

Editorial

Race in Prison

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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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