

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-

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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.