic descriptions and reports by social researchers remains highly challenging. The relationship between psychotropic drug distribution and substance addiction among marginalised prisoners reveals that these medications are often used not only for withdrawal treatment but also as an informal maintenance therapy

to alleviate suffering and reduce conflict among poly-substance users. Given the intersection of street-level marginalisation and drug addiction, a significant proportion of foreign prisoners, often subjected to selective criminalisation, are notably persistent in requesting psychotropic medications, which are increasingly used to maintain order and pacify problematic groups.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed how the Italian prison system functions not merely as a site of confinement aimed at punishing or rehabilitating people convicted of crime, but as a mechanism for managing political and social boundaries. This becomes particularly evident when observing the incarceration of migrants within Italian prison facilities. We have shown how prison governance engages with the imperative of maximising internal order through differential treatment, thereby contributing materially and symbolically to the reproduction of social control.

Practices such as the creation of ethnic wings, the racialised framing of radicalisation, the management of self-harm, and the widespread use of disciplinary transfers are emblematic of how incarceration is informally entangled with selective forms of deterrence. Rather than viewing these dynamics as reactive or coincidental, we argue that they are part of a rationalised governance framework that informally aligns with the principle of less eligibility. Within this logic, certain prisoners—those with Italian background, specific values or cultural proximity—are deemed more 'governable', while others are considered a threat to order and therefore, they are targeted for differential treatment. Citizenship status, in this context, becomes a powerful proxy for sorting individuals and shaping their prison experiences along racialised and socio-political lines.

Building on this premise, we argue that prison should not be viewed as a neutral institution, but rather as a space where national belonging is actively

Scepticism
surrounding prison
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criminal profiles of
marginalised.

44. Ronco, D., Sbraccia, A., & Torrente, G. (2019). *Prison De-Radicalization Strategies, Programmes and Risk Assessment Tools in Europe*. European Prison Observatory.

45. See footnote 6: Associazione Antigone (2024).

46. Rondi, L. (2023). Il carcere sedato: Più di due milioni di euro all'anno spesi in psicofarmaci. *Altreconomia*. Retrieved April 10, 2025, from <https://altreconomia.it/il-carcere-sedato-piu-di-due-milioni-di-euro-allanno-spesi-in-psicofarmaci/>

negotiated and enforced. While existing literature has characterised the prison as a site where border-like dynamics of exclusion are reproduced, we suggest it operates as a liminal space in which national borders and citizenship are in constant interplay, mutually shaping one another. The coercive and confined nature of prison renders the distinction between exclusion and inclusion increasingly ambiguous, blurring the lines of national belonging. This, in turn, generates forms of subordinated inclusion and produces subjects who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation within illegal and informal economies.

Through both formal prison policies and informal practices, migrants, particularly non-EU nationals, are racialised, placing them in a liminal condition where their subordinated status becomes symbolically inscribed onto their subjectivities. This condition undermines their prospects of attaining full citizenship, yet as supported by existing literature and data, it does not necessarily result in deportation, thereby sustaining a precarious, in-between status that also affects their experience and perception of incarceration.

By briefly exploring the Italian case, we propose the notion of the 'citizenship line' as a heuristic tool to capture this dynamic. On the one hand, in contrast to other conceptualisations, such as the 'colour line', it foregrounds the interplay between the formal policy framework and informal enforcement practices. On the other hand, emphasising citizenship, rather than borders, allows us to highlight the distortions within Italian migration policies that lead to forms of subordinated inclusion, as opposed to outright exclusion or even deportation. While this remains an initial hypothesis, which we intend to explore further, it appears consistent with current literature on migration control in Italy. Finally, by testing this hypothesis, this study aims to shed light on the complex interplay between migration policy, penal governance, and the strategic deployment of informal targeted deterrence.

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Bennett Award Winner 2025

The Bennett Award for outstanding article of the year is in its ninth year.

The Prison Service Journal editorial board reviewed a shortlist of articles published in 2025. The board weighed each article by its merit. We have endeavored to make our judgement as unbiased and objective as possible. In so doing, we chose the article that best reflected the aims of the PSJ which are to present good quality, evidence-informed, and practice-focused publications to encourage discussion and debate on topics at the forefront of research, policy, and practice.

The winning article for 2025, published in edition 279, is *Creating the Roots of Hope: Using art to support well-being in prison*, written by Mark Jones (Director of Higher Plain Research and Education Ltd). The article uses the CHIME (Connected, Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment) recovery model to reflect on the experiences of, and impact on, those involved in Creative Roots, an arts project in HMP/YOI Parc.

The winner received a certificate, and a trophy designed and made by prisoners at HMP Channings Wood.



The 2026 Bennett award shortlist will be agreed in the autumn this year. If you would like to nominate an article from the 2026 editions, please send your nominations to prisonservicejournal@crimeandjustice.gov.uk

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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The purpose of the PSJ is to provide a platform for exchanging knowledge on issues relating to the Prison Service. Its scope includes imprisonment, the wider criminal justice systems, and other related fields. It aims to present good quality, evidence-informed, and practice-focused publications to encourage discussion and debate on topics at the forefront of research, policy, and practice.

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Editorial arrangements: The editors are responsible for the style and content of each edition, and for managing production and the Journal's budget. The editors are supported by an editorial board – a body of volunteers who have experience and knowledge of the criminal justice and penal system. The editorial board considers all articles submitted, although the editors retain an over-riding discretion in deciding which articles are published and their precise length and language. The views expressed by contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of HMPPS and HM Government.

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