



# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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**Special issue: Knowledge Equity in  
Carceral Research**

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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: Knowledge Equity and Naming Names in Carceral Research

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This special issue emerged as a sort of experiment to see if we could disrupt the knowledge inequities involved in doing carceral research. We have sought, in other words, to explore other ways of “knowing” about carceral spaces.

Social science research almost always involves a distinct power imbalance between the people doing research and the people being researched. This inequality is significantly prominent in prison research. People with lived experience of imprisonment are of great interest to researchers and the consumers of social research, and are frequently approached to contribute to research studies of one sort or another. Rarely do they have any meaningful participation in the design and operationalisation of this research or the questions being asked.

Despite the growth of co-produced research in recent years, people in prison rarely see the results of the research they contribute to and have no idea how their inputs were used or to what end. Who funded the research? Who was it for? Who benefited as a result of the research? Research participants may never know. If they try to chase down the research online once released from custody, they may find that the outputs are hidden behind paywalls, and only accessible to individuals with access to a university library. This is knowledge inequity.

In “The Convict as Researcher,” the legendary prisons researcher Hans Toch, confessed his unease at these power imbalances inherent in the criminological research:

*During rare moments of honesty, we may admit that what we ask is unreasonable and unfair. ... After all, at best we are supplicants, and at worst, invaders demanding booty of captive audiences. In return for a vague promise or a modest remuneration we expect a fellow human being to bare his [or her] soul or to make controversial and potentially incriminating statements. The ‘communication’ is one way – the researcher maintains his [or her] position as an ‘objective’ recipient of non-reciprocated information. ...*

*I speak with considerable humility here, because I almost once again made the mistake of taking my Viennese accent and my parochial concerns into prison cells and police stations, expecting to secure frank answers to prying questions. I have done this sort of thing often in the past. This strategy strikes me now not only as naïve but offensive.<sup>1</sup>*

This special issue responds in a reparative manner to the “naivety” and “offensiveness” highlighted by Toch. Toch also points us to the multitude of deeper complexities inherent in contesting with his admissions. This includes our own understanding of knowledge production, our own morality and ethics in knowing, our understanding of exploitation, of ownership, of our purpose and intention and our own role as actors in the world of social injustice. All of the authors contributing to this special PSJ edition, whether they originate from academia or carceral spaces or straddle both, are grappling with these questions. In the nine papers presented, authors explore new attempts at co-production and collaboration as an attempt to transcend some of these power imbalances and honour a commitment to knowledge equity.

Knowledge equity has emerged conceptually against a backdrop which historically has valued one way of knowing over another and in so doing has applied valuations to knowledge and similarly to knowledge producers. We see this in the ranking of those deemed reliable as knowledge producers and defining reliable sites of knowledge production (e.g., ranking universities against one another for example, through mechanisms like the Research Excellence Framework, or valuing research over community consultation). Such regulation has created powerful tools for controlling what is researched, how it is researched, by whom it is researched, and what knowledge is deemed valid and platformed. These favoured methodologies invisibilise research participants as knowledge creators and assign ownership of knowledge to an expert class. In so doing, alternative ways of knowing through collaborative methodologies, like participatory action research, have been minimised

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1. Toch, H. (1967). The Convict as Researcher. *Trans-action*, 4, 72–75.

and restricted. Criminological research has, to date, firmly placed the knower as the researcher and the prisoner as the researched. This edition seeks to disrupt such assumptions and bring those incarcerated or formerly incarcerated into the knowledge creation process fully as knowledge producers emancipating them in this instance from the confines of research objectification.

We hope that what emerges from these efforts might be seen as the emergence of “equitable epistemology” -- an approach to knowledge creation that incorporates academic inquiry and personal lived experiences, without hierarchical structure, to create inclusive and emancipatory ways of knowing. Through creating knowledge in this way, it is our ambition that the broader research community may come to recognise such practices as a significant mark of empirical quality and value.

### **An addendum on author names**

The co-production of this special issue revealed some of the challenges of achieving knowledge equity. One issue will jump out immediately: readers will see that article authors are introduced by first name only (with a note at the end of each article on how to cite the publication when referencing). We understand this looks very strange, but it is an attempt at equity in the face of structural resistance to the naming of select

incarcerated authors. With fulsome support from the editorial leadership of the PSJ, we pursued this matter in this Special Issue. It was important to us that all authors receive full and equal credit for their contributions. In the end, HMPPS determined that although some co-authors could be named under the existing guidelines, a small number of co-authors could not be named due to their specific index offences.

As such, we were faced with the difficult position of being able to name some co-authors fully and then some co-authors would be identified only by their first name. This did not strike us as very equitable, especially in a special issue devoted to the concept of knowledge equity. As such, we decided that if some of our collaborators could not have surnames atop the article, then none of us would. Admittedly, this act of solidarity is symbolic; we do include a ‘how to cite’ note at the bottom of the articles, so our authors (many of whom are previously unpublished) can receive full credit for their contributions.

However, much more work is clearly needed on this important question, and we hope this Special Issue will help pry open a wider conversation about knowledge ownership and recognition. In fact, as a result of our experience as guest editors, the three of us have decided to initiate an interdisciplinary advisory commission to delve more deeply into the ethical, moral challenges associated with realising equitable epistemology. Watch this space.

# Co-creating prisons knowledge inspired by collective autoethnography

**Gillian** is Associate Professor in Social Work at the University of Chester. **Rebecca** leads on extending support in prisons within a national charity. **Paula** is Head of Prisoner Engagement at the Prison Reform Trust. **Philippa** is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nottingham.

This is a story, a kind of map, about a study we co-produced on prison peer support work.<sup>1</sup> The social science community call these mapping stories methodology papers. We have tried to write this one in an informal (less academic) style to appeal to a broad audience — including people who live or have lived in prisons and who may not have had access to further education. ‘We’, the authors, are four people interested in prisons. Two of us became interested having lived parts of our lives in prison, two of us became interested by studying prisons at university. We met as part of a co-authorship project, which was originally made up of five former prisoner researchers and three academic researchers.<sup>2</sup> Having published our original study in 2023, we decided to write about our pioneering work together. (All eight original co-authors were invited to co-write this methodology paper and four of the team decided to do so). We hope the method we introduce will be useful to those interested in capturing (often traumatic) lived experiences in a way that values and centres those most impacted, and that we address the concern that people with lived experience often only emerge in research as subjects, rather than authors.<sup>3</sup> (Note: many of the academic sources cited here can be expensive to read without access to a university library. For help with access, please email the lead author).

We introduce a co-writing approach inspired by ‘collective autoethnography’, which involves a group of people writing together about personal experiences. ‘Autoethnography’ involves reflection on life experiences, society, and published literature.<sup>4 5</sup> Carolyn Ellis describes autoethnography as a project that ‘helps us understand [the world...] and that moves us to critical engagement, social action, and social change’ (p.229).<sup>6</sup> The goal is not just to capture emotional experiences but develop a critical analysis of social phenomenon: ‘a technique of *social* investigation conducted *through* the self.’<sup>7</sup> Collective (or collaborative) autoethnography involves sharing personal accounts to support deeper analysis.<sup>8</sup> Diverse writing partnerships matter because most research about marginalised people is done by those who are not marginalised.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, criminological research has been criticised for a tendency to invisibilise participants, replicating the very marginalisation researchers often seek to shine a spotlight on. A radical challenge to traditional research is to develop community-led research agendas,<sup>10</sup> which value local insight and wisdom. Prison scholarship has overwhelmingly centred the interpretations and agendas of academics living outside prisons. Perspectives that are often absent are those of prisoners and former prisoners, yet experience of incarceration can ‘add context, and contour’ to analysis, providing an ‘essential thread in the tapestry of criminological inquiry [providing necessary] building

1. Buck, G., Tomczak, P., Harriott, P., Page, R., Bradley, K., Nash, M., & Wainwright, L. (2023). Prisoners on prisons: Experiences of peer-delivered suicide prevention work. *Incarceration*, 4, 1–21.
2. See footnote 1: Buck et al (2023).
3. Booth, M., & Harriott, P. (2021). Service users being used: Thoughts to the research community. In Masson, I., Baldwin, L., & Booth, N. (eds). *Critical reflections on women, family, crime and justice*. Policy Press.
4. Wakeman, S. (2014). Fieldwork, biography and emotion: Doing criminological autoethnography. *British Journal of Criminology*, 54(5), 705–721.
5. Gant, V., Cheatham, L., Di Vito, H., Offei, E., Williams, G., & Yatosenge, N. (2019). Social work through collaborative autoethnography. *Social Work Education*, 38(6), 707–720.
6. Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Left Coast Press.
7. See footnote 3: Wakeman, 2024, p.708.
8. See footnote 4: Gant et al., 2019.
9. Brown, L. A. and Strega, S. (2015). *Research as Resistance* (2nd ed). Canadian Scholars’ Press.
10. Edwards, R., & Brannelly, T. (2017). Approaches to democratising qualitative research methods. *Qualitative Research*, 17(3), 271–277.

blocks to a science of criminology and criminal justice'.<sup>11</sup>

Lived experiences of imprisonment provide valuable 'data' for academic studies, but the person with stigmatised experiences is often peripheral and prisoners' truths are 'located at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge — subjugated, disqualified, or 'muted' altogether' (p.110).<sup>12</sup> However, a criminology that aims to democratise and diversify knowledge by injecting theory from the periphery is possible.<sup>13</sup> Gathering such 'local histories' can restore dignity and access invisible spaces.<sup>14</sup> One approach is to position 'participants' as co-investigators, to view the community experiencing the phenomena as the site where 'local knowledge' is discovered,<sup>15</sup> and viable solutions provided.<sup>16</sup> This article tells the story of how we worked together to uncover local knowledge of prison peer support work and make recommendations for practice.

Our work aligned with a 'knowledge equity' approach (p.406),<sup>17</sup> which emphasises co-created knowledge and the importance of learning together. Co-creating knowledge involves an exchange of expertise and resources — for example, knowledge of surviving imprisonment and formally studying imprisonment.<sup>18</sup> In advocating knowledge equity, Jaffe argues that social inequities are made possible by knowledge inequity.<sup>19</sup> For example, when society prioritises discursive knowledge (developed through language and expressed in arguments and theories) above embedded expertise (the body's interaction with nature and objects), this creates a bias toward official knowers with credentials, and risks losing crucial knowledge and

skills. As a result, Jaffe argues, we must dismantle the knowledge hierarchy and create learning through dialogue. Such action requires new modes of research, such as facilitating situated 'counternarratives'; knowing and taking seriously people's stories and enabling people to 'come into existence' (in this case as authors) where we previously only saw them as objects or 'others'.<sup>20</sup>

### Building our team

Paula is a prison reform activist and former prisoner who builds networks with prisoners, practitioners, and academics as part of her leadership role in a national prison reform charity. She argued that too little prisons literature represents the realities of people's experiences and advocated research methods that could uncover previously unexplored issues and solutions. Paula knew Gill and Philippa (university researchers) through her network and proposed an innovative research project, bringing together academics and people with lived experience to explore prison life. The project interested Gill and Philippa as they were researching prison regulation,<sup>21</sup> including how to integrate the experiences of prisoners into regulatory practices. Collaborative writing offered one way for people to participate in

regulation, i.e., use their knowledge of prison to inform policymaking and academic knowledge. Gill and Philippa suggested using 'participatory action research' (PAR), which assumes that people impacted by a topic should be co-researchers.<sup>22</sup> Participatory epistemology (which means theory of knowledge) incorporates

Lived experiences of imprisonment provide valuable 'data' for academic studies, but the person with stigmatised experiences is often peripheral and prisoners'

11. Newbold, G., Ian Ross, J., Jones, R. S., Richards, S. C., & Lenza, M. (2014). Prison research from the inside: The role of convict autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4), 439-448.
12. Ballinger, A. (2011). Feminist research, state power and executed Women: The case of Louise Calvert. In: Farrall, S., Sparks, R. & Maruna, S., (Eds.), *Escape routes: Contemporary perspectives on life after punishment*. Routledge.
13. Carrington, K., Dixon, B., Fonseca, D., Goyes, D. R., Liu, J., & Zysman, D. (2019). Criminologies of the global south: Critical reflections. *Critical Criminology*, 27(1), 163-189.
14. Carrington, K., & Hogg, R. (2017). Deconstructing criminology's origin stories. *Asian journal of criminology*, 12(3), 181-197.
15. Fals Borda, O. (1988). *Knowledge and people's power: Lessons with peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia*. New Horizons Press.
16. Peralta, K. J. (2017). Toward a deeper appreciation of participatory epistemology in community-based participatory research. *PRISM: A Journal of Regional Engagement*, 6(1), 4.
17. Jaffe, J. (2017). Knowledge equity is social justice: Engaging a practice theory perspective of knowledge for rural transformation: Knowledge equity is social justice. *Rural Sociology*, 82(3), 391-410.
18. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 1117-1141.
19. See footnote 16: Jaffe, 2017.
20. See footnote 16: Jaffe, 2017, p.406.
21. <https://www.safesoc.co.uk/>
22. Valenzuela, A. (Ed.) (2016). *Growing Critically Conscious Teachers: A Social Justice Curriculum for Educators of Latino/a Youth*. Teachers College Press.

'collective inquiry and socio-political action in the pursuit of knowledge that could... counter oppression'.<sup>23</sup>

In practical terms, Paula, Gill and Philippa (and an independent researcher who was part of the original study) met to plan the project. The idea was to hold focus groups with former prisoners (online due to the Covid 19 pandemic), serving prisoners could not be included because of the Prison Service research moratorium amidst the pandemic.<sup>24</sup> People would be invited to write retrospective reflections of being a peer supporter in prison and come together in monthly (online) group meetings to co-write an academic article. Gill and Philippa proposed the study to the university ethics committee to ensure that the rights, safety, dignity and wellbeing of participants were considered. To acknowledge personal reflection and analysis as acts of labour, Gill and Philippa sought funding to pay co-researchers as employees for the period of data collection, analysis and co-authorship. Payment poses a challenge for planning research in partnership, however. Activities like planning research and writing funding bids (in many universities) are done by academics in their own time. Whilst this is problematic and has been raised by staff unions,<sup>25</sup> academics do at least have salaried jobs. If lived experience partners are unemployed (which is statistically more likely with a criminal record),<sup>26</sup> is it ethical to expect them to work for free on planning and funding research? Yet those not involved at these stages have less influence over the research design and management. This is an example of how experts by experience can be structurally excluded from influencing research agendas.

Once ethical approval was gained and funding secured, Paula recruited participants through the *Prisoner Policy Network* (PPN), including Rebecca, who co-wrote this article. Rebecca has a background of strategic development in criminal justice. She currently

leads on extending support in prisons within a national charity and has an interest in bringing lived experience and academic knowledge together to inform a balanced collaborative approach. The PPN, hosted by the *Prison Reform Trust* voluntary organisation, is a network of serving and former prisoners and allies working to include prisoners' experiences in national policy development. Whilst we used this network to connect to former peer supporters, there are many people with lived experience undertaking a range of roles in criminal justice. Clinks found in 2019, 67 per cent of penal voluntary organisations in England and Wales regularly consulted service users in service design and delivery, 53 per cent relied on service users as volunteers, 29 per cent employed service users as staff and 12 per cent had recruited service users to their boards of trustees.<sup>27</sup>

For our original study, people could apply to work as co-researchers if they had previous experience of peer prison suicide prevention work. People on prison licence were excluded due to the pandemic research moratorium. Now that restrictions have lifted, there would be value in approaches like this involving serving prisoners. Because prison research most commonly informs us about men in prison,<sup>28</sup> we particularly

welcomed interest from women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, who are over-represented in the criminal justice system but fare worse in education and employment.<sup>29</sup> Our original team was made up of five authors with lived experience of imprisonment (two White women, a dual heritage British/Asian woman, a Black man, and a White man) and three authors with academic knowledge of criminal justice (all of whom were White women).

Not every person who lives in or leaves prison will want to work as a co-researcher, not least because revealing a criminalised past can have negative consequences. To acknowledge this, we encouraged all

## 'Collective inquiry and socio-political action in the pursuit of knowledge that could... counter oppression'.

23. See footnote 15: Peralta, 2017, p.46.

24. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/946338/NRC\\_COVID-19\\_medium-term\\_plan\\_Updated.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/946338/NRC_COVID-19_medium-term_plan_Updated.pdf)

25. Leathwood, C., & Read, B. (2013). Research policy and academic performativity: Compliance, contestation and complicity. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(8), 1162-1174.

26. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlock-opportunityemployer-information-pack-and-case-studies/employing-prisoners-and-ex-offenders>

27. [https://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/clinks\\_state-of-the-sector-2019\\_FINAL-WEB.pdf](https://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/clinks_state-of-the-sector-2019_FINAL-WEB.pdf)

28. Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2012). Digesting men? Ethnicity, gender and food: Perspectives from a 'prison ethnography'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), 141-156.

29. Harris, H. M., & Harding, D. J. (2019). Racial inequality in the transition to adulthood after prison. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 5(1), 223-254.

co-authors to carefully consider whether they wanted to remain anonymous or not in publications. To inform decisions, we invited people to consider the 'hands-off our stories' principles,<sup>30</sup> which highlight risks of self-disclosure given that experiences may be appropriated to serve organisational interests:

- ❑ Participation is voluntary. You can always say no.
- ❑ Ask yourself, who profits from you telling your story?
- ❑ What purpose does personal story sharing serve?
- ❑ How do large organisations use stories to make material change?
- ❑ Storytelling as an exercise of labour/ work. Do you get paid?
- ❑ The internet lasts forever. Because of the technology available today, your interview or story will likely be accessible to the public for a very long time. That includes future employers and landlords.

All but one of our original team chose to be named on our first publication,<sup>31</sup> and all authors of this article chose to self-identify. Co-researchers valued the opportunity to be acknowledged, however, individual quotes and experiences within our write ups were anonymised. This offered some individual protection whilst allowing the person to still be named and acknowledged. People providing rich experiences were not made invisible, nor were experiences tainted with pain or distress tied to them by name.

### Working together

Our first focus group in September 2020 was attended by all authors, via videoconferencing. Gill prompted discussion with an open question, asking how former prisoner authors *learned they could volunteer in peer suicide prevention and what motivated them to take part*. The rest of the meeting

was 'unstructured', allowing co-authors to shape the direction. The discussion lasted 100-minutes and with the informed consent of the group, was audio-recorded and transcribed (typed up word for word). Both sound and word files were stored by Gill on a secure computer. After the first meeting, all authors were invited to write their (autoethnographic) reflections. One month later we discussed these together.

It is relevant to note that most group members were more comfortable *talking* about their experiences than *writing*, so the task of academic partners evolved into writing up some co-researchers' spoken reflections, others' written reflections and weaving in literature. For example, several people shared examples of working in highly distressing situations in prison, with very little or no support for themselves as peer support workers. Academic partners linked these experiences to writings on 'vicarious trauma' which is when exposure to others' trauma affects the wellbeing of the helper and changes their ability to engage empathically with those they are supporting.<sup>32</sup> This led us to consider the need for prisons and employing charities to recognise and minimise vicarious or secondary trauma. Facilitating some team members to speak and others to write is one way of broadening who takes part in research, but if outputs (e.g.,

Trauma affects the  
wellbeing of the  
helper and changes  
their ability to  
engage  
empathically with  
those they are  
supporting.

reports, journal articles) are all written, this again privileges the academic partners. For this reason, our plan is to create other outputs such as podcasts and (prison) radio broadcasts, enabling team members who are more confident speaking than writing to lead on sharing findings.

Reflective (ethnographic) accounts can offer rich descriptions, exposing the chasms between prison ideologies and morbid realities, including the grinding, repetitive violence of prison.<sup>33</sup> Yet, trauma is relational, not limited to an individual's experience.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, we were all underprepared for how emotional the process of talking and writing together about past events would be. These reflections from our first group reveal this emotional impact:

30. Costa, L., Voronka, J., Landry, D., Reid, J., Mcfarlane, B., Reville, D., & Church, K. (2012). "Recovering our stories": A small act of resistance. *Studies in Social Justice*, 6(1), 85-101.

31. See footnote 1: Buck et al., 2023.

32. Bober, T., & Regehr, C. (2006). Strategies for reducing secondary or vicarious trauma: Do they work?. *Brief treatment and crisis intervention*, 6(1), 1.

33. See footnote 27: Earle and Phillips, 2012.

34. Bornstein, A. (2001). Ethnography and the politics of prisoners in Palestine-Israel. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 30(5), 546-574.

*Former prisoner co-researcher 1: I'm quite emotional talking now, but at the time, you just compartmentalised so much... [Seeing self-harm in prison as a peer support worker] would play on my mind when I was on my own, but it becomes the norm seeing that. When you talk to people outside of prison [they say] 'what do you mean people were slashing their face?' and I go, 'Yea! Sometimes the whole [young people's] wing did it', and they're just like, 'That's unbelievable!' That's just life inside those walls and that's why they do take advantage of us [as peer support workers]. And looking back on it, I realise now that I've been taken advantage of. At the time, I thought I was helping...*

*Former prisoner co-researcher 2: I've been out of prison 12 years and yet look at how emotional you can get when recounting something now when at the time you compartmentalised it. So, when I look back at jail, I don't even think I really cried. ... I had this clear plan I'm going to survive this. ... When I think back about prison now and the things I saw, like the girls cutting up... all the little micro and macro abuses... I feel so traumatised. ... When I look now, wow, that was actually a lot to go through [...silence]*

Flotman notes that managing group discussions such as these requires 'a deep sense of personal self-awareness and self-regulation as [facilitators] serve as complex dynamic containers of group processes' (p.1).<sup>35</sup> 'Containing' relationships help people to articulate experiences and tolerate the discomfort of uncertainty through recognition and understanding.<sup>36</sup> This is important for facilitators of partnerships like ours to consider. Inviting reflection on traumatic experiences can cause emotional harm to speakers and listeners. We anticipated the potential for (re-) traumatisation and built in some safeguards, as we explained in our first group meeting:

*Academic co-researcher: We didn't just [want to] drop you like you've been dropped in your prison experiences, so we've set up some [videoconference] meetings once a month for*

*at least the next three months. They're not compulsory, but while we're doing this writing... if you want to get back together as a group and say, 'Oh, it's been a nightmare since we last met', or 'Things are spilling over for me', or 'How are you all doing'? We're going to build a space for that to happen. So, you're very welcome to come and you're very welcome not to; it's up to you. And we've got a list of helplines for you as well, in case you want that outside of this.*

A (former prisoner) co-researcher noted:

*I think that because [some of us] knew each other before we started working together as a group, I was able to be more vulnerable, yet immensely safe. So, safeguarding also links to relationships... I would advise people to spend time getting comfortable with each other before research begins and allocate enough time for this.*

Researchers who were listening to, rather than drawing on, traumatic memories were also emotionally impacted. This led us to reflect on the benefit of 'containing' (reflective / cathartic) research spaces, or at a minimum, peer support spaces where difficult emotions can be explored and processed. Tolich and colleagues argue that researcher emotional safety is a key part of ethics and advocate for professional supervision for researchers.<sup>37</sup> Such formal, containing relationships allow people to reflect in a neutral setting. This is something we encourage lived experience-led/informed research teams to consider as an ethical safeguard.

## Stumbling blocks

Our work together created meaningful connections, new learning, and the opportunity to share findings with peer support providers and the Justice Committee Inquiry into Mental Health in Prisons.<sup>38</sup> However, there were limits to our approach that may be useful to review for others interested in this method. Firstly, there were issues around our communication channels. As the global Covid-19 pandemic began, our group discussions were moved online to enable social distancing. We used the Microsoft Teams videoconferencing platform, which

35. Flotman, A. P. (2018). Group relations consulting: voice notes from Robben Island. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 18(1), 1-12.

36. Doyle, S. (2013). Reflexivity and the capacity to think. *Qualitative health research*, 23(2), 248-255.

37. Tolich, M., Tumilty, E., Choe, L., Hohmann-Marriott, B., & Fahey, N. (2020). Researcher emotional safety as ethics in practice: Why professional supervision should augment PhD candidates' academic supervision. *Handbook of research ethics and scientific integrity*, 589-602.

38. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/36300/html/>

offered more cybersecurity than others similar applications.<sup>39</sup> This enabled people to get involved in research who may otherwise be limited by time, distance, or social barriers.<sup>40</sup> Whilst videoconferencing had the benefits of low costs and connecting participants across England (and has potential to foster international writing partnerships), it did impact the quality of interactions. For example, at times we could not see each other fully due to people working on mobile phone cameras, or the internet connectivity would dip, and sound would be affected, which meant that occasionally we missed parts of what was said. Relatedly, potential participants may not have volunteered because they lacked digital equipment, knowledge, or connectivity. Adeyemi and colleagues recommend that researchers partner with charities to facilitate the involvement of those facing financial or structural barriers.<sup>41</sup> They also propose that in-person contact be used in addition to videoconferencing to build trust and rapport.

Another major challenge in participatory research can be successfully sharing power. Too often 'partnerships' between academics and non-academics can result in tokenism or exploitation of marginalised parties.<sup>42</sup> We were keen to avoid these traps, but the academic partners did have control of funding and ethical approval given our base in universities.

Indeed, it can be hard for service user/ lived experience groups to secure funding and ethical approval independently and this is another of the structural barriers to working as equals on producing knowledge.<sup>43</sup> Power imbalances can be mitigated with recognition of structural limits and reflexivity (open

reflective discussions about power). To try and nurture more equal relationships, we involved several experts by experience to promote a feeling of representing a 'we' due to shared experiences and made clear that our aim was to draw on our varied *lived and learned expertise as equally valuable*.<sup>44</sup> One former prisoner co-author reflected:

*In our group there wasn't a pecking order, it felt like a balanced equity vibe, however, I think it was still important for people to have the confidence and freedom to ask further exploratory questions. Peers*

*related their experiences, seemingly making others feel more comfortable talking through a perhaps traumatic experience... the academics would then ask the open/digging questions to try and unwrap the experience. It felt like everybody brought something to the 'conversational table'.*

Another former prisoner co-author reflected:

*I agree with the 'balanced equity vibe', but I would like to understand why some co-authors dropped out after they had given their spoken inputs. Did appetite for the article writing wane as we progressed through the long and difficult process of peer review (and rejection!)?*

Indeed, new obstacles were encountered during publication.

The journal article that resulted

from our work together was under review for two years. One journal requested a more critical stance to suicide prevention, which for a time directed our work away from its core message, but the revised work was rejected anyway. A second journal expressed concern we were too close to our subject and challenged the

Another major challenge in participatory research can be successfully sharing power. Too often 'partnerships' between academics and non-academics can result in tokenism or exploitation of marginalised parties.

39. Azhar, M. A., Timms, J., & Tilley, B. (2021). Forensic Investigations of Google Meet and Microsoft Teams—Two Popular Conferencing Tools in the Pandemic. In *International Conference on Digital Forensics and Cyber Crime* (pp. 20-34). Springer.

40. Tuttas, C. A. (2015). Lessons learned using web conference technology for online focus group interviews. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(1), 122-133.

41. Adeyemi, I., Sanders, C., Ong, B. N., Howells, K., Quinlivan, L., Gorman, L., & Cheraghi-Sohi, S. (2022). Challenges and adaptations to public involvement with marginalised groups during the COVID-19 pandemic: commentary with illustrative case studies in the context of patient safety research. *Research Involvement and Engagement*, 8(1), 13.

42. Sangill, C., Buus, N., Hybholt, L., & Berring, L. L. (2019). Service user's actual involvement in mental health research practices: A scoping review. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 28(4), 798-815.

43. Voronka, J., Grant, J., Harris, D. W., Kennedy, A., & Komaroff, J. (2020). The possibilities and constraints of service user research collaborations: The Peer Qualitative Research Group. In *The Routledge Handbook of Service User Involvement in Human Services Research and Education* (pp. 446-453). Routledge.

44. See footnote 41, Sangill et al., 2019.

use of the self/lived experience in research. After strengthening our defence of autoethnography, the article was rejected again. Rejections are a part of publishing life, but they can be painful even for academics, who are more accustomed to them. For lived experience researchers less familiar with the process, they can be especially hard given critiques can hit personally as well as professionally. Peer review itself is imperfect, suffering from bias, a lack of transparency and training for reviewers, and long delays.<sup>45</sup> It is also a core part of the knowledge hierarchy,<sup>46</sup> which dismisses alternative (embodied) knowledges from those rarely visible as authors. We would add that the pool of reviewers — the gatekeepers of knowledge — rarely includes experts by experience. If we are to overcome tokenistic involvement of people with lived experience, one way is to include experts by experience on peer review boards. Former prisoners and prison staff could also be represented on boards deciding what research can take place in prisons, especially as ‘the ability to reject or approve applications for conducting research with incarcerated populations, [shapes] carceral knowledge and... affect[s] the quality and richness of the data obtained’ (p.183).<sup>47</sup> If local and national ethical review boards, research teams and publishing peer review spaces are all staffed by professionals who have never lived in prisons, our scientific knowledge is unlikely to fully represent lived experiences.

Positioning oneself as a researcher, writer (or indeed reviewer) whose capital is lived (marginalised) experience, involves taking on the dominant White-male, scientific voice at the top of criminology’s long-established hierarchy of knowledge. Should people want to do this, it is useful to have ‘communities of coping’ where belonging is fostered, and people can ‘offload’/resist experiences of marginalization.<sup>48</sup> Training and clarity about how people can contribute can also avoid tokenism. In future, we would build in a training period including basic research methods, writing skills, oral history skills and self-care. One of our

co-researchers suggested asking people in teams to explain what support they have for themselves while doing this work (rather than just offering support helplines), this enables members to share support strategies and ensures gaps in support can be filled. To improve retention, researchers could ‘recce’ people’s skills and experiences in more detail at the outset; to best allocate specific activities and then ask members afterwards how it felt to be involved.

## Conclusion

The criminal justice sector relies heavily on the knowledge and labour of criminalised people but less so in influential positions. Co-researcher roles create a progression route for experts by experience, but also illuminate where people with lived experience are often excluded (e.g., as grant holders, authors, ethical reviewers, peer reviewers), highlighting a need to diversify these spaces. Collective autoethnography, where criminalised people and academics write together about personal experiences could have much to offer criminology and criminal justice. The method centres those who are the focus of study, amplifying voices that are otherwise muted and enabling diverse parties to exchange expertise, and resources to drive social change.

Writing personal accounts of stigmatised and traumatic histories can restore dignity, illuminate invisibilised places, and uncover solutions held by people with lived experience of criminal justice.

We were able to form a diverse team, based in different cities and facilitate varied ways of contributing, from group and one-to-one discussions to individual writings. We paid co-researchers for their time and enabled informed choices about authorship. We recognised the potential for re-traumatisation and built in ‘containing’ spaces for people to offload and discuss issues of power. This work took time, planning and revision but uncovered accounts of ‘vicarious trauma’ within prison peer support work that has been

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and uncover  
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people with lived  
experience of  
criminal justice.

45. Barroga, E. (2020). Innovative strategies for peer review. *Journal of Korean Medical Science*, 35(20).

46. See footnote 16, Jaffe, 2017.

47. Watson, T. M., & van der Meulen, E. (2019). Research in carceral contexts: Confronting access barriers and engaging former prisoners. *Qualitative Research*, 19(2), 182-198.

48. Buck, G., Tomczak, P., & Quinn, K. (2022). This is how it feels: Activating lived experience in the penal voluntary sector. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(4), 822-839.

overlooked in evaluations to date. We also highlighted possible harms to prisoner peer supporters and argued that peer supporters be included more strategically in plans to improve mental health in prisons. However, our approach was not perfect, and we encourage others to consider limitations faced.

Firstly, while the internet can facilitate diverse teams, it can also exclude people experiencing poverty or those in prisons who do not have access to devices and/or connectivity. It may be that for some studies, in-person writing teams are more appropriate. Secondly, whilst our team included different backgrounds, genders and ethnicities, many experiences were not represented. With careful adjustments and translation methods, this method could be adapted to include some of the most marginalised prisoner voices, for example, foreign national prisoners or those with (learning) disabilities. Thirdly, it can be difficult to meet as equals when some have experienced marginalisation and some privilege within criminal justice and research. These power relations must be named and worked through. It can help to explicitly state that lived and

learned expertise are equally valuable and to include several experts by experience to increase confidence. Academics bring research knowledge, familiarity with funding and ethics, and their past achievements/reputations. They need discipline for study, time and commitment to the subject matter. Experts by experience bring community connections, knowledge of gaps in research and practice, and often a passion for change. In doing this work they need care for self and others, and bravery and strength to re-visit traumatic experiences. There are often higher costs for partners working through lived experience, as the work can impact their everyday life. A core message from our project has been the importance of valuing varied expertise within research. Existing ways of doing research can feel extractive to those being researched. The alternative we have presented here is one attempt to acknowledge and avoid this risk.

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# Pen(ology) Pals: Connected Through Conversation

*Helen is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Hull. Glenn is a life sentenced prisoner at HMP Fosse Way.*

**We were invited to write this piece to present an example of how academics and people in prison can think collaboratively about matters concerning criminal justice practices and experiences. Collaborating in this way creates opportunities to make sense of issues both parties are motivated to understand in more depth. It is our hope that this written piece expresses the value of continued dialogue between prisons and the outside world and the importance of engaging in ongoing conversation.**

Despite our distinct differences in life experiences, shared interests have formed the basis of the authors' relationship which is grounded in dialogue, facilitates positive focus, and promotes the view that prisons and the people within them can still be part of our communities through meaningful reflection on lived experience. In preparation for writing this article, we considered the issues we would like to address and how to communicate our points of discussion. Keen to develop a unique approach to our writing process, our methodological design for this piece has been to write the article as a series of letters to reflect our ongoing method of continued communication since 2016.

Rather than presenting extracts of our existing communications, the original letters contained in this article have been written purposely. They are based on collaboratively selected topics which have resurfaced at various points in our previous conversations. Readers will note that references are cited in some of the featured letters, and this is not uncommon in our regular interactions. Providing references in our usual conversations (outside of this article) signposts to articles and reports we have read and, in some cases, leads to the sharing of those sources via post for continued discussion. For this article, some additional references have been provided to support our dialogue. We discussed several topics that we could potentially address in this article, eventually resulting in a set of three themes which are considered through a deliberately conversational approach: *Treading Water Behind the Scenes, Coping and Hope and Considering International Comparisons*.

Each theme is presented through a series of reciprocal letters providing discussion on some pressing issues relevant to penological thought. Within the letters exchanged between the authors, further themes emerge organically, including public perceptions of prisons and those who live and work within them. What follows in this written piece is a 'live' conversation enabling readers to understand how written dialogue between an academic and a serving prisoner facilitates the emergence of such themes and leads to important exchanges of experience, personal reflection and scholarly work.

## Becoming 'Pen(ology) Pals'

We have been thinking collaboratively about when we first met in 2016. Glenn was held in HMP Full Sutton and Helen, along with Dr Bill Davies,<sup>1</sup> was looking for men to take part in a Learning Together programme which involved the accredited study of a third-year university penology module. Glenn was 9 years into his life sentence and had been given the opportunity to study alongside university students, which was something he didn't want to miss. Helen had recently completed her PhD researching adult male prisoners' experiences of education, and through the development of this programme, it was a chance to put some of her research findings into practice. This meant going into prison as an educator to extend the reach of higher education and be part of a learning experience that revealed the power of education in bringing people together for meaningful interactions, grounded in a shared interest in learning, reading and critical discussion. This kind of learning has been experienced by many university students and people serving prison sentences nationally and internationally, championing the value of educational experiences in breaking down social and physical divides.

For Glenn, the course inspired him to continue with his own studies, which he has done since. Through the penology module, Glenn was able to reflect on his sentence as a whole drawing on concepts such as 'intelligent trust' to explore the

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1. At this time, both Helen and Bill worked as Senior Lecturers at Leeds Beckett University.

experience and stages of long-term imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> Concepts such as this, which significantly resonated with Glenn, ignited what has now become a passion; understanding and speaking out for truth and change within the criminal justice system. Penological issues have become the foundation of our continued communication. For Helen, the circumstances of the authors' first meeting, through a shared educational experience, was also transformative. While researching education in prisons was an important learning process, this experience facilitated personal and professional growth through interpersonal interaction and resulted in the development of a more in-depth appreciation of the value of emotional intelligence and intellectual humility. Transitioning from tutor and student to now 'pen(ology) pals' who regularly correspond has been an important journey for both authors. For Glenn, it has facilitated support and encouragement in his academic progression and for Helen, it has provided an opportunity to remain connected to a former student (and now collaborator) through a relationship grounded in a shared enthusiasm for education, and a connection to the realities of prison life. Through our letter writing we connect the prison to wider society and together explore various subjects that we both find interesting and relevant to talk about.

From 2017 to 2021, following meeting via the Learning Together programme in 2016, we maintained contact through physical letter writing, the 'old school' way, with paper, envelopes, and stamps. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed this down for us and in 2021 we decided to try using the online *emailaprisoner.com* (EMAP) system, which has now become our preferred way of writing. Writing letters takes time and thinking, and this is something we have both enjoyed over the years. This written piece has been co-produced through EMAP correspondence only. Achieving a co-authored piece in this way demonstrates the product of a flattened hierarchy between the authors in the spirit of intellectual fellowship.

### **Treading Water Behind the Scenes**

In this section, we consider two key issues. Firstly, we discuss public perceptions of prisons and people within them and how misrepresentations can be problematic. We also consider how some people in prison who have completed a range of offending behaviour, risk reduction and educational programmes can be left feeling forgotten in the system due to barriers to opportunities for higher level education.

*Dear Helen,*

*I am a firm believer that there should be a wide-reaching public consultation about the future of prisons. The public, as I did before I came to prison, have a very misinformed view of what the purpose of prison is, and what prison life is actually like. The public only see sensationalised documentaries or dramas which show mainly violence. This is clearly what the government of the day want the image to be, as being seen to be 'tough on crime' and that punishment is a vote winner. The truth is of course very different, as within the walls of the prison lots of good work takes place and many men and women really do change their lives.*

*However, the accepted culture of fear, intimidation, bullying and criminal activity by both staff and prisoners is widespread, with security staff and law enforcement only able to scratch the surface of what is really going on in our prisons. In my opinion, until the truth about our prison system is made public and an informed consultation is held, we will continue to see many men and women simply return to custody time and time again. As a lifer I look with envy at the Canadian, Dutch and Portuguese systems which have given opportunities for release at different stages of the life sentence.*

*I, like many of my peers, have completed all offender behaviour and risk reduction work and we are now just treading water, waiting for release. Some of my peers describe the feeling of being forgotten by the system. Once you have completed offender behaviour and risk reduction courses, the prison has little to offer. Many workshops provide menial work that is not skilled, education provision is poor with many courses only available up to Level 2, and ROTL, which would allow us to attend real work for real wages or provide voluntary community work, is not available to lifers until the last three years of the tariff.*

*I hope to hear from you soon,  
Take care,  
Glenn.*

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2. O'Neill, B. O. (2006). Intelligent trust, small print and good communication: 150th anniversary lecture to the faculty of actuaries. *British Actuarial Journal*, 12(2), 417-430.

Dear Glenn,

I think it's interesting that you've raised the point about the disconnect between the public and the reality of prison life. It makes me think about Jamie Bennett's article, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: The Media in Prison Films'.<sup>3</sup> In this article he talks about the importance of the role of films and the media in informing beliefs and actions and how representations of prisons depict the academic literature while at the same time distorting the reality, and that through understanding these distortions, we can then understand public attitudes to punishment. He explains the mixed reactions of the public to different depictions, from attitudes pushing towards reform to those that are more negative. I found it interesting recently to see the responses to the BBC drama 'Time'. While there were some reviews identifying flaws, many former prisoners and prison officers have credited the drama's accuracy with one reviewer saying 'I pray that Time has helped to finally awaken the public to what prison is really like. I hope it goes some way in changing the narrative of how prison is portrayed and encourages understanding of the real pain it brings'.<sup>4</sup> In this review, Crilly wrote about some of the realities that you have mentioned such as fear and intimidation, and also the very worrying reality of the mental health illnesses of many people in prison. It's strange to think at the same time, as we've experienced together, lots of good work takes place in these challenging environments and as you have said, many men and women really do change their lives.

I've recently been reading through the new Prisons Strategy White Paper<sup>5</sup> — not quite finished(!), and of course as you would predict, I started by searching through the new plans for education in prisons while at the same time thinking about yours and others' experiences of the limits on what is available and how this perhaps exacerbates the feeling of 'treading water' or 'swimming with the tide'<sup>6</sup> and waiting — I see the tidal

metaphors are still useful to you years after the Long Term Imprisonment lecture(!). The White Paper discusses plans for a new Prisoner Education Strategy, acknowledging that education provision is 'not good enough'. The new strategy continues to focus on 'baseline skills' in literacy and numeracy and vocational qualifications in areas such as construction and computing, and I wonder where this then leaves those like yourself and your peers who are keen to continue pushing beyond Level 2. Although I think we both appreciate the importance of basic skills, we also are very conscious of the value of continued education opportunities, not just for educational qualifications that enhance employability, but also because the reach of these experiences extends to coping, wellbeing and 'feeling human' during a prison sentence, which is an important part of maintaining a safe environment for prisoners and staff<sup>7</sup>.

This gets me thinking about our discussions over the years about how studying has been a good way to take your mind out of prison, but that feelings of hope can fluctuate over time. Coincidentally, while I am writing this, I am listening to a recent presentation given by Drs Serena Wright and Susie Hulley about their research on life sentenced prisoners, and hope is such a distinct theme that comes through from lifers' narratives in their work. Do you think studying has been the main source of hope for you over the years, or have you found it in other ways as well?

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.  
Take care,  
Helen

### Coping and Hope

Coping with the experience of imprisonment has been a consistent point of discussion in our written conversations over the years. In this section, we discuss the experience of entry shock, the positive influence that people who work in prisons can have, and mechanisms of coping that can lead to the development of hope for the future.

3. Bennett, J. (2006). The good, the bad and the ugly: The media in prison films. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(2), 97-115.
4. Crilly, J. (2021, June 22). BBC's drama time took me back to being inside – I hope it showed the public how painful prison is. I (Newspaper).
5. Ministry of Justice. (2021). *Prisons strategy white paper*. Ministry of Justice.
6. Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). Swimming with the tide: Adapting to long-term imprisonment. *Justice Quarterly*, 34(3), 517-541.
7. Nichols, H. (2021). *Understanding the educational experiences of imprisoned men: (Re)education*. Routledge.

Dear Helen,

Your letter got me thinking about hope and what it means to me. In the early years of my sentence, I didn't have any hope. I had spent two years on remand before being found guilty. I recall returning from the Old Bailey having just been told I would serve at least 25 years in prison. At the time I felt I was coping well and a reception officer at HMP Belmarsh asked me if I was ok. In reply I said I was fine, and I recall saying 25 years is not that bad. I went to my cell that night and after the door was slammed shut behind me, I fell to the floor and broke down. On reflection, the time on remand and the first year following sentencing was a period of shock, dealing with the reality of spending a significant time in prison. So at that point I would say I didn't have hope.

Around a year after being sentenced, a prison officer took me to a quiet room for a coffee and a chat. I didn't realise it at the time, but this would be a life changing conversation. He spent time talking to me like I was a human, not a convicted criminal. He explained to me that I should try and focus on today and he encouraged me to become a Samaritans Listener and to engage in education. He went on to say that hope is something that I must find as it will give me the strength to get through my sentence, and we spoke about the different stages of the life sentence, something that I recall we covered in the Learning Together course. That conversation changed my life and gave me hope for the future. I did become a Listener and began to complete many courses offered by prison education. As I suggested in my previous letter, education provision is quite poor for those, like myself, who want to study beyond Level 2. I did manage to enrol with the Open University in 2011 and have since gained a Certificate in Higher Education (Open), a Certificate in Legal Studies and I am in my final year of a Business Management (Hons) Degree. I hope to then study a Masters followed by a PhD. Higher education has given me hope! I have plans for self-employment that would not have been a reality without having completed higher education and I have met people, including

you Helen, who have provided support, guidance and created opportunities that have made me feel like a human again. I now have lots of hope for the future and I am using my time left in custody to develop plans and research ideas.

It would be wrong of me if I didn't consider the many men and women who would describe having no hope. Prison can be a very lonely place, and many find it difficult to cope. My work as a Samaritans Listener opened my eyes to the mental health crisis in our prisons, with many men and women turning to self-harm as the only coping mechanism. At times I became the focus of hope for the men that I was supporting as a Listener and I would spend hours talking to peers about serious issues, or at times it was just mundane chat, but this made them feel listened to which in turn ignited some feeling of normality and hope. Sadly, the prison service is not always good at recognising and dealing with mental health issues, with many of my peers left to just suffer in silence which can result in devastating consequences.

Hope means many things to different people, but for me hope is the future I am building for myself, without which I would struggle to survive each day.

I hope you are keeping well,  
Take care,  
Glenn.

Dear Glenn,

Your recollection of returning from court and the impact that the realisation of your sentence had on you really resonates with Wright, Crewe and Hulley's research on very long sentences. I know you're familiar with some of their work, however I'm not sure if you've read their 2017 article 'Suppression, denial, sublimation: Defending against the initial pains of very long life sentences'?<sup>8</sup> In this article they discuss 'entry shock', explaining that the interviews they conducted were dominated by 'Narratives of numbness and shock, and themes of darkness, illusion and hopelessness' (p.231). Interestingly, they found in their research that numbness and

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8. Wright, S., Crewe, B., & Hulley, S. (2017). Suppression, denial, sublimation: Defending against the initial pains of very long life sentences. *Theoretical Criminology*, 21(2), 225-246.

dissociation were experienced by women and those who admitted guilt in a comparatively more intensive way. They also talk about people in or recalling early phases of their sentence, describing the difficulty in coming to terms with the sentence length as 'temporal vertigo'. I know you're interested in the metaphors and descriptions used to capture the long-term prison sentence experience, so if you'd like to read this article, let me know and I'll post you a copy — another one for your ever-expanding reading list.

In my own research and wider conversations with people in prison and people released from prison, I've heard many times about the 'one officer' who connected with them and provided advice and encouragement, and how this had a lasting positive impact, like your experience. In a module I teach at university, the students are in fact this week learning about prison officers as part of the 'populations in prison' part of the module. In one of the set readings, Arnold recalls from her doctoral research findings that the 'best' prison officers have probity (honesty and integrity), moral values and reasoning, equanimity and composure, self-confidence and assuredness.<sup>9</sup> She notes that there are various ways of being a good officer which can vary based on working style. Giving the example of officers on residential wings, Arnold identifies that some 'may have a tendency towards a counselling role, based on a working style involving compassion and care' (p.273) while others may gravitate towards facilitator or rule enforcement roles. In my PhD research, former prisoners also told me about officers, like the officer who supported you, who had encouraged them to engage with education during their sentence and how this was an instigator for the eventual reimagining of a future self, drawing parallels with your own experience of developing hope for the future and how encouragement and support to engage with education has been integral to this.

As we have talked about over the years, I know that you have continued to focus on your interest in penal reform and have drawn inspiration from other countries to explore

your thoughts around this, particularly in relation to people serving life sentences. I wonder now how you view the difference between regimes in England and Wales compared to international approaches and whether you think there are approaches that may alleviate some of the challenges of 'treading water' that you have often referred to. Education, and encouragement to study, has clearly been an important mechanism for you in managing this experience. In terms of the future, are there international examples that you have identified that you think could better facilitate continued education and the realisation of hope for the future, post-release?

Take care and speak to you soon,

Helen

### Considering International Comparisons

When we discussed the potential themes for discussion in this paper, Glenn noted his interest in international systems of justice that had resulted in his consideration of progression for people serving indeterminate sentences. This part of the article reflects this interest through a conversation about the Canadian 'faint hope clause' which led us to thinking again about the position and role of public opinion.

Dear Helen,

Reading your letter made me realise that I am not alone with the feelings I had when I was given my long sentence. I would like to read the article noted in your first paragraph, could you send me a copy in the mail please?

You are correct that my interest is in penal reform and the more I learn, the more passionate I become. I have, as you know, been looking at other countries and how the regime and progression for people serving indeterminate sentences differs to that of England and Wales. In 2016 the Howard League for Penal Reform completed some research. At the time there were 11,675 people serving an indeterminate sentence which was a staggering increase from 4,530 in 2001 and 2,708 in 1991.<sup>10</sup> Looking at

9. Arnold, H. (2016). The prison officer. In Y. Jewkes, B. Crewe & J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook on Prisons*. Routledge.

10. Butt, E. (2016) *Faint hope: What to do about long sentences*. The Howard League for Penal Reform.

other countries we can learn some important lessons. The Canadian, Dutch, and Portuguese systems have each offered the potential for release at several stages of the sentence. Multiple opportunities for release are linked to a much greater recognition that steps should be taken to prevent somebody being in prison longer than necessary. I think this comes back to a point I raised in an earlier letter about public perception and understanding the purpose of prisons. Victims should always be at the heart of any decision for early release or for reform of the current system.

Canada has what is colloquially known as the 'faint hope clause', which allows those sentenced to life with a minimum of 15 years to apply to have a jury examine the progress they have made in prison and review parole eligibility. Theoretically, any person serving life with a minimum of 15 years can apply for a jury to consider their case. The jury has the power to reduce the number of years before parole eligibility and the decision must be unanimous.

In England and Wales, the Secretary of State for Justice does have executive powers, under the Royal Prerogative of Mercy, to reduce the tariff of a lifer, but the criteria for such an application is very limited and so this power is not used very often.

Looking my own circumstances, I have completed a significant part of my tariff, but I am still a number of years from pre-tariff (Cat -D) parole. My own rehabilitation is on hold because I have completed all identified risk reduction work and I am in the final stages of my degree. I am simply serving time with no benefit to my rehabilitation. As you know, I am keen to continue my studies, but my options within the closed prison estate are very limited because of the research element that is required.

In my view, a version of the faint hope clause should be introduced in England and Wales. It should not be forgotten that lifers are placed on a life licence once released with strict conditions and supervision from a probation officer. A failure to stick to the licence conditions can result in the lifer being

returned to prison. I have mentioned before about the need for a fully informed public consultation, and I feel that this is needed more than ever. If the Government make decisions without taking or listening to public opinion then the result can be civil unrest, as we have witnessed in recent months with the 'Kill the Bill' protests, which are trying to stop the new Sentencing and Courts legislation from progressing into law.

I hope that this letter finds you well.  
Take care,  
Glenn.

Dear Glenn,

I was really interested to read your letter which considered international comparisons. Admittedly, my own knowledge of international systems is more limited than I would like it to be, and so this reveals another advantage of our ongoing letter writing. In the same way that I sometimes mention journal articles that you might like to read, you also raise issues that encourage me to explore and broaden my understanding of penological issues and debates.

After reading your letter I read about the 'faint hope clause', which I now understand came into effect in Canada in 1976. I read an article about this that presents an interesting connection to points you have raised about public views and consultation. Roberts provided discussion around the clause's controversies,<sup>11</sup> and I was particularly drawn to the article's focus on public opinion. Up to 2009, only one poll had asked the public their views about the provision, which Roberts described as 'an astonishing finding given the very public nature of the debate' (p. 539). Unsurprisingly to Roberts, who criticised deficiencies in public opinion research, the representative sample of Canadians involved in the survey were asked misleading questions and given insufficient information to make a decision about their view of the clause. 72 per cent of the respondents subsequently supported the repeal of the provision.

Roberts called this representation of public opinion into question when presenting data

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11. Roberts, J. V. (2009). "Faint hope" in the firing line: Repeal of section 745.6? *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 51(4), 537-545.

*on the outcomes of applications under the clause which revealed, as of 2008, 83 per cent of the 169 applications (in receipt of a completed hearing) resulted in some reduction in the number of years to be served before parole eligibility. Of those prisoners who reached their revised (earlier) date, 93 per cent were granted release on parole having convinced a superior court judge, a unanimous jury, and members of the National Parole Board. Criticising the role of wider public opinion on this, Roberts argued that 'The outcomes of the hearings tell the whole story' (p.543).*

*Through my reading, I found that Bill S-6 repealed the 'faint hope clause' from the Criminal Code meaning that those sentenced for murder on or after December 2nd 2011 would no longer be eligible to apply for parole before the eligibility date stated during sentencing. This was disappointing to read given the reduced opportunity for further rehabilitation — something that you have critiqued in reference to England and Wales. This raises points of discussion that I'm sure we will continue to explore in our conversations.*

*This perhaps leaves our conversation for this article at a suitable 'to be continued' point, reflective of our ongoing dialogue since 2016.*

*I hope you're well and looking forward to hearing from you soon.*

*In the meantime, take care,*

*Helen*

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The construction of this written piece began with a mutually agreed set of three core themes that the authors' planned to discuss in a brief series of letters. Through the letter writing process and the consideration of issues concerning coping, hope and

international comparisons, the conversation led to the organic emergence of other themes including the role and nature of public opinion.

Through the sharing of perspectives and the deliberation of a small number of issues, this written piece demonstrates not only the value in creating a space to consider penological issues in a reciprocal way that permeates prison walls, but also the capacity to instigate the knowledge development of both parties by introducing each other to contemporary research findings and international penal processes. Further, while the key themes we have discussed in this article are not novel in the presence of a broad range of existing scholarship, we have also demonstrated how the existing literature can be used by those serving prison sentences to make sense of and articulate their experiences. This is important, particularly for those serving long term sentences to develop a grasp of time that initially appears lost. The academic literature, in our case, also serves as an important conduit to continue to discuss our shared interests and raise questions that spark critical thought.

Considering international systems of justice enabled our conversation to come full circle, for this article at least. Beginning with the proposition of the potential benefit of wide-reaching public consultation about the future of prisons, we have also highlighted the problematic nature of misinformed views, both through considering media representations of prisons and people within them, and also drawing on the concerning consequences of misinformed public consultation leading to calls for the repeal of progressive practices in Canadian criminal justice.

This leaves us wondering what the public really think about sentencing and prisons, or rather, what the public would think if there was a concerted effort to invite the public into transparent, informed discussion and debate. This article, and indeed this special issue of the Prison Service Journal, serve as part of that concerted effort by bringing physically separated people together in conversation and openly sharing insight into reciprocal dialogue with a wider audience.

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# Exploring Friendships behind Prison Walls through a Knowledge Equity Approach

*Donna is a Research Fellow in Public Health at the University of Southampton. Marc is the CEO of Fair Justice, an organisation striving for a fairer criminal justice system.*

**Positive connections between men in prison are rarely thought about or discussed in academic research. Yet as Crewe (2014),<sup>1</sup> Laws and Lieber (2020),<sup>2</sup> and Morey and Crewe (2018) highlight,<sup>3</sup> considerable intimacy and camaraderie exists between imprisoned men. In this paper, we utilise academic collaborative writing — taking a knowledge equity approach — to examine friendships between imprisoned men. One author with first hand lived experience of prison (Marc) writes about their experiences freely in their own words, in the first person, and creates the wider narrative together with an academic (Donna). We suggest these conditions create a more relaxed and natural position for a person with lived experiences of prison to share them, arguably encouraging openness surrounding sensitive topics like friendships during incarceration, deepening insights. Through this process of co-production, we aim to bridge some of the distance from the conventional space of ‘research participant’ towards a more equitable ‘participant author’.**

In the following sections, we present and discuss the participant author’s experiences of prison friendships. We argue that there are similarities as well as differences in how these friendships function compared to friendships beyond the prison gates. Similarities include friendships becoming established through shared interest and values, being maintained by shared bonding experiences, creating safety and trust, and becoming fractured and finished by disagreements. The differences with wider community friendships include the function of safety as a necessity, the unavoidable shared trauma and also empathy, and the compounded grieving of loss involved when friends are removed. We also highlight that the specific dynamics of imprisoned friendships are infused with an ‘imposed intimacy’, which

functions in complex ways with various psychological impacts. We make four new contributions to the existing small body of work on imprisoned friendships, i) unpacking different stages of a friendship life cycle in prison, ii) expanding understandings of positive emotional flows between imprisoned men, iii) identifying a previously unexamined feature of imprisoned friendships, ‘imposed intimacy’ and discussing some of its impacts, including, iv) highlighting associated potential psychological risks. We have added an additional section to the paper where we reflect on our collaborative process of working towards knowledge equity.

## **Experience of forming, maintaining, fracturing, and endings of friendships in prison**

This part of the paper presents my (Marc’s) personal views and experiences of friendships in prison. Having served multiple custodial sentences, with the last being an Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence where I served eight years in prison, I have experienced a wide range of friendships. These friendships consisted of multi-layered dynamics in the way that they were formed, maintained, fractured, and finished. These layers were infused with complexity.

Friendships between people who are or have been incarcerated together within the prison system tend to be thought of as ‘bad’ and stereotypically accompanied with negative connotation by prison staff, probation officers, and other officials who hold the power within the prison estate. However, friendships in prison can also be built on positive interactions borne through mutual experiences little recognised by prison officials.

## **Forging Friendships Inside**

So, how do these prison friendships form? People with common interests tend to gravitate towards one

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1. Crewe, B. (2014). Not Looking Hard Enough: Masculinity, Emotion, and Prison Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4), 392–403.
  2. Laws, B., & Lieber, E. (2022). King, Warrior, Magician, Lover’: Understanding expressions of care among male prisoners. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(4), 469–487.
  3. Morey, M., & Crewe, B. (2018.) Work, intimacy, and prisoner masculinities. In *New perspectives on prison masculinities* (pp. 17–41). Palgrave Macmillan.

another. This is not any different to friendships built outside of prison.<sup>4</sup> For example, in prison it is typical to see people who use the gym associating with other gym users, or people who use narcotics associating with other narcotic users, or people who are interested in studying hanging around with other students. Other factors, for instance, cultural, regional, or life habits, such as addictions, can all be inroads for a friendship to form. This is seen in rehabilitation journeys as well. The same people will attend educational classes and offending behaviour programmes and behave in ways that steer away from criminality and recidivism.

Shared language, dialogue, and dialect are common features in the initial stages of forming a friendship in prison. A recognisable street or regional slang can be comforting where you feel understood and accepted. Although people in prison clearly all have one thing in common — serving a custodial sentence — this commonality does not automatically make everyone friends. Their wider interests and values become the foundations for friendship rather than criminal activity.

Prison by default is an environment that can easily create mistrust. When forging a friendship group that feels trustworthy, it promotes the sense of safety and acts as a vehicle to feel less vulnerable. Feeling safe within your friendship group becomes essential which is different to friendships on the outside where it is desirable but not necessary. Being a 'criminal' can lead to a very paranoid lifestyle and outlook of the world around you with a sense of having to second guess every interaction with people in an order to stay safe. Once you enter custody the paranoia experienced as a 'criminal' in the community is amplified to the point that it impacts your approach to making friends. This magnified paranoia draws you to people with common interests that make you feel safe and less vulnerable. When you strike up a friendship in prison you spend most of the 'unlocked' day with that person. You eat together, watch TV together, go to the gym together and even use communal showers together. This constant close proximity can generate shared emotional states between cell mates. For example, at times, when one person is happy so is the other, or when one is sad the other is also sad.

This close proximity comes with added tensions. For example, unwritten rules regarding the toilet whilst in multi occupancy cells. The expectation is that one

does not use the toilet for anything other than to urinate whilst the other person is in the cell and using the communal toilets outside the cell otherwise. This often creates animosity when there are no opportunities to use any other form of toilet facilities, especially at night when you are locked behind the door. You will not find this rule written down in any policy framework. As a first timer in prison, it is normally the first thing that you are told by your cell mate when entering the cell for the first time. It is seen as a sign of disrespect if this rule is not followed and can lead to physical altercations between cell mates which can damage the forging of potential friendships and fracture friendships that may already exist.

Although most toilets are behind a curtain or in a cupboard like fixture, these attempts at privacy bring their own issues as there are spy holes for the officers to check that you are in there. This always worried me as you would have to be careful not to be accused of 'exposing yourself' by using the toilet at the same time as an officer uses the spy hole. Allegations of exposure could lead onto disciplinary issues.

Relations with authority can break down quickly between officers and the men. For example, you could be speaking to an officer then the next moment you could be restrained by that same officer, or a spontaneous fight erupts between people on the landing. Prisons are environments where

everything appears calm one minute and the next, they become a place of total chaos. Paradoxically, this volatility can help friendships to become cemented as they act as a vehicle of safety amidst the instability of potential violence. With this in mind, it is fair to ask whether these are 'real' friendships or just friendships of convenience. Likewise, is this sense of safety through physical protection enough to enable the maintenance of the friendship over a period of time?

### ***Maintaining Friendships***

The importance of bonding is vital, as having common interests is not necessarily enough to maintain a friendship. Bonding happens through shared experiences. For example, treatment received from the prison system, issues with contact with children and families, or through enforced proximity. These bonds may vary from person to person but the stronger the bond that is shared, the stronger the friendship.

Paradoxically, this volatility can help friendships to become cemented as they act as a vehicle of safety amidst the instability of potential violence.

Mirroring the wider community, in-prison bonding also happens through shared celebrations and shared grieving. When it is someone's birthday, friends get together and celebrate the occasion. In some cases there will be cake, music, and a food spread. This is entirely provided by your peers and all purchased from the weekly available canteen. Similarly, when someone experiences a close bereavement their friendship group may go to the chapel and pray with them, light a candle, or be there as a shoulder to cry on.

Acknowledgement of your grief during incarceration is ever present through a shared understanding from your peers. However, the peer support differs from prison to prison. In HMP Grendon's therapeutic community there is the support of the entire therapeutic community as speaking and sharing experiences of grief is encouraged. This is distinct from prisons that are not run with therapeutic principles. In these prisons support is provided by close friends rather than the larger therapeutic support group.

A unique aspect of strong bonding inside compared to friendships in the wider community is the amount of shared trauma, taken on by all due to shared confinement. Examples of these traumatic experiences could be mistreatment from the system, being knocked back on a progressive move, being turned down for employment, or when someone experiences a death of someone that is close to them.

On the one hand, taking on other people's trauma when you yourself are experiencing your own trauma contributes to the maintaining of the friendship, especially when you may be experiencing the same type of trauma. But on the other hand, sharing experiences of similar trauma can also become overbearing. Even if the root cause of the trauma is not happening directly to you, it is still difficult to distance yourself — physically and psychologically — from the experiences of other people.

Take the case of a death for example. A member of the chaplaincy team gets assigned to inform the person of the death. If it is at a time where staff are available this is usually done in a side office or at the chapel, in a private space. However, if no staff are available or you are on lockdown behind the door then the chaplaincy member will share the news through the door, standing on the public landing. When this happens, the personal news can be heard by many others as the chaplain's

update and any subsequent conversation between the two will take place within ear shot of the rest of the landing. In prison sharing others' grief is unavoidable.

Openness is also unavoidable in prison as the close proximity of the living conditions means that people will know most of your deeply personal and intimate business. Others will know when you use the toilet, when you have a doctor's appointment, when you are having a personal visit, and when a loved one dies on the outside. Regardless of whether you want others to know or not, this knowledge is shared, inevitably leading to a deeper understanding of one another. They will see when you are upset and sad. There is no option to conceal these emotions as you might choose to with friends on the outside. This means friends made in

prison tend to know you better than those outside, even those friends you have known since birth. For instance, I would never go to meet a friend down the pub and open up about my feelings to the extent that I have whilst in prison.

Whilst in the community, there is the option not to engage with friends. You can switch your phone off, not answer the door, and become invisible. This is not the case whilst you are incarcerated. People know exactly where you are and what time you will be there. There really is no space to get away, and it is impossible to have time for yourself. Friends can come to the door flap at any time. There is

not anywhere to be alone. People come with good intentions, asking if you're ok, and sometimes you want to tell them to go away but instead you often internalise your emotions to avoid any potential confrontation.

Even if you are in a single cell at night the officers come round and check on you, turning on the light and slamming the door flap. This may cause high levels of stress and can promote a sense of claustrophobia, potentially encouraging frustrated outbursts. This can lead to negative consequences which could impact upon positive outcomes and progression. There is no time alone to destress. Even if you choose to cover your door flap to try and regain some privacy, this is against prison rules and so could lead to adjudications or other punitive measures.

The shared restrictions to privacy, shared celebrations and shared grief of bereavement, together with the spoken and unspoken shared empathy of each other's trauma, contribute to the strengthening of

A unique aspect of strong bonding inside compared to friendships in the wider community is the amount of shared trauma, taken on by all due to shared confinement.

friendship bonds. However, are these types of bonds enough to maintain friendships, if and when they end or become fractured?

### **Friendships' Fractures and Finishes**

There are multiple ways that friendships end inside prison. Mirroring friendships in the community, friends fall out over things such as money, differences of opinion, or people just drift apart. The most common reason a friendship ends is when someone leaves the establishment. This can happen when people come to the end of their sentence and are released, people get moved for progressive reasons, or people get moved for disciplinary reasons.

When people are finishing their sentences and granted approval to move to a lower security prison a date is normally known well in advance enabling everyone to prepare. Yet, when people leave the establishment for disciplinary reasons there is no warning, it comes out of the blue. There is no time for people to say 'goodbye' or exchange personal details as the removal is normally done covertly. Imagine that you have been friends with someone for two or even three years, living on the same landing as them. You say 'good night' and when you wake up in the morning, they are gone. You do not even know what prison they have been sent to as disclosing this information would be seen as a 'breach of security'.

Regardless of the reason, when friends leave, a grieving process takes place. Prisons can be very lonely places and having a companion within those walls can make it feel more bearable. When a friend leaves, this promotes all the feelings that may already be there from the things that you are missing from your life outside. This causes the sense of loss to become

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multiplied, adding to the feelings of loss that are already bubbling away underneath. Missing family and friends is ever-present for incarcerated people. For example, not being able to attend weddings creates feelings of loss and missing out. This is also felt when not attending funerals. Not being able to say goodbye to loved ones is an experience that is felt deeply when inside. I experienced this with the death of my grandmother. Unsurprisingly, when I had a close friend shipped out on a security move the feelings were similar. Not being able to say goodbye mirrored not saying goodbye to my grandmother.

### **Discussion**

Marc's account of friendships inside prison resonates with themes explored in the small body of existing research on prison friendships as well as the literature on friendships more broadly: both the function of physical support in providing safety and the emotional support which men provide for one another in prison and in the community,<sup>5 6</sup> the significant role of trust in the process of forming friendships in prison and in wider society,<sup>7 8</sup> and the role of therapeutic bonding.<sup>9</sup> Marc's account also adds nuance, advancing the literature by demonstrating how regime conditions infuse the dynamics of friendships in distinct ways

related to trust and care.

Supporting Liebling and Arnold's (2012) findings that low levels of trust were linked to perceptions of friendships being for convenience,<sup>10</sup> motivated by personal or group agendas in a high security prison, Marc also questions the authenticity of friendships forged in custody. Elsewhere, high levels of self-reported trust have been highlighted between

4. Dunbar, R. I. (2018). The Anatomy of Friendship. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 22(1), 32-51.
5. Crewe, B. (2009). *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*. Oxford University Press; See also footnote 1: Crewe, B. (2014).
6. Doroszuk, M., Kupis, M., and Czarna, A.Z. (2019). Personality and friendships. In *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. Springer Nature, 712-721; Magrath, R. and Scoats, R. (2019). Young men's friendships: inclusive masculinities in a post-university setting. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(1), 45-56.
7. Harvey (2007) *Young Men in Prison*. Willan; Niven, K., Holman, D. and Totterdell, P. (2012). How to win friendship and trust by influencing people's feelings: An investigation of interpersonal affect regulation and the quality of relationships. *Human Relations* 65(6), 777-805.
8. Buzzelli, C.A. and File, N., (1989). Building Trust in Friends. *Young Children*, 44(3), 70-75. Greif, G. (2008). *Buddy system: Understanding male friendships*. Oxford University Press.
9. Stevens, A. (2012). *Offender rehabilitation and therapeutic communities: Enabling change the TC way*. Routledge.
10. Arnold, H., Liebling, A. (2012). Social relationships between prisoners in a maximum security prison: Violence, faith, and the declining nature of trust. *Journal of Prison Law*, 40(5), 413-424.

imprisoned men.<sup>11</sup> The personal account in this paper suggests that heightened trust dynamics are deeply complex cultivated in part by care, supporting Crewe's insights on the emotional flows of masculine intimacy between imprisoned men and Anderson's conceptualisation of 'inclusive masculinity',<sup>12 13</sup> which captures the emotional openness and disclosure in contemporary 'male' friendships more broadly.

Taking these observations further we would add that these emotional dynamics are unavoidably infused by the unescapable conditions of confinement; there is no choice but to have the deep level of intimate knowledge of other prisoners. As Marc notes that 'people will know most of your deeply personal and intimate business... regardless of if you want to know or not, this knowledge is shared.'

We suggest that this uniqueness of enhanced trust and nurture during confinement can be understood as 'imposed intimacy.'

Whilst Anderson and McCormack (2018) argue that enhanced emotional openness between men is more reflective of the wider fundamental shift in the practices of masculinities,<sup>14</sup> Marc's experience suggests it may not be so straightforward. For some men in prison there is heightened openness in prison compared to wider society. However, as an imposed form of intimacy, the openness does not necessarily translate into positive outcomes, as Marc highlighted in his discussion of shared trauma at times being overwhelming. On first glance, openness in friendships in terms of sharing trauma may appear as a positive act, yet Marc's insights have shown that forging and maintaining friendships involving sharing trauma also harbours psychological risk.

The terms of friendship in broader society include choices over avoiding social interaction which imprisonment does not afford. As Marc explained,

'There really is no space to get away and it is impossible to have time for yourself'. This demonstrates how friendships inside may also function as a form of 'social overload'.

'There really is no space to get away and it is impossible to have time for yourself'. This demonstrates how friendships inside may also function as a form of 'social overload'. Borrowing the term from housing studies, research in residential nursing homes, and university student accommodation, social overload refers to the 'forced presence of others'.<sup>15 16</sup> We liken the concentrated interactions of the daily prison regime to residential crowding, both sharing excessive social interactions where there is reduced capacity to remove oneself either physically or mentally. The role of social withdrawal has been shown to be an effective strategy for coping with chronic residential crowding, reducing the short-term stress associated with the crowded conditions.<sup>17</sup> Yet as Marc reminds us in prison 'There is

not anywhere to be alone. People come with good intentions, asking if you're ok and sometimes you want to tell them to go away but instead you often internalise to avoid any potential confrontation'. In the face of social overload, there is no opportunity to socially withdraw, 'There is no time alone to destress. Even if you choose to cover your flap to try and regain some privacy, this is against prison rules and so could lead to adjudications or other punitive measures.' There are psychological implications for these conditions of imposed intimacy, such as social overload yet to be examined in the prison

context.

The confined intimacy is not through choice. As Marc shares, unique intimate prison conditions can produce psychological and physical stresses. The unwritten rules around toilet use and accompanying frictions are illustrative. On the outside, shared personal toilet use is usually reserved for those who have chosen to live in close quarters together. Similarly, we suggest it is those same relationships outside of prison where a fuller spectrum of emotions, including irritability and

11. See footnote 7: Harvey, J. (2007).

12. See footnote 1: Crewe, B. (2014).

13. Anderson, E. (2005). Orthodox and inclusive masculinity: Competing masculinities among heterosexual men in a feminized terrain. *Sociological Perspectives*, 48(3), 337-355; Anderson, E. (2010). *Inclusive masculinity: The changing nature of masculinities*. Routledge.

14. Anderson, E. and McCormack, M. (2018). Inclusive masculinity theory: Overview, reflection and refinement. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(5), 547-561.

15. Firestone, I. J., Lichtman, C. M., & Evans, J. R. (1980). Privacy and solidarity: Effects of nursing home accommodation on environmental perception and sociability preferences. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 11(3), 229-241.

16. Valins, S., & Baum, A. (1973). Residential group size, social interaction, and crowding. *Environment and Behavior*, 5(4), 421-439.

17. Evans, G. W., Rhee, E., Forbes, C., Allen, K. M., & Lepore, S. J. (2000). The meaning and efficacy of social withdrawal as a strategy for coping with chronic residential crowding. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 20(4), 335-342.

frustrations associated with domestic intimacies are exhibited. Crucially, when these arguably inherent domestic disagreements arise outside of prison, individuals have the opportunity to take time out and attain a level of distance where emotions can diffuse, taking us back to the importance of social withdrawal. Distance as a mechanism of diffusion with other individuals is relatively unavailable in prison and in its absence, we argue it is clear to see how tempers may fray.

Whilst distance may be in short supply between cell mates, distance from loved ones on the outside is not. Separation from friends and family is cited as the hardest part of serving a custodial sentence.<sup>18</sup> We can understand the pain of being separated from loved ones during incarceration through Crewe and colleagues (2020) concept of 'social dislocation'.<sup>19</sup> These losses become compounded. As Marc recounts, 'when a friend leaves... causes the sense of loss to become multiplied adding to the feelings of loss that are bubbling away underneath'. This is a 'double bereavement', the bereavement for oneself and then the loss of another.<sup>20</sup> Marc's narrative illustrates Hunt's insight that incarceration does indeed 'raise the possibility of a more complex grief process' (p.18). Whilst Hunt (2021) examines bereavement in the context of men experiencing deaths of loved ones during incarceration,<sup>21</sup> we suggest that Hunt's insights might well apply to the context of friendships within prison. After all, is the unexpected removal of a friend under the cover of night not akin to a death in the sense of the complete sudden removal of somebody close to you from your world?

Whilst existing literature discusses risks in friendships between men in prison in relation to manipulation and recidivism,<sup>22 23</sup> it appears fairly limited in scope given our discussion here. Marc's experience has revealed multiple additional potential psychological risks involved in navigating friendships within prison walls. We suggest these different

psychological risks relating to openness, shared trauma, and concentrated social interaction are all characteristic of friendships infused with imposed intimacies which necessitate serious consideration by those concerned with harms in prison and the wellbeing of those detained.

### Reflections on Working Towards Knowledge Equity

The enthusiasm we felt when embarking on this collaboration stayed with us throughout the process. As contributors to this Special Issue, we hope that our collaboration will show others, including those in prison, that this type of academic collaboration is a viable option for current and former prisoners to have their words directly heard with potential for shaping policy debates and decision-making. This approach allows the space for all collaborators to speak more freely and honestly about their trauma and experiences as there will be feelings of mutual contribution with their words being presented from a position in which they intended them to be. This promotes trust in the process, whilst leaving the contributor feeling like they have a voice, like they are valued, and ultimately resulting in a much more humanising experience.

Reflecting on the dialogical approach to our work, we had ongoing dialogue to deepen our understanding of Marc's experiences, incarceration, privilege, power and disempowerment, going back and forth on themes and concepts. We had ongoing discussions on the unavoidable power-asymmetries of one collaborator being inside the academic community — understanding journal and academic expectations and conventions — and the other outside.

We were also pushing back against the classic traditional academic training which encourages researchers to 'extract out' emotion,<sup>24</sup> instead acknowledging our emotion work in the process. Our

Separation from friends and family is cited as the hardest part of serving a custodial sentence.

18. Wessely, S., Akhurst, R., Brown, I., & Moss, L. (1996). Deliberate self harm and the Probation Service; an overlooked public health problem? *Journal of Public Health*, 18(2), 129-132.
19. Crewe, B., Hulley, S., Wright, S. (2020). Identity and Selfhood. In: *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood. Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology*. Palgrave Macmillan.
20. Hunt, K. (2021). Bereavement Behind Bars: Prison and the Grieving Process. *Prison Service Journal*, 254, 17-23.
21. See footnote 20: Hunt, K. (2021).
22. See footnotes 9 and 7; Stevens, A. (2012).
23. Benda, B. B. (2005). Gender differences in life-course theory of recidivism: A survival analysis. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 49(3), 325-342. Boduszek, D., McLaughlin, C., & Hyland, P. (2011). Criminal Attitudes of Ex-Prisoners: the Role of Personality, Anti-Social Friends and Recidivism. *The Internet Journal of Criminology*, 9, 1-10.
24. Jewkes, Y. (2011.) Autoethnography and Emotion as Intellectual Resources: Doing Prison Research Differently. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1, 63-75.

dialogue involved the substantive content of the paper but also explicit discussions of our inner feelings, even when uncomfortable. Donna's overwhelming concern throughout was not imposing her ideas in a top-down hierarchical way to the detriment of knowledge equity. Discussing this, Marc helpfully reminded her that 'hierarchies are not necessarily bad things'. Marc was eager to have academic writing coaching, in his words, it being 'a luxury' to have one-to-one input on his writing. Whilst this reduced Donna's anxieties, they did not entirely disappear. Being mindful of not wanting to dilute his voice in the narrative, Donna avoided rewording as far as possible when editing the section on experiences of friendship. Donna applied minimal editing, focusing on grammar, punctuation and isolated words rather than rephrasing chunks as she might do in other collaborative writing ventures.

There were also fears from Marc that his voice may become overpowering. Being aware of Donna's anxieties he was concerned that because of this, Donna's voice may become stifled, and the running narrative and commentary would solely be his own. Marc's unfiltered voice was imperative to the personal experience section of the paper. The guidance that he received from Donna encouraged him to write in a more coherent way and allowed for his voice to be transferred onto the paper. Donna also learnt from Marc, honing her writing away from 'academese' to more accessible and plain English. In co-producing the content we learnt from one another, both improving our writing and cementing our shared belief in the benefit of collaborating outside of our usual sectors as an important strategy towards knowledge equity, and in doing so, we also forged our friendship.

## Conclusion

We set out to destabilise some of the established elitist academic knowledge production norms working towards knowledge equity in prison research context. Through co-production we achieved our shared aim of Marc becoming a 'participant author' with Donna as a conduit for Marc's own words getting written,

published, and read rather than being interpreted or direct quotations being cherry picked at the discretion of a researcher. Substantively, we discussed prisoner friendships with Marc's experiences during custody revealing many similarities between friendships inside and outside of prison. Importantly, we revealed what we argue are unique dynamics of friendships in prison which are distinct from friendships made and maintained on the outside. Complex dynamics shaped by the inescapable conditions of confinement, with both positive and negative consequences for friendships and psychological impacts. Marc's account suggests that positive friendships emerge in prison providing nurture and care produced at the intersection of the negativity of trauma and imposed intimacy. The imposed intimacy is forced upon incarcerated people promoting the sharing of trauma and empathy that bonds people together. At the same time there are limited options for social withdrawal, arguably a necessity for good mental health. These complex dynamics of intimacy contribute to the forming, maintaining and ending of friendships behind prison walls.

We hope this paper has shown the value and viability of a knowledge equity approach to academic collaboration in prison research paving the way for more of this work in criminology and across the social sciences. We have also opened up debates on friendships made in prison and future research potential and discussed little understood and unexplored aspects of incarceration. Whilst we have highlighted one person's experience in the context of friendships between incarcerated men, we acknowledge that men in prison are not a homogenous group and the way in which emotions, intimacy, and friendship's function will not be the same for all. Going forward, we plan to continue the work started here with continued collaboration to pursue the topic of 'imposed intimacy' in prison.

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# Photovoice with care: A creative and accessible method for representing lived experiences.

**Natasha** and **Kemi** are co-founders of Reformed CIC, Liverpool. **Gillian** is Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Chester.

**Photovoice is a research method with great promise as a tool for people looking to tell stories about their lives and work toward change, it also has much to offer criminology, creating insightful material from the perspectives of those most intimately connected to the research topic.<sup>1</sup> This article reflects on photovoice as a resource for lived experience practitioners, activists, and leaders. The work we reflect upon is a co-designed, participatory study of a community-led crime prevention organisation: 'Reformed'.<sup>2</sup> We (Natasha and Kemi) founded Reformed after being released from prison to multiple barriers and low expectations from criminal justice professionals.**

Natasha and Kemi are community practitioners and activists. Gill is a social work lecturer and researcher. We bring different skills and strengths to our work together. Gill is a trained academic and more comfortable writing than speaking, Natasha and Kemi are impactful, influential speakers. In our co-teaching and co-research work,<sup>2,3</sup> Gill often leads on writing, but this does not accurately reflect the contribution that Natasha and Kemi have made to the production of knowledge. Here, we have worked differently. We (Natasha and Kemi) spoke to Gill about our experience

of photovoice (so are the lead authors of this piece). Gill has written up our words and made links to academic work in this area.

'Lived experience' workers use direct personal experience of a social issue/issues to inform social change work.<sup>4</sup> This kind of involvement is increasingly prominent across social services,<sup>5</sup> but there has been a lack of research on lived experience-led services and more 'is needed from the perspectives of those who have experienced incarceration to better inform this topic' (p.13).<sup>6</sup> Our study — and this reflection — were influenced by participatory action research (or 'PAR'), which assumes that people impacted by a topic should be co-researchers.<sup>7</sup> University-community partnerships enable communities to benefit from the knowledge, expertise, and material resources housed in a university,<sup>8</sup> and universities to benefit from the 'local knowledge',<sup>9</sup> and viable solutions of experts by experience.<sup>10</sup>

This discussion considers what it was like to collaborate with an academic partner and represent community-led work through photographs. We reflect on the benefits and limits of photovoice and emphasise the importance of relationships and care within research collaborations.

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2. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 1117-1141.
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## Our history

Natasha and Kemi are sisters. We served our prison sentences together, have supported each other through barriers and direct discrimination since release, and have a strong bond. We met Gill in 2012 and have worked together teaching university students about marginalisation, racism, and community activism. Over the years our relationship has become more like workmates. This is important context for what we reflect on later.

## The photovoice study

In 2020, we explained to Gill that we wanted some evidence of the impact of Reformed. Gill suggested photovoice — a method in which people use cameras to document their lives and advocate for change.<sup>11</sup> Gill told us about a local partnership that was funding practitioners and academics to form research partnerships. Together we planned a timeline to train community members, take photos, and discuss results, and Gill wrote up a funding bid. We secured the money to pay us for our time on the research, print the photos for an exhibition, and cater the exhibition so the community could see the images and eat with us. Gill also applied to the university ethics committee, as we wanted to make sure our project was safely planned and the dignity and wellbeing of people taking part was considered. We planned the ethical application together, guided by Economic and Social Research Council good practice for social research (2020). Inspired by Wendel and colleagues, we took these steps to carry out the study:<sup>12</sup>

1. Co-researchers (Natasha, Kemi, and Gill) met to co-design training.

In contrast to western democracy and capitalism, which are dominated by individualism and competitiveness, Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of their relationships with others.

2. Co-researchers delivered training, explaining the study to participants, sharing photography skills,<sup>13</sup> and considering how participant-photographers could keep themselves and others safe.
3. Participant group (one researcher, four staff members, and four people who have used the service — nine in total) took photographs to prompts: *'Why is Reformed needed? and What does the work of Reformed mean to you?'*
4. Participants selected 4-5 images each to discuss in online focus groups.
5. In groups, each participant explained the meaning of their photographs and discussed others' photographs. Common themes were identified as a group.
6. Co-researchers wrote a social work journal article to share findings and presented results to a national Criminology Conference.<sup>14</sup>
7. Co-researchers held public exhibitions in Warrington and Liverpool.<sup>15</sup>

Our approach aligned with 'Ubuntu',<sup>16</sup> a dominant philosophy in sub-Saharan African countries, which values caring, sharing, respect, compassion, and ways of organising that benefit all. In contrast to western democracy and capitalism, which are dominated by individualism and competitiveness, Ubuntu defines

the individual in terms of their relationships with others. In research, this shifts our role as researchers from *taking, owning, and using* others' data to *sharing* ownership and use of data. Ubuntu-based research emphasises consensus in decision-making, collaboration with participants, and community, with respect to people's spirituality, values, and norms. This includes sitting with people, understanding their needs and, if possible, eating with them.

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11. Milne, E. J., & Muir, R. (2019). Photovoice: A Critical Introduction. In L. Pauwels, & D. Mannay (Eds.), *SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methodologies* (pp. 282-296. Sage.
  12. Wendel, M. L., Jackson, T., Ingram, C. M., Golden, T., Castle, B. F., Ali, N. M., & Combs, R. (2019). Yet we live, strive, and succeed: Using photovoice to understand community members' experiences of justice, safety, hope, and racial equity. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice*, 2(1), 9.
  13. We recruited a trained photographer to share insider tips for using light and ideas to best effect.
  14. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 1117-1141.
  15. Buck, G. (2022). *Exhibition Report: Reformed Photovoice: A visual narrative of a peer led crime prevention approach*. Available at: <https://teachingpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Insider-and-Outsider-Research-Which-hat-are-you-wearing.pdf>
  16. Muwanga-Zake, J. W. (2009). Building bridges across knowledge systems: Ubuntu and participative research paradigms in Bantu communities. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30(4), 413-426.

Ubuntu and other communal relational/Black feminist philosophies have helped us to make sense of *Reformed* because they all recognise care and connection as routes to human excellence.<sup>17 18 19</sup> However, long before we discovered these writings, we had built our working relationship on these values. We have worked with Gill for ten years now on co-teaching and writing projects. Our work has included long discussions about our values over coffee and meals together to celebrate things we have achieved. As time has progressed our working relationship has become more like friendship. This can be a benefit and a challenge to doing research work together.<sup>20</sup> On one level we know and trust each other and understand each other's strengths and expectations. However, such personal relationships in research can be criticised as introducing too much 'bias' or even leading to 'exploitation' if boundaries are not clearly set out. These 'forays into friendship' also raise concerns that any unprofessional practices could be ignored.<sup>21</sup> These are things we have to actively reflect on and guard against.

### Reflecting on the study

**Gill: What was good about the photovoice project?**

**Natasha and Kemi:** The photovoice project was a unique, effective way to enable individuals to express themselves without feeling judged or pressured. It was a simple method that allowed people to feel comfortable, confident, and to open up. We asked for feedback from every participant and people said that it was a safe environment and they felt comfortable and confident in the roles and tasks. It was simple enough for people to get involved without overthinking things. The individuals involved also had commonalities. They may have had different struggles to overcome, but a lack of support and care from services was something that they all had in common. I know photovoice started off in the

health world, but this method can be used across the board.<sup>22 23</sup>

Researchers need to be mindful of the people involved, because some researchers start a project and have not actually thought about the person and their complex needs. As we've got to know each other — over years — you (Gill) have been getting to know us, listening, and asking questions. You've been getting to understand the complexities of people with convictions and people from different backgrounds and what can put them off. Anything you approach us with is manageable, not everyone can play that role. The only people that can play this role without our lived experience is someone who is *interested*, someone who wants to *learn more*, and someone who has been *listening*, listening with an understanding of people's needs, that's very important.

**Gill: What problems did we meet? And can we make improvements?**

**Natasha and Kemi:** Due to the Covid-19 pandemic we decided to move the project online, but this meant participants had to have access to the internet and mobile phones, this limited individuals who couldn't take part because of lack of facilities or poverty. Now we are out of the pandemic we can do things face-to-face and provide cameras.

This photovoice project was powerful, but if you take us out of it, and put someone else in, it might not have the same result. It's about the people involved not going in with judgments. You did not go in with judgments on people and we didn't, so people feel that. So going forward with a method like this, there's got to be an understanding and non-judgement of people in these situations. You have to listen to what the people are saying, not cherry pick the parts that make sense to you. Are we really doing people justice if we're picking what we're going to put in? So, real representation of the people involved.

Personal relationships in research can be criticised as introducing too much 'bias' or even leading to 'exploitation' if boundaries are not clearly set out.

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17. Lorde, A. (2017). *Your silence will not protect you*. Silver Press. Original essays 1984; original poetry 1997.
  18. Hooks, B. (2000). *All about love*. New Visions.
  19. Mugumbate, J., & Chereni, A. (2019). Using African Ubuntu theory in social work with children in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Work*, 9(1), 27–34.
  20. Oakley, A. (2016). Interviewing women again: Power, time and the gift. *Sociology*, 50(1), 195–213.
  21. Browne, K. (2003). Negotiations and fieldworkings: friendship and feminist research. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 2(2), 132–146.
  22. Catalani, C., & Minkler, M. (2010). Photovoice: A review of the literature in health and public health. *Health Education & Behavior*, 37(3), 424–451.
  23. Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health*, 8(2), 185–192.

**Gill: Any tips for future photovoice projects involving people's lived experiences?**

**Natasha and Kemi:** It is important to listen, but also, people involved in this process can't come with a hierarchy. Everyone involved should be valued. Sometimes when people with lived experience are brought into research situations, we're seen as the underdog or the one that is just an 'add-on' to something that's almost completed, so we're like an afterthought. It needs to be a collaborative approach, in which all parties are valued, whether people with lived experience or the academics, because we all bring something unique. We are not academic writers in the slightest, you are, we couldn't have written that journal article alone, but we bring the issue, we have experienced the criminal justice system first-hand, we bring the experience that enables you to write that, so there's value in what we all do.<sup>24</sup>

It is essential for all those involved to be open to learning to make things better. If we look at the criminal justice system, nothing has changed, nothing's getting better, and we're only getting to the point now where people are beginning to look at us (people with lived experience) as contributing to things. I think that if we were involved in a lot more of the processes and decisions and making things better, I think that we could bring about change. It's alright using these methods, but what are you doing with the information? Just because it's simple doesn't mean it's not valuable. Yes, it's simple but we didn't just capture this information and leave it there.

**Gill: Have you got one example, to just bring that to life? Can you give an example of something that's not got better, and maybe an example of how you would do it differently to make it better?**

**Natasha and Kemi:** Off the top of my head: reoffending rates. So, when we were first released from prison the reoffending rates were high. They haven't improved. The one year proven re-offending rate in 2009 was 37 per cent,<sup>25</sup> by 2020 the proven reoffending rate after release from custodial sentences was 54.9 per cent.<sup>26</sup> Reoffending rates are not looking

at contributing factors. To get an understanding you need to talk to people with that experience. I could have told them from a first-hand experience of feeling like "*I wanted to re-offend because society had given up on me*", and it's very difficult to get to that point when you want to make a positive change. So, if you talk to me about that situation, I could tell you that there's more to not reoffending than just getting a job and staying out of prison. If you get out and there's no support, you're homeless, you've got no family, you've got poor mental health on top of that, then how can you move forward positively? And what happens is, when decisions are getting made about people within the criminal justice system, none of that is being taken into consideration.

These decisions have been getting made about us from the beginning of time! In our organisation we see first-hand every single day. We've tried to so many times to have our voice valued and help bring a bigger change and we've been ignored. Poor decisions have been made about us, with little or no understanding of the reality surrounding us. Now, I'm not sure whether there is a mistrust in collaborating with those who have lived experiences of the criminal justice system, fed by stereotypes and social biases, but it is time for change. It's time to change our approach, there is a

lack of understanding in rehabilitation services. Do they really want to hear from us? Do they really believe in the change we're trying to make? We still get people saying a leopard never changes their spots. We are 14 years into our journey of providing community services, with all this greatness behind us, more than 15 years crime-free but the system is still not involving us in the process of change, because there are still stereotypes and bias which don't allow you to do that.

People with lived experiences are overlooked and ignored in processes that affect them. One of the benefits of photovoice as a method for understanding experiences is it can include a range of individuals without making people feel uncomfortable about their academic abilities. A lot of people who we support do have confidence issues about where they feel they should be in life academically, so they won't speak up. If they're in an environment where they feel intimidated, if someone is there that they feel is more

It is important to listen, but also, people involved in this process can't come with a hierarchy. Everyone involved should be valued.

24. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 1117-1141.

25. Ministry of Justice (2012). 2012 *Compendium of re-offending statistics and analysis*. Ministry of Justice.

academically advanced it may put them off, but photovoice puts everyone on a level playing field. Everyone said that they felt it was a clear, simple process. Now that means it was designed well, it made them feel confident and comfortable. If you make things too complex for people, especially when people's lives are already complex, it puts them off and they

won't want to take part. Now when I say it's simple, it's also an approach with a lot of richness, just look at what we've done, the rich content that came out of it (see Table 1).

None of the people involved in the photovoice study felt like it damaged them emotionally and none of them felt like they couldn't come back because they

**Table 1.** Some images and descriptions that came out of the project

			
<p>[Photographer descriptions] 'It's all about the journey. Not where you start or end, but the journey and they guide you every step of the way'.</p>	<p>'Reformed loves imperfections. The bottom of the man is not finished, there are so many places where people with imperfections don't feel comfortable, but in Reformed you can be imperfect and still be as special as somebody who feels they are well rounded'.</p>	<p>'They keep you feeling safe from police brutality and a society that sees Black people as infiltrators even though we were first people on the earth. You've fed people, [older people who were lonely] ... brought people together, not just people with convictions, everyone. What comes with crime prevention is a whole lot of other issues in people's lives'.</p>	<p>'Our children will one day walk in our shoes. Your holistic approach to working with families educates and breaks any negative cycles'.</p>

were embarrassed or because someone was more superior than the other. Everyone knew why they were there, they were confident, and they felt they were able to contribute. And that's important.

**Gill:** *I just realised that 100 per cent of the people who did the training came back with photos, didn't they? Nobody dropped out.*

**Natasha and Kemi:** And that's because of the approach. Making things complicated can give people anxiety. Everyone's got different mindsets, and some people are alright with text instructions, some are not. Meeting people and explaining the instructions, they all executed them. For everyone to come back and come back with something, that alone speaks volumes.

**Gill:** *Do you think this is an approach that people could use while they're in prison?*

**Natasha and Kemi:** Yes, yes, yes, as long as there is respect. We were protected by officers in prison. What the officers were doing without us knowing at the time, was they were treating us like human beings, they continued to treat us with dignity as a human being and they actually played a big part in us coming out of prison with that fire and ambition in us. Some of the inmates that we used to help, that officers wouldn't help, they weren't being treated like human beings. They would take drugs, take risks because they didn't have the guidance, and they were not being treated like human beings.

It's OK to have great work in prison, but it has to continue on the outside, because if you enhance someone's mindset in prison, which is brilliant, and you

give them a bag of tools with everything they need, if they go into the outside world with them tools and don't achieve because of stereotypes and discrimination, that actually can be more damaging than a person not knowing what's in the tool bag. FAILURE! We know the racism toward people that have not even been to prison... when failure creeps, or someone loses everything, the risk is people consider suicide or do something horrific.

Yes — it's the understanding and the listening. You treat people as a human being. That's the key, that's the first step.

There was a news story recently about a failing mental health system in England, there was a mum who lost her daughter to suicide, and she had written this letter saying 'it's terrible in here, six people trying to restrain me', a really heartfelt letter, really heart-breaking and the mum said the thing that was missing for her daughter was care. There's no care in the services. Now that example is an institutionalised environment, but it applies across the board. In prison we were cared for by [officer name], she would go on holiday and the whole place would be watching us, people used to say, 'leave them they're [officer name]'s babies!' So, if you look at us as an experiment, going in as young offenders and how they loved and cared for us, look at the result on our mindset coming out! If we were not treated like human beings and cared for and loved, you may not have known us because we would have left prison with no self-care, but we came out of prison with fire! Wanting to do well, volunteering. That thread of care needs to be consistent for all and have a connection from prison into rehabilitation services.

If you're cared for and supported in the right way, it does make you want to do better. If you get to a point where you realise 'this system doesn't care about me, no-one wants the best for me, why am I wasting my time getting treated like crap', you think, 'I'm just gonna do me', even though 'doing you' is negative, you haven't got the tools to do the right thing, you haven't got support to know where to begin. You've got a record so the system is against you, but at the same time, the only way you feel like you can control a

little bit of the situation is to reoffend. The real sentence starts when you get released.

We could be capturing some of these issues with this method, but it's whether that information is then passed to the relevant people, or they take it forward with an action plan. These are things that potentially don't happen. For example, Booth and Harriott reflect on the lived experience of being researched and argue:<sup>27</sup>

*Collective and personal experiences of pain are often subjected to being used, manipulated, and repackaged — often without our direct knowledge and indeed without actual real consent — mostly leaving marginal benefit and minimal impact on the actual lives of the criminalised women themselves nor on the wider structural conditions under which we labour.*

Photovoice puts us at the centre, we decide what to share, what it means, and what changes we think need to happen. It has the potential to feed change and better services for people with convictions because it allows people to open up and express themselves, then that's a rich quality piece of work. Because the individual knows what they need: they know!

#### **Gill: What helped us that could help others?**

**Natasha and Kemi:** You (Gill) are in the frame of mind of working and not judging people, but not everyone is at that point, they could be unaware of their social biases. We have to have confidence in the person writing. It's so simple, it's about treating people like human beings, and then you will get respect and it builds the relationship. But it's not for everyone and that's what we've experienced in services. So, if we did this with anyone else, they potentially could have come in and seen themselves as above us. So, there's a judgement towards us as co-researchers and that can jeopardise things. The feeling of being equal needs to be there for me as a fellow co-researcher and for the people going through the process.

26. Ministry of Justice (2022). *Proven reoffending statistics: October to September 2020*. Ministry of Justice.

27. Booth, M., & Harriott, P. (2021). Service users being used: Thoughts to the research community. In I. Masson, L. Baldwin, & N. Booth (Eds), *Critical reflections on women, family, crime and justice* (pp. 199-218). Policy Press.

Researchers need to reflect and work on their conscious and unconscious biases. Some people treat us like children. If you look at the criminal justice system involving people with lived experience, it's very controlled. I've been there myself; someone takes you into the room, they tell you what to say, 'take the chewing gum out your mouth'. They put you there, you say what you've got to say, everyone faffs around and then the organisation gets a clap. It's very controlled but that undermines our work because it devalues us, it's almost like we can't come in on a level playing field. I'm not saying every person who comes out of prison, you take what they've got to say, but we've got value, we're an organisation that's working with people for years now. But some people still treat us like we've just walked out of prison yesterday. Till we move away from this mentality we're never going to have people like us contributing and making things better, we're still going to be in the same situation.

We were 18 and 19, convicted on importing drugs, served an eight-year sentence and have all these years of service since, but society hears more negative stuff about us than positive. With reoffending rates, it's not that she doesn't want to change, or he doesn't want to change, low expectations stick with people. There may be a service set up, saying it helps people change, but in the worker's mind, there will be someone believing that these people can't change, it's almost like an instant stereotype, an automatic door up, and it's going to stop communication. The worker is thinking 'I'll give a little bit of effort because I have to, but I'm not going above and beyond because he'll be back inside next week' but why is he back inside next week? What are the other issues going on?

We also need to think about mental health. Suicide and self-harm are rife in prison and there may be childhood issues, but in prison people are lost. We were together (as sisters), we don't know what it's like to be lonely in prison because they kept us together.

***Gill: This conversation is reminding me of a finding from our photovoice project; that your work is valued by people because they felt your love. And here you are saying love and care can mitigate some of the damage of prison. So, no matter how good the research method is, (e.g., photovoice), if you've not got researchers who***

***care for the people involved, then it you're not going to make it work?***

**Natasha and Kemi:** It takes a unique person, and you have to want to be that. Please don't play with people. A unique person that is looking at people as a human being, is willing to learn, is listening and can take all of that and put it together, because it's not easy sometimes to explain to people if they haven't been there, but you do a lot of listening and are respectful. A lot of researchers do a lot of talking but what they don't realise is the vibe that comes off them, non-verbal communication is just as important. Not communicating in a way that feeds the stereotypes. This has to be implemented professional courses, it's missing. If you don't know better, you can't do better.

## Conclusion

There seems no better place to end than with a message that researchers should connect with participants and co-researchers as equal human beings, treating people with respect, and listening to them. It is a simple message, but it is also often forgotten. Research (and 'user' involvement work) can too often be extractive rather than relational. Our methods too, play a part. This article has introduced the straightforward, accessible practicality of photovoice as a method. Inviting people to frame their own worlds using visual and spoken methods can level the research field and amplify voices not always heard. It can help to overcome some of the tokenism that criminalised people can experience in 'involvement' or 'participation' projects, and it creates beautiful, powerful data. However, our main lesson from writing this piece has been the importance of relationships and care. We are friends in our work together, we care about each other and listen to each other, this has created safe, trusting relationships, which influence the feel, 'vibe' or culture that we invite our participants and co-researchers to step into. We encourage others to nurture caring relationships and environments as a healthy backdrop for the exciting task of inviting photo stories of people's lives.

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# The Importance of Social Visits to Prisoners

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**Good quality visits have many social and psychological benefits. These include improved prisoner behaviour, improved mental health, and better relationships between prisoners, their families, and the wider community.<sup>1</sup> The challenges of enforced separation faced by long-term prisoners and their families are particularly concerning.<sup>2</sup>**

At the time of writing (May 2022), one of the authors (Carl) is about to start his 18th year in prison in England. Carl is also a PhD student working with Sacha, whom he first met at HMP Coldingley where they both participated in a convict criminology study group delivered at the prison by the University of Westminster.<sup>3</sup> Carl was originally imprisoned in 2005, at the age of 18, and by the time he finishes his studies, will have spent over half of his life in prison. He has so far served at 13 different prison establishments, from category A to category D. One thing that has kept him half sane throughout his sentence is having contact with the outside world through visits. He personally cannot stress how important it has been for him, and for other prisoners, to keep interacting with people in the outside world, not only to maintain a certain level of normality in their lives, but also to attempt to hold onto the ties they have with their professional, and especially personal, contacts.

However, in England and Wales even the most compliant prisoners are entitled to no more than five one-hour social visits from friends or family a month. Social visits often end up being no more than 30 minutes long by the time everyone has passed through security and is seated. Prisoners are usually entitled to two one-hour social visits every four-week period.<sup>4</sup>

Most academic literature on prisoners' lack of contact with the outside world focuses on the negative

effects on their families. In a recent review of studies on the families of long-term prisoners, Kotova refers to how some relatives of those incarcerated for long periods of time are able to recover from the initial trauma of imprisonment quickly, but others remained in a state of 'chronic bereavement' (p. 244) throughout their loved ones' sentences.<sup>5</sup> The impact of having a family member in prison is especially strong for partners and children. Not only do prisoners' partners have to get used to living and bringing their children up alone, but they must also re-adapt to having their partners around again once they are released. The effects of separation from an incarcerated parent are even stronger. According to McKay et al., a child is, 'more likely to experience internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression when a parent is incarcerated and exhibit more behavioural and academic problems' (p. 97).<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the child-parent role and dynamic inevitably changes. Birthdays and other special occasions are missed too, in some cases causing resentment. In effect, prisoners' families are punished for crimes they did not commit. The case for increasing families' contact with their imprisoned parents and partners is strong.

This paper focuses on the case for increasing contact with the outside world from the viewpoint of prisoners, the subject of Carl's doctoral research. The curtailment of visits negatively affects a prisoner's prospects for successful post-release reintegration. Research indicates that receiving visits from family members or partners significantly reduces a prisoner's likelihood of reoffending by up to 40 percent.<sup>7</sup> Family relationships have been described as the 'most important resettlement agency' by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (p. 3).<sup>8</sup> The curtailment of visits also has more

1. Comfort, M. (2007). *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*. University of Chicago Press.
2. Adams, M., & McCarthy, D. (2022). The needs and experiences of prisoners' families during long sentences. *Prison Service Journal*, 261, 45–50.
3. For detail on the study group and its basis in convict criminology, see: Darke, S., Aresti, A., Faizal, A., & Ellis, N. (2020). Prisoner university partnerships at Westminster. In S. S. Shecaira, L. G. B. Ferrarini, & J. M. Almeida (Eds.), *Criminologia: Estudos em Homenagem ao Alvin Auguste de Sá* (pp. 475–498). D'Placido.
4. National Offender Management Service (2021). PSI 16/2011 *Providing Visits and Services to Visitors*. NOMS.
5. Kotova, A. (2018). Time, the pains of imprisonment, and 'coping': The perspectives of prisoners' partners. In R. Condry, & P. S. Smith (Eds.), *Prisons, Punishment and the Family: Towards a New Sociology of Punishment?* (pp. 244–257). Oxford University Press.
6. McKay, T., Lindquist, C., Feinberg, R., Steffey, D., Landwehr, J., & Bir, A. (2018). Family life before and during incarceration. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 57(2), 96–114.
7. Booth, N. (2021). Gendered prisons, relationships and resettlement policies: Three reasons for caution for imprisoned mothers. *British Journal of Criminology*, 61(5), 1354–1371.
8. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016). *Life in Prison: Contact with Families and Friends*. London.

immediate implications for a prisoner's experience of the 'depth of imprisonment'.<sup>9</sup> Described by Crewe in terms of distance and polarity from freedom,<sup>10</sup> the depth of imprisonment involves the sense of being 'buried alive far away from society's eyes, ears, and mind' (p. 373),<sup>11</sup> in 'a 'bubble' away from normality, and having to cope with the alien and unreal social world of prison... physical aloneness and feelings of separation that routinely occur in prison life' (p. 3).<sup>12</sup> Most important, we contend, is the stigma that accompanies incarceration. As Sykes emphasised in his classic study of prison life in America, *Society of Captives*, it is not so much the loss of liberty as loss of civil and social status that hits hardest.<sup>13</sup>

*The basic acceptance of the individual as a functioning member of the society in which he lives... the loss of that more diffuse status which defines the individual as someone to be trusted or as morally acceptable is the loss which hurts most. (p. 66)*

Therefore, good quality prison visits, including all day and private family overnight visits, help prisoners as much as their families. Thomas and Christian explain:<sup>14</sup>

*The incarceration period itself has great import as an experience that is exceedingly harsh, degrading, and painful... Sykes argued that prison inflicted not only physical separation from society, but social isolation and rejection: powerful symbols of condemnation and deeply painful invisibility from the rest of society. One way to bridge this invisibility and separation for incarcerated men is visits from family members. (p. 273)*

Prison inflicted not only physical separation from society, but social isolation and rejection: powerful symbols of condemnation and deeply painful invisibility from the rest of society.

Ironically, considering the lack of visiting rights afforded to prisoners, the English and Welsh HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and Ministry of Justice also stress the importance of family and pro-social peers when it comes to rehabilitation, to the extent that these relationships are used to assess a prisoner's risk of reoffending and the danger they pose to the public not only while in custody, but more importantly when released. Indeed, it has long been a key topic in reviews, reports, and recommendations on how best to deal with prisoners, reduce reoffending, and tackle current issues surrounding the criminal justice system. For example, the white paper *Custody, Care and Justice* stated that, 'prison breaks up families.... imprisonment is costly for the individual, for the prisoner's family and

for the community' (paragraph 1.16).<sup>15</sup> In possibly the most significant UK government inquiry into prisons, Lord Woolf partly attributed the country's largest ever prison riot, at HMP Strangeways in Manchester, to prisoners' lack of contact with their families.<sup>16</sup> Among 12 major recommendations, Woolf proposed 'better prospects for prisoners to maintain their links with families and the community through more visits and home leaves and through being located in community prisons as near to their homes as possible' (paragraph 1.167). Irrespective of these recommendations, a third of prisoners were still being held 100 miles or more from their

homes twelve years later.<sup>17</sup> Woolf's recommendation was later picked up by Lord Farmer in a government review that focused specifically on strengthening family ties with prisoners.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, Farmer emphasised that the importance of visits is widely known by prison governors and their staff. After all, Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 16/2011 (Providing Visits and Services to Visitors)<sup>19</sup> states that:

9. Downes, D. (1988). *Contrasts in Tolerance*. Oxford University Press.
10. Crewe, B. (2021). The depth of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 22(3), 335–354.
11. Wacquant, L. (2003). The curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration. *Ethnography*, 3(4), 371–397.
12. Schliehe, A., Laursen, J., & Crewe, B. (2022). *Loneliness in prison*. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(6), 1595–1614.
13. Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton University Press.
14. Thomas, S. S., & Christian, J. (2018). Betwixt and Between: Incarcerated men, familial ties, and social visibility. In R. Condry, & P. S. Smith (Eds.), *Prisons, Punishment, and the Family: Towards a New Sociology of Punishment?* (pp. 273–287). Oxford University Press.
15. Home Office (1991). *Custody, Care and Justice: The Way Ahead for the Prison Service in England and Wales*. HMSO.
16. Woolf, H. (1991). *Prison Disturbances, April 1990: Report of an Inquiry*. HMSO.
17. Cavadino, M., & Dignan, J. (2006). *The Penal System: An Introduction* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
18. Farmer, M. S. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. Ministry of Justice.
19. See footnote 4: National Offender Management Service (2021); footnote 18: Farmer, M. S. (2017); HM Prison and Probation Service (2020). *Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties Policy Framework*. HMPPS.

*Regular and good quality contact time between an offending parent and their children/partner provide an incentive not to re-offend, and helps prisoners arrange accommodation and employment/ training on release... Visits also assist in maintaining good order. Good quality visits in a relaxed environment make a significant contribution to the wellbeing and attitude of prisoners and generally help to build better relationships between families and staff to the point where families are encouraged to share sensitive information which may have an impact on the welfare of the prisoner. (paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3)*

Amongst the recommendations made by Lord Farmer were extended day-long visits, and visits being granted irrespective of custodial behaviour, and not treated as a privilege subject to being partly withdrawn under the prison service's IEP (Incentive and Earned Privileges) scheme.

For these reasons, many prisoners, including Carl, are perplexed that social visits remain so limited. To his and thousands of others' frustration, the current systems in place do very little to promote ties with the outside world, and despite years, if not decades, of research and recommendations from government sanctioned reviews, it does not appear that much has been done. In the following section we will see that, if anything, things have got progressively worse over the years in which Carl has been in prison. These failings in prison practice were brought into sharp focus during the Covid-19 pandemic, to which we also turn our attention. In the conclusion, we explore possibilities and limitations for the types of reforms promoted by Woolf and Farmer. The fact that their recommendations regarding social visits have yet to be implemented raises the important question of why, if it is suggested through decades of research that improved family and community ties would make the experience of prison a little less painful, and improve prisoners' prospects for successful future reintegration, more has not been done? Does the government really

want to achieve these goals or are there conflicting agendas at play? In a political climate in which government policies are so focused on the punitive elements of punishment, it is questionable whether the supposed objectives of building family ties could ever coincide.

### Carl's lived experience of prison

I have personally experienced the consequences of a lack of emphasis in promoting ties between family and friends. This is represented by the extortionate costs of phoning people outside of prison, which

Farmer found to be, "a recurring theme and a cause of considerable resentment in every prison [he] visited".<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the limits on what you can earn and spend of your own money to pay for these costs is not sufficient and has not kept up with rising costs and inflation. For example, a 1st class stamp has gone from 27p in 2005 when I began this sentence to 95p in 2022. Yet, while the cost of a stamp has more than tripled, what a prisoner can spend or earn has not. If anything, the wages for certain jobs have been reduced dramatically.

Another aspect of prison that has impacted my relationships and contact with the outside world is the distance prisons are from prisoners' homes. My family and most of

my remaining friends live in London, so unless I have been in a local remand prison or decided to use the accumulated visits scheme,<sup>21</sup> my visitors have had to travel over 100 miles to see me. Luckily, most of my visitors can afford to do so and can also find the time to do this. Unfortunately, this is not the case for a large proportion of the prison population. This is despite the recommendations mentioned in the previous section, made by Lord Woolf after the Strangeways Riots over three decades ago. These experiences plus much more, are what led me to study these issues empirically, with a focus on my own personal experiences.

In addition to the long travel times that visitors must endure (on average, four-hour round trips in my case), the visit quality, duration and frequency, and limits on the number of visitors on each visit all fail to

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and staff

20. See footnote 18: Farmer, M. S. (2017), p. 104.

21. Under National Offender Management Service (2021), paragraph 3.2, you may save up to 26 visits in a twelve-month period. You may also apply to be temporarily transferred closer to home to use these intensively. See Footnote 18.

support the maintenance of relationships. Prisoners are only entitled to two visits each month, with a maximum of three adults attending. These visits are meant to last one hour but, as we emphasised in the introduction, are typically little more than 30 minutes long. However, depending on your IEP level, most prisons will facilitate two 2-hour visits a month as standard (or more if you are on the enhanced IEP Level), but you will only be eligible for the minimum if your behaviour is deemed to be 'not up to scratch'. Visits are also subject to availability, so in highly populated prisons it is most likely you will not always get a space on all the sessions you book, again emphasising the lack of action taken on this issue since both the Woolf and Farmer recommendations.

The Covid-19 pandemic helped to highlight how unfit the current prison system is when it comes to prisoners maintaining contact with the outside world. During most of the pandemic, at a time when contact became even more important than usual, visits were instead massively reduced if not cut out altogether. For the first few months I was only able to leave my cell for 15 minutes per day, and this was just for exercise. Showers were every three days and food was delivered to our cells. HMP Coldingley, where I was for much of the pandemic, does not have phones or toilets in the cells. I

cannot start to describe how horrendous the conditions were as a result. It was near enough impossible to call our families. For the most part, visits were not available and when they were, over a year into the pandemic, they were socially distanced, once a month, for an hour. Remarkably, at the time of writing, this is still the case.

As a result, I only saw my parents twice, my partner once, and my friends not at all for over two years during the pandemic. The process of entering a prison often cuts these visits in half if not more, as all prisoners' loved ones are assumed to be bringing in contraband and therefore need to be searched. This searching procedure results in some prisoners having even less than 30 minutes for their actual visits during this time. These Covid-19 experiences helped shine a light on the lacking structures needed to facilitate and maintain quality contact with the outside world in normal times. Private family visits could have provided the appropriate facilities that would have ensured prisoners and their families were kept in their 'bubbles', which could have reduced the risks presented by the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic helped to highlight how unfit the current prison system is when it comes to prisoners maintaining contact with the outside world.

Indeed, family visits are one of the few positive opportunities for social bonding that most prisons offer during normal times. Family visits are often as long as five hours and may offer a bit more of a relaxed environment. The requirements to gain access to these visits generally include being on enhanced IEP status and having at least one child on the visit. In my case, I have not been able to access these visits as I have no children. But some prisons do also offer other special visits a few times a year, like 'lifer visits' or 'adult only visits', which I have been able to access a few times over the course of my sentence. Once in 2007, whilst at HMP Swinfen Hall, then again whilst at HMP Coldingley from 2017 to 2019, I was able to have visits like these two to three times a year. Due to these current practices

throughout the prison system, which have been further exacerbated over the last three years because of Covid-19, it has been incredibly hard to maintain relationships with people on the outside. I have witnessed most long-term prisoners lose their partners and many forfeit visits all together. In fact, most of my friends that visit me now are ones who I have made from prison, something that is not always looked at favourably by the prison system. This reality is in stark contrast to what PSI 16/2011 says it intends to achieve through prison visits.

Another major issue, which seems to be more in the spotlight in recent times, is the impact prison has on mental health. I have personally noticed an increase in the cases of self-harm and suicide over the last decade, and even more so during the Covid-19 lock-down. I have lost a few friends to suicide or overdoses over the years, including foreign nationals who did not have much support, if any, from the outside world. Many foreign national prisoners do not receive any visits at all, not only due to the high costs incurred from travelling between countries, but also because of family and friends being refused visas. One foreign national, life sentenced prisoner I know has not physically seen his family since 2006. While at HMP Coldingley, a relatively small prison with around 500 inmates, amongst my peers there were three suicides and a fatal overdose. In the height of the lock-down whilst also at HMP Coldingley, a prisoner had a mental health episode where he began to cut off parts of his body including his nipples. In 1991, Lord Woolf stated that lack of contact prisoners had with their families was viewed by those who helped inform his review as a key factor in violence, self-harm, suicide, and the

deterioration of mental health.<sup>22</sup> According to Lord Farmer, one fifth of men in prison have attempted suicide. At first sight, these are surprisingly high numbers. However, in the last month alone there have been three suicide attempts by people on the landing I currently reside on. Visits, contact with the outside world, and improving ties with prisoners' loved ones should be at the forefront when considering how to tackle this epidemic we are currently experiencing in the prison system.

### Can things be different?

The Barlinnie Special Unit (BSU) was a unit within Barlinnie Prison in Scotland, since closed, that was opened in the early 1970s to house some of the most dangerous and disruptive prisoners in the country. These included the infamous Jimmy Boyle, who later wrote that he gave up fighting the system the moment, on his first day at the Unit, when he was handed a pair of scissors by an officer to open clothes parcels he had arrived with.<sup>23</sup> The BSU was opened to deal with these individuals, but in a much different way to the conventional methods used in UK prisons. They did not use restraint or solitary confinement, instead encouraging good behaviour through trust and responsibility, art, education and — our focus in this paper — private family visits, which were unsupervised and held within an environment that was as close to what they would be like if they were at home.<sup>24</sup> All in all, the BSU was a great success, to the extent that of the 36 prisoners held there during its 21 year history, only four were ever re-convicted.<sup>25</sup> Citing debates in the UK Parliament from 1980 and research published in the early 1990s, Wilson and Brookes<sup>26</sup> explain:

*Regimes, like the BSU which allow more inmate participation, increased contact with the outside world and which are operated by more highly trained prison officers*

*the outside world and which are operated by more highly trained prison officers, were likely to have a positive impact on the rising tide of violence in British prisons. (p. 51-52)*

Yet the BSU was closed after a media exposé of prisoners being allowed to have sex with their partners.<sup>27</sup> The clear success of the prison — and its closure for one of its most progressive practices — further highlights the need to question whether UK policy makers are genuine about rehabilitation. On this matter, Sparks highlights an 'ambivalence within the higher echelons of the Scottish Prison Service'<sup>28</sup> that had hung over the unit throughout its history. Wilson and Brookes cite a prison chaplain from the unit who had criticised his colleagues for regarding 'a changed, articulate Boyle [as] more of a threat than one who lived like a caged animal'.<sup>29</sup> Wilson and Brookes continue:

*What was true for clerics was also true for other members of the public — defined in the very broadest sense — who might want prisoners to change their behaviour, but not if this was done within a regime that was seen to be 'soft' or 'easy'... The public did not want prisoners to experience conditions inside that were better than they might have*

*experienced on the outside. (p. 48)*

As UK-based penal abolitionists such as Carlen and Ryan and Sim have pointed out for decades, certain sections of government and the public may want prisoners to change, but they want this done through force, punishment, and harsh conditions that they feel will work as a deterrent, as opposed to genuine change through better opportunities and relationships with those in the community.<sup>30 31</sup> Progressive practices, Carlen stresses, are invariably 'clawed back' in time. Prison, she explains, is the central symbol of the state's

22. See footnote 18: Farmer, M. S. (2017).

23. Boyle, J. (1977). *A Sense of Freedom*. Pan Books.

24. Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021). A failed success: The Barlinnie Special Unit. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 17(1), 31–41.

25. See footnote 24: Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021).

26. See footnote 24: Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021).

27. Sparks, R. (2002). Out of the 'Digger': The warrior's honour and the guilty observer. *Ethnography*, 3(4), 556–581.

28. See footnote 27: Sparks, R. (2002), p. 573.

29. See footnote 24: Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021).

30. Carlen, P. (2002). Carceral clawback: The case of women's imprisonment in Canada. *Punishment & Society*, 4(1), 115–121.

31. Ryan, M., & Sim, J. (2007). Campaigning for and campaigning against prisons: Excavating and reaffirming the case for prison abolition. In Y. Jewkes (Ed.), *Handbook on Prisons* (pp. 697–718). Willan Publishing.

power to punish, and its main function is the delivery of pain. The BSU was an exception, and many Scottish prison officials resented this. As Norrie emphasises, as a radical alternative that worked, the BSU served as an 'alert to the overall failures of penal power in theory as well as practice' (p. 133).<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, it was never regarded as more than an experiment. Its emphasis on 'innovation... and transformation'<sup>33</sup> was not replicated in other prisons and is certainly not reflected in most UK prisons today.

This is not to say that there are no recent or current examples of progressive practices to learn from. These include units where prisoners can spend extended periods of time with their families, mainly children, under reduced supervision. For example, before the Covid-19 pandemic, HMP Askham Grange included an overnight child contact facility where mothers could spend up to 48 hours with their children in a separate building (Acorn House) with no intervention from staff.<sup>34</sup> A similar facility was opened at a second women's prison, HMP Drake Hall, in 2015. A few prisons allow prisoners' visitors to come onto the wing so they can see how their loved ones are living, including HMP Grendon, where Sacha coordinates a second convict criminology study group.

HMP Warren Hill, and quite a few private sector prisons, including HMP Five Wells, HMP Park, and HMP Oakwood, allow prisoners access to 'lounge visits'. These consist of a separate room from the main visits hall. These are mainly used for prisoners, their children, and partners to have a more private visit for at least an hour, with no CCTC or prison officers in the room, but with staff close by doing regular 'walk by' checks. These examples demonstrate that in theory all UK prisons could allow private family visits.

Unfortunately, often when pressure is applied, instead of allowing all prisoners to access these benefits, they are cut out altogether, as was the case

with the Barlinnie BSU. This may be the case today with HMP Askham Grange's Acorn House, which received positive inspectorate reports in the months before the Covid-19 prison lockdown by HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Ofsted,<sup>35 36</sup> but had still not re-instated overnight visits by the time this paper was submitted (February 2023). HMP Drake Hall has also stopped receiving children overnight. In January 2021, the Ministry of Justice announced it would include overnight facilities in plans to provide up to 500 new places across the women's prison estate. However, the Ministry of Justice did not repeat this pledge when it later provided more specific details — 456 places across 18 women's prisons — in its response to the House of Commons Justice Committee's report *Women in Prison*.<sup>37</sup>

Carlen used the phrase 'carceral clawback' in the context of failed prison reforms in Canada.<sup>38</sup> We conclude our paper with reference to one region of the Global North that has managed to sustain progressive policies towards prisoners' contact with their families for more than half a century: the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, Greenland, Iceland, and especially Norway. Norway has the lowest recorded reoffending rate in the world and its prison system is intertwined

with its social welfare system.<sup>39</sup> Norwegian prison staff need a minimum of an undergraduate degree and three years training to work with prisoners. Open prisons are widely used to hold men and women on shorter sentences. Typically, individuals with a sentence of two years or less are housed in low-security prisons, the justification being that no one should be held under stricter conditions than necessary, which is surprisingly the same criteria used when categorising prisoners in English and Welsh prisons, although rarely followed. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, private overnight family visits are standard practice. The same is the case across the Nordic region.<sup>40</sup>

Open prisons are widely used to hold men and women on shorter sentences. Typically, individuals with a sentence of two years or less are housed in low-security prisons.

32. Norrie, A. (2022). Restoration, abolition and the loving prison: Jimmy Boyle and Barlinnie Special Unit. *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 61(1), 103–116.

33. See footnote 27: Sparks, R. (2002), p. 571.

34. Raikes, B., & Lockwood, K. (2019). Acorn House revisited: 'Think family, up and down and side to side'. In M. Hutton, & D. Moran (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison and the Family* (pp. 295–315). Palgrave Macmillan.

35. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2019). *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP & YOI Askham Grange*.

36. Ofsted (2020). *Inspection of Acorn Family Centre*.

37. House of Commons Justice Committee (2022). *Women in Prison*. HC265.

38. See footnote 30: Carlen, P. (2002).

39. Smith, P. S., & Ugelvik, T. (2017). Introduction: Punishment, welfare and prison history in Scandinavia. In P. S. Smith, & T. Ugelvik (Eds.), *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice: Embraced by the Welfare State?* (pp. 3–31). Palgrave Macmillan.

40. Condry, R., & Smith, P. S. (2019). A holistic approach to prisoners' families: From arrest to release. In M. Hutton, & D. Moran (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison and the Family* (pp. 99–118). Palgrave Macmillan.

New Zealand criminologist John Pratt sparked intensive debate when he described the Nordic prison system as exceptionally progressive.<sup>41</sup> Some criminologists in the region have implicitly or explicitly accused Pratt of understating, even ignoring, a range of aspects of imprisonment in their countries that, in comparison to England and Wales, for example, are clearly regressive. Examples include their relatively high levels of remand and foreign national prisoners, their disproportionately long sentences for drug-related crimes, their common use of short prison sentences in place of community sentences, high use of solitary confinement, and high levels of self-inflicted death.<sup>42</sup> There are also signs that the region is drifting slowly in the direction of punitive populism.<sup>43</sup>

Still, the Nordic prison model is clearly one we in the UK should aspire to, in general and especially in regard to the emphasis put on prisoners maintaining contact with their families. Important in our view is the extent to which — in contrast to the experiences of failed reforms in the UK and Canada we have highlighted in this paper — Nordic prison systems still manage to distance themselves from negative media headlines and to operate with little interference from politicians. As Thomas Ugelvik explains in a recent interview that focused on Norway, the external agencies that are legally obligated to provide prisoners with social welfare equivalent to those they provide in the community simply ‘refuse to provide a second-rate service’, while the graduates who commit to two years’ training to enter the prison service train continue to do so ‘because they want to make a difference’.<sup>44</sup>

Equally important, — and again, in sharp contrast to the situation in Anglophone Northern countries like the UK and Canada — is the extent to which Nordic prison systems maintain closer ties with universities and

are generally more receptive to prison researchers. In an inspiring paper, Smith outlines how a long-term research project he was involved in eventually led to the introduction of children’s officers and parental courses across the Danish prison system.<sup>45</sup> When the project began in the late 2000s, Danish politics was dominated by a populist government that ‘seldom missed a chance to appear ‘tough’ and talk about ‘zero tolerance’’,<sup>46</sup> including at one point proposing legislation that would have introduced an automatic three-month ban on home leave for any prisoner who arrived back late. The project quickly moved forward when the Social Democratic Party returned to power in the early 2010s. The researchers engaged with both prisoner support groups and senior state officials, including the Danish

Minister for Justice, implemented four pilot projects with the support of local prison officials, and made specific efforts to get the issue of the impact of imprisonment on children into the national media. Throughout the paper, Smith emphasises the importance of engaging all relevant actors in continuous ‘criminological engagement’ and dialogue throughout the research process. Interestingly, he does so with reference to the work of mostly British criminologists and British prison reformers who are similarly prepared to work with state representatives, including some who were involved in the research that unintentionally led

to the demise of the Barlinnie SPU in the 1990s.

How and to what extent a participatory research activist agenda that included stakeholders and focused on the absence of private family visits in the UK could work is the subject matter of Carl’s doctoral research. There are major political, institutional, and cultural differences that will likely make both the research and activist stages of such an agenda more difficult in the UK than in Denmark, as Pratt’s Nordic exceptionalism thesis testifies. Carl takes heed of the warning by many

## Nordic prison systems still manage to distance themselves from negative media headlines and to operate with little interference from politicians.

41. Pratt, J. (2008). Scandinavian exceptionalism in an era of penal excess: Part I - The nature and roots of Scandinavian exceptionalism. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(2): 119–137.

42. Mathiesen, T. (2012). Scandinavian exceptionalism in penal matters: Reality or wishful thinking? In T. Ugelvik, & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Prison Policy and Practice* (pp. 13–37). Routledge.

43. Smith, P. S. (2012). A critical look at Scandinavian exceptionalism: Welfare state theories, penal populism, and prison conditions in Denmark and Scandinavia. In T. Ugelvik, & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Prison Policy and Practice* (pp. 38–57). Routledge.

44. Darke, S. (2021). Global criminology: Comparative criminology. In S. Case et al. (Eds.) *The Oxford Textbook on Criminology* (2nd ed., pp. 375–407). Oxford University Press.

45. Smith, P. S. (2015). Reform and research: Reconnecting prison and society in the 21st Century. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 4(1), 33–49.

46. See footnote 45: Smith, P. S. (2015), p. 40.

British — and, indeed, Nordic — penal abolitionists that positive reforms are always vulnerable to being undone in time, and radical prison reformers who push too hard are eventually ‘silenced’<sup>47</sup> and ‘defined out’<sup>48</sup> as idealistic and irrelevant by prison authorities. Still, the more he reads about prison reform in the Nordic region, the more convinced he becomes that there are lessons to learn from Smith and his colleagues’ experiences.

In summary, the criminological case for the value of improved and increased prison visitation is simply too strong to ignore, especially regarding the impact on children. In any one year, 300,000 children in the

UK will go through the experience of having a parent in prison. Most of these parents are fathers. At the same time, as social visits help people cope better in prison, they also help children cope better outside. Fortunately, the children of prisoners are not stigmatised in the media or in politics as they might be in the playground. A radical research agenda that begins with their needs surely has a chance of success in any national context.

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47. Mathiesen, T. (2004). *Silently Silenced: Essays on the Creation of Acquiescence in Modern Society*. Waterside Press.

48. Mathiesen, T. (2008). The abolitionist stance. *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 17(2), 58–63

# Sorority inside and outside as a means of survival and resistance: Experiences of women imprisoned in Mexico

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This article tells the stories of two formerly imprisoned women with recent experiences in a Mexican prison.<sup>1</sup> As Marthita's and Ana's accounts demonstrate failures of Mexico's neoliberal prison, which continues to operate according to the logic of the 'coloniality of power' in which women are made more vulnerable according to their position on colonial racial hierarchies.<sup>2</sup> They not only find themselves subjected to discrimination and sometimes physical abuse, but also — more than some of their (white) male counterparts — face glaring deficiencies in provision, including food and personal hygiene products. The gaps left by what has been described as Mexico's 'failed democracy' and an 'absent state',<sup>3</sup> have to be filled to ensure physical, psychological, and social survival. This article explores the consequences of the 'absent state' from the perspectives of women who have struggled and fought — and continue to struggle and fight — to create livelihoods, wellbeing, and community through sorority.

Although they only represent 5.7 per cent of the overall prison population,<sup>4</sup> women make up 53 per cent of the people processed and sentenced for federal offences.<sup>5</sup> Crimes related to drugs are the primary cause of imprisonment for women at this level, their

numbers having grown dramatically since the declaration of the War on Drugs by president Felipe Calderon in 2006.<sup>6</sup> Since the beginning of his sexenio — the six year term to which Mexican presidents are elected — over 3,000 women were imprisoned for 'crimes against health', as drugs crimes are euphemistically known.<sup>7</sup> This growth in the population of women in prison is not proportionate to that of men. In 2021, for example, the population of women in prisons rose by 7.1 per cent while that of men grew by 4.1 per cent.<sup>8</sup> Against this background of gender inequality, injustices within the justice system multiply:

*The pattern which is repeated in Mexican prisons and across the continent is that, once they are inside the justice system, women — often facing low levels of education, poverty and/or social exclusion [...] — are judged according to a clear framework of gender stereotypes, judged to be bad mothers and given disproportionate sentences. Often they complete long periods of preventative detention with no contact with their families with no trial and with no sentence.*<sup>9</sup>

1. The prison is anonymised throughout the article.
2. Whitfield, J. (2018). *Prison Writing of Latin America*. Bloomsbury.
3. Ávalos Tenorio, G. (2013). La democracia fallida en México. *Veredas*, 26, 121-142; González Placencia, L., coord. (2011). *Impunidad: síntoma de un Estado ausente*. Defensor, Comisión de Derechos Humanos de la Ciudad de México.
4. ENPOL (2021). *Encuesta Nacional de Población Privada de Libertad*. INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography). Available at: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/enpol/2021>
5. Blas, I. (2016). El mundo de Sofía o el abuso del derecho penal para abordar problemas sociales. *Derecho en Acción*, CIDE, CONACYT. Federal offences are a particular category of serious crimes judged to harm the "wellbeing of all Mexicans". See Moreno Colmenero, S. P. (2001). *Valores para la democracia Delitos e infracciones administrativas*. Instituto Nacional para la Educación de Adultos.
6. See footnote 5: Blas, I. (2016).
7. Redacción Animal político (2019). #LiberarlasEsJusticia: Más de 3 mil mujeres están presas en México por delitos menores contra la salud. *Animal Político*. Available at: <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/06/campana-liberar-mujeres-presas-drogas>
8. Angel, A. (2021). 2021 cerró con casi 10 mil personas más en prisión. *Animal político*. Available at: <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2022/01/2021-tercer-ano-aumento-poblacion-prision>
9. See footnote 5: Blas, I. (2016).

Two decades ago, Elena Azaola spoke about how women in prison in Mexico suffer what criminologists call 'double deviance',<sup>10</sup> a particularly severe punishment for having transgressed not only the law but also gender roles: they are bad women, bad carers, or bad mothers. The punishments imposed on them are not only juridical but also moral and social, coming from both state authorities and their own families and communities. This accentuates the levels of isolation and abandonment for imprisoned women, leaving them in situations of extreme vulnerability.

Against this context of social abandonment, the Editorial Collective of Sisters in the Shadow has been collaborating with a community of women in a women's prison in Mexico for more than 15 years, building alliances and projects centred on social justice. The main 'outside' members — Elena de Hoyos, Aída Hernández Castillo, Marina Ruiz, Carolina Corral, María Vinós, Daniela Mondragón, Paloma Rodríguez, Marcia Trejo, and Lucía Espinoza — seek to dignify imprisoned women through creative, artistic, writing and editorial workshops and by producing books to showcase this work. The collective has published around 20 books to date, as well as participating in talks, conferences, and book fairs among many other activities, to amplify the voices of some of Mexico's most marginalised and vulnerable people.<sup>11</sup>

Over the years, the collective has developed a form of sorority that Elena de Hoyos defines as 'solidarity between women'.<sup>12</sup> In *Reborn in Writing: A Manual for Feminist Intervention in Spaces of Violence*, de Hoyos, Ruiz, and Hernández Castillo explain that 'the challenge is to construct autonomy not from the place of exclusionary individualism which capitalism promotes, but rather from the sorority that seeks to strengthen us personally. Sharing writing we create links between women and establish

commitments to self-care and sorority, both individual and collective'.<sup>13</sup> But what does sorority mean to imprisoned women themselves?

This article grapples with this question through the voices of Marthita and Ana, whose accounts reveal the alternative forms of (co)existence that have allowed them to survive during and after their imprisonment by the neoliberal, colonial, and racist justice system.<sup>14</sup> In prison, Marthita and Ana developed networks of sorority with women inside and outside. These networks allowed them not only to survive, but also to resist the alienating and isolating rules imposed by the prison authorities, along with the social stigma generated by the multiple sexist racist and classist discriminations of Mexican society. Through acts of kindness, affection, and care, and diverse forms of grassroots community building, these imprisoned women resisted the neoliberal ideology that governs globalised Mexican society and the prison system that is one of its key pillars.<sup>15</sup>

We wrote this paper according to the dialogical and decolonial methodologies of the *Hermanas (Sisters)* themselves.<sup>16</sup> We began by putting together some preliminary ideas, which we discussed as a group, deciding together with Marthita and Ana to focus on the themes of sorority and survival. After immersing ourselves in the academic work of some of the Sisters who move in the

academic sphere, and reflecting on the collective's work, we formulated a set of guiding questions about cooperation and solidarity as well as the barriers to both these things during and after imprisonment. Ana and Marthita wrote first drafts responding to these questions which we wrote up, translated, and edited, continuing to communicate with them via WhatsApp messages and calls, requesting further details and clarifications where necessary. We then read through

Through acts of kindness, affection, and care, and diverse forms of grassroots community building, these imprisoned women resisted the neoliberal ideology that governs globalised Mexican society.

10. Azaola, E. (1996). *El delito de ser mujer*. Hombres y mujeres homicidas en la ciudad de México: historias de vida. CIESAS-Plaza & Valdés.
11. See <https://hermanasenlasombra.org>
12. De Hoyos, E. (2013). Libertad en el encierro: ensayo sobre trabajo con mujeres en prisión. In *Libertad anticipada: Intervención feminista de escritura en espacios penitenciarios*, 17-50. Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, 36.
13. de Hoyos Pérez, E., Ruiz Rodríguez, M., & Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2021). *Renacer en la escritura Manual para la intervención feminista en espacios donde se viven violencias*. Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, 19.
14. Segato, R. L. (2007). El color de la cárcel en América Latina. Apuntes sobre la colonialidad de la justicia en un continente en deconstrucción. *Nueva Sociedad*, 208(1), 142-161.
15. Pérez-Ramírez, B. (2016). La prisión como un eje de la política neoliberal. Reflexiones sobre el papel del trabajo social penitenciario en México. In E. Pastor Seller & L. Cano Soriano (Eds.), *Políticas e intervenciones ante los procesos de vulnerabilidad y exclusión de personas y territorios. Análisis comparado México-España*. Dykinson.
16. See footnote 13: de Hoyos Pérez, E., Ruiz Rodríguez, M., & Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2021).

the completed draft aloud as a group, making further final changes.

The accounts in this article thus represent a dialogue that inverts the normal direction of academic knowledge. Instead of imposing our theoretical concepts on the 'subjects' of the research, Anna and Marthita begin with some key concepts that have been developed in the intellectual work of the Sisters in the Shadow — survival, resistance, solidarity, sorority, collective work — and relate these to their own stories, experiences, and realities. These women are of course the true experts. We hope to have honoured their experience and expertise through co-production, a process in which we have learned less from our academic readings than our conversations and written exchanges with Anna and Marthita.<sup>17</sup> At one point at a point in Marthita's testimony where she was not able to describe what happened to her we have, with her permission, added information in italics in our own words.

### Ana's words

My name is Ana, originally from the State of Morelos. At 18 I started working as an educational assistant with children from ages of 0 to 4. I did not go to university, but when I started working in day care centres the government gave us courses to train us in childcare. When I was 19 years old, I started a relationship with the cousin of a friend of mine, and through him I met a friend of his who was dedicated to making and changing counterfeit banknotes. That's how I got involved in the crime of 'counterfeiting and use of counterfeit currency' for which I was sentenced to 5 years in prison.

In 2013 when my trial began, I had no children. The following year, my first son Ernesto was born and two months after his birth came the judge's final verdict, and I was given 5 days to present myself to the prison. I was afraid of leaving my son and of missing out on so much of his early life, so I did not give myself up, and an arrest warrant was issued against me. In 2017 my second son was born, and when he was almost two and a half years old there were only two months left before my arrest warrant would expire. On the morning of the 4th of June 2019, I was re-arrested by the federal police, and this time I would not leave only one son, but two...

My children were 2 and 4 when I was sent to prison in 2019, just 3 days before my 26th birthday, and I spent almost 3 years there. Like everyone else, I had terrible ideas about prison, which turned into sheer terror as I went through the blue door behind which we

imprisoned people leave our lives, families, jobs, friends, and unresolved problems.... They took my fingerprints and details and took me to the medical area where the doctor makes out a report — something they do because sometimes the authorities in charge of transport beat or torture, or even sexually abuse, our comrades.

Then, the officers led me to a door that said 'clothes store'. They looked for clothes in my size and I had to change into the beige prison uniform. Extremely nervous, I went into the cell they had assigned me to drop my mattress off, and the comrade who already lived there came straight in. She told me that I could take whatever I needed from what was there (soap, shampoo, toilet paper, etc.) — a small act of care but a very important one: she knew that we all arrived with nothing. She also told me our area's allocated time for calls (4pm) and that she would lend me her card to talk to my family. Soon Marti and I began to talk, and I felt calmer and fortunate to have her as a comrade.

Marti and I spent almost 15 days sharing a cell until she was taken to the C.O.C. area. I was alone for 2 days until a new girl arrived, and as soon as she arrived, I tried to be as kind to her as Marti was with me. Without a doubt I think that the first impression or experience in that place was something that influenced me to define the type of comrade I would be.

In the 2 years and 10 months that I was inside, there were a few companions that I became very fond of and with whom I shared loyalty, sincerity, and trust. The Apodaca sisters were two of them. Originally from Sinaloa, they are one of the few with whom I never had any conflict or misunderstanding. It was always a sincere friendship of mutual trust and support, and they always had good advice for me and the best words to lift my spirits on difficult days. Other friends were the Naranjo sisters, Colombians who arrived almost a year after me. We developed a great friendship and a bond of mutual support. We had fun, but we also helped each other by finding ways of working together to make money and share what we had. Generally, my family brought me everything I needed, and I shared what they brought with the Naranjo sisters, who had no family support other than their mother, who could rarely visit them because the prison was very far from their home. They were noble hearted and very generous. Generally, whenever we had a visitor, we always shared the food that the guards let us keep.

I tried to be supportive and kind with other comrades, but just as there are many women with very noble hearts in prison, there are also some who tend to take advantage of the good intentions of others, and I ended up staying away from them so as not to have

17. Marthita and Anna's reflections are unique, particular to them, and in certain respects contrasting, owed partly to a temporal gap: Anna spent time prison in a sexenio and regime that was much stricter; Marthita spent much more time inside, but at an earlier period in which there were fewer restrictions.

problems or misunderstandings. Sometimes it is the imprisoned comrades themselves who make it difficult for us to practise sorority, by letting others down or failing to reciprocate the good will or support that we have shown them.

Generally, however, it is the authorities who make it more and more difficult for us to build sorority among comrades. When I arrived, the situation was already strict, but as time went by, things got worse. The authorities began to impose absurd rules of 'non-coexistence', prohibiting us from spending time together, sharing our things, or simply having a space or time to talk or to help the new comrades find self-employment. The law states that remand prisoners and sentenced prisoners cannot live in the same area, but it does not say that it is forbidden for us to spend time together. However, the institution imposes these rules as if they were the law, thus imposing its own regimes of control on us and forbidding us access to the other wings for social or work reasons.

With this policy, how are newcomers supposed to learn how to work? Who is going to teach them? If, when you arrive there, you do not know how to do the work that is done there, if we cannot mix at mealtimes, what kind of model of reintegration is being practised? Is good daily coexistence not a fundamental part of social reintegration? How can we prepare to live outside if we do not learn to relate to each other in the already very restricted prison community, if prison regulations do not allow us to be empathetic to those around us, if we are forced not to share with or care for our comrades, if we cannot even support each other when we have problems?

In some cases, the authorities even offer privileges in exchange for our collaboration as 'witnesses', to help them deny all the abuses and human rights violations. That means having to lie and say that whatever injustice our comrades are denouncing is not true. Some collaborate to obtain privileges and others because they know that if they do not, at some point it will go against them and the authorities will take some kind of revenge, make it more difficult for their family to enter, or deny them access to food or personal items. This means we end up making enemies of each other whether we choose to collaborate or not. The authorities can make it very difficult for family to visit by

doing ever more thorough checks and searches, until the visitor gets tired of it and visits less and less until they end up not visiting us at all. Our prison authorities do not care that the maintenance of family ties is not only a right, but also a fundamental part of social reintegration.

Sometimes we were denied the right to call our families, especially when there was a riot in the men's area when we were locked in our cells and could not even go out to get our food. We had to cover the windows with our clothes to keep out the tear gas they fired to try to subdue the men although really, the protests were the fault of the authorities, whose mistreatment and violations of human rights forced the men to rebel.

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### ***Solidarity from outside prison***

In terms of social networks with the outside world, many of the comrades with whom I spent time in prison had very little contact with their families because they live in other states or countries, or simply because they did not have the support of a family member or friend. For them, life in prison is much more difficult. Fortunately, my brother and my mother came to visit me. My brother was two years younger than me — 23 — when I arrived. Our life was always difficult, and we struggled to complete our education, but at the age of 23 he decided to go

back to high school and after two years he went to university to study criminal law. He was the one who visited me most often. My mother, who was in her 40s, struggled to visit every weekend because of her job, but if they could not come every week, they would still always make sure to bring me everything I needed to look after myself and to work. My mother always told me that if what she brought was enough to share with someone who needed it, to give it to them without charging anything or expecting anything in return, because she knew that those who did not have visitors had to buy everything in the shop and that everything there was very expensive.

I was also always part of the Sisters in the Shadow writing workshop. I remember that the first time I attended the workshop was because of a colleague who invited me, who knew that I really liked reading and told me that I would like it very much. She was right. For me, participating in those workshops always

gave me a very comforting feeling because I could express myself freely and because of the kind treatment from Aida and Maria.

### **Life after prison**

On 5th April 2022, it was finally time for me to be released. I was not only excited and anxious to leave but also really nervous about seeing my family again. I was pregnant again. I had started to talk on the phone with a man from the male section of the prison and we began to have a relationship and see each other more often, though our visits were always in secret. My family did not know that I had a partner. They did not find out I was pregnant until 15 days before my release, because I had been transferred to a more distant prison where they couldn't visit. I was already at 6 months. I was very, very nervous about seeing them, about what would happen when they saw me, about what my mother or my children would say when they found out that they would be getting a new baby sister.

When at midnight the notification arrived that my release had been authorised, and that I would be released immediately, I had to do something I never thought I would do inside the prison... Ask to spend one more night there (for my own safety given how late it was, and given that my family could not come to pick me up because the prison was so far away). Finally, my brother arrived, accompanied by his partner and a friend of mine. The truth is that I felt very calm and happy to see my brother again, the whole way we talked, and I felt as if everything I had lived through in prison had only been a dream. My brother's partner was extremely kind and attentive, and my friend kept offering me things to eat and drink, asking if the music was OK, and so on.

When we arrived at my mother's house my nerves returned, as did the excitement of knowing that I would see my family again and that this time we would never be separated. When we embraced, my children, even though they are small, cried with sheer emotion. After having a wash, I went into the bedroom and my mother came in carrying a dress with a wide skirt. She looked at my belly without saying anything, but I suppose she thought the dress would be comfortable for me because of the bump.

When I got out of prison, my mother and my brother helped me, both emotionally and financially. Another very good support network that I also found when I got out was what I least imagined. One

afternoon when I was leaving the house where I live, I heard a voice that sounded familiar. I stopped to see a woman with her back turned. I was almost sure that I knew her. As I approached, I realised it was Elena de Hoyos. Through her, I was able to make contact once again with the Editorial Collective of Sisters in the Shadow. I was very happy: Elena knows everything that we went through in prison, she knows my comrades and many other things that no one on the outside would understand. She told the Collective that she had seen me and soon I began to make contact with the others. When she told them I was pregnant, they all gave me gifts for the baby. The Sisters are a support group for which I feel extremely grateful, and I consider myself very fortunate to have been able to take part in the writing workshops that they gave.

As for the few friends I made in prison, I made an effort to keep in touch with them. As soon as I could, I contacted their families on Facebook, and sent them my mobile number so that they could call me. I talk to them very often on the phone: we talk for a bit and have a laugh, and I try to support them whenever I can. Sometimes I also call their families to ask how they are, because I know that sometimes things happen in prison — like the riots I described above — that make it difficult for them to

communicate regularly.

The most difficult thing after leaving prison is finding a job, and not only because of the criminal record. Those of us who are released through early probation are still barred by the state from participating in all sorts of legal and bureaucratic processes. We cannot, for example, get formal employment, social security, credit from a bank, or even get official ID. This makes it very difficult for us to find employment because in order to get access to jobs, social security, or any benefits, we need updated documentation, and that is not possible until the end of our time on probation. The law in Mexico is absurd, unjust, and contradictory. How are we supposed to reintegrate into society, how are we supposed to get our lives back if we have no way of even getting a job to take care of ourselves? This is why we remain dependent on other people's support, and since we cannot rely on the state, we depend on our families, if we are lucky, or other support networks that we have to create ourselves.

How do we overcome these problems created by the state? In my case, in addition to the help of my family, I have had friends who know my situation and who have been able to support me. Some of them have

The most difficult thing after leaving prison is finding a job, and not only because of the criminal record.

even invited me to work with them or to go back to doing things that we did together before my imprisonment, for example making organic personal hygiene products like soap, toothpaste, or deodorant, and on other occasions we make handmade pastries to make a bit of money. It is nothing stable or secure, but it helps.

In our lives as ex-prisoners, it is the same authorities that continue to put obstacles in our daily lives. They prevent us from finding formal jobs and even from helping our friends who are still incarcerated, because former prisoners cannot get in easily for visits. Since I already knew this, I decided that I would at least try to support my friends with things that I know are needed there, like basic belongings such as hygiene and cleaning products. But when I went, the officer would not allow anything in, not because they were prohibited items but because of who I was. In other words, despite the fact that we are no longer in prison, the authorities continue to limit our freedoms simply because we have been there. And these are the same authorities who discriminate against us, stigmatise us, and make our lives — and our reintegration — difficult by denying us the possibility of supporting one another even after we leave.

### Marthita's words

My name is Marthita. My mother tongue is Tsotsil, a Mayan language they speak in the Mountains of the Chiapas, although I was born close to the border with Guatemala. In Tsotsil, the name of the language is bats'i k'op [original language] or jk'optik [our language]. When I was 12, I went to live with nuns in Mexico City, but I had come from a very quiet village and the contrast was very hard. Later I got married and I went to live in Morelos to escape the pollution and the smog. My husband sold tacos and I supported him, although it was very hard because we didn't know anyone. Little by little we got to know more people and later some neighbours lent us a bit of land on which we could grow maize.

I lived and worked outside the city (Cuernavaca), in the forest, where there was very little electricity. My house was made of recycled cardboard and had no doors. It was in the month of June when some policemen showed, wounded, looking like they had had an accident and begging me to feed them. I didn't think anything bad. An uneducated woman from the countryside, brought up by nuns. My first thought was that I should love my neighbour. I had no idea of all the problems that would follow. I didn't understand Spanish very well which made things much more

difficult: my inability to communicate was exhausting and harmful. My life took a 180 degree turn that night. It was destroyed like a broken glass. That life ended, another life in the women's prison began.

*[The policeman asked Marthita to feed and care for a child they had with them who later turned out to be the victim of a kidnapping, for which she and her husband were convicted. Marthita is still traumatised by her experience and struggles to recount these details].*

### Sorority with women inside

Prison is also a world where there are fights, screams, people reporting each other, suicides, thefts, and so on. But in contrast with the things imposed on us and the violence of everyday life in the prison you can also form connections of sorority which allow you to survive and resist injustice. In the almost 14 years that I was in prison my relationship with cellmates was good because we gave ourselves rules. Our main rule was respect. We repeated what our president Benito Juárez said 'respect for the rights of others means peace'.<sup>18</sup> This was necessary because, due to overpopulation, three or four of us lived in tiny cells designed for two people. We had to respect our cellmates, not touching their toiletries like shampoo, bath soap, sanitary pads, flip flops for the showers, etc. That's how we lived in harmony with our comrades.

There are women who support you when you first enter. You arrive with no shoes, with the clothes you have worn for a whole week, unwashed, tortured, beaten up, cold and hungry, with no blankets, no shampoo to wash yourself, and no towel or changes of clothes. For me a great figure was Maria, another indigenous woman from Acapulco who supported me when I arrived. She was also there because of a kidnapping she knew nothing about. She no longer believed in God because she should not have been there. She knew how to sew and embroider. She taught me a way of embroidering that she had learned in Puebla. I had never seen such beautiful fabrics. She had a real gift for expressing what she wanted in her work. She embroidered beautiful precious tablecloths and handkerchiefs. When visitors came her creativity and beautiful combinations of different colours really caught their attention. We worked every day to make money by selling to the visitors. We also made cushion covers. Our comrades bought them and sent them out to their families so that they in turn could resell them on the outside.

18. Benito Juárez was a liberal president who served between 1858 and 1872. He was of Zapotec indigenous heritage, the first indigenous head of state in the postcolonial Americas.

There were incredible women like my friend Maria in that prison. Women who knew how to look after their children even though they were in prison, women who called their children on the phone, asked them about what medicines they are taking, made sure they were ok. Indigenous women like us. The prison doesn't care about the children left behind. No one can know what it is like to be a mother leaving behind small children, unless it has happened to them, like it happened to me. This fortitude, the strength they have, that we give others, allows us to maintain our children and even send them money despite being in prison. I really think women are incredibly strong. They have values and principles and manage to survive. I really admire my former companions and their children who are now working in spite of what happened to their mothers. Maria is now free, working happily in the countryside.

Alma is another close friend from prison. From her I learned how to cook. She knew how to write and how to express herself. She could write letters and complaints to be sent to the prison authorities which others paid her to do. One day when we were sewing, she said, 'let's go eat'. I told her that I didn't have any food and she said, 'I'll give you some.' She took out an iron and put a taco on it to heat up then she put cheese and made a salsa by grinding chili on a plate. Mortar and pestles were forbidden. She said to me, 'I think we should work to put together a kitchen.' I said I didn't know how to cook but she said, 'You will learn.' She explained the rules of the work to me. You couldn't just stand there chatting with our comrades, you could not ask them what crime they were there for, you just had to sell and work and not get into trouble so that you could avoid misunderstandings that might land you in trouble with the administration. We hugged each other and that is how we began a friendship and a food business.

But these forms of sorority, that helped us to survive in that repressive and racist institution, were not always possible. After many years the administration of the prison changed in 2013 and imposed extremely strict rules: many women were segregated and there was no communication between comrades. We were no longer permitted to sell things, so I had to look for another job and that is how I met Ángeles.

Ángeles was transferred from another prison where she had learned to sew. She invited me to work in a sewing workshop where she made things to be

sold on the outside. My role ended up being to iron the uniforms that comrades from Guerrero made. In this group there was a lot of harmony, peace, and teamwork. The other women taught me to use the sewing machines. But that work ended because the authorities made it very difficult to bring the materials into the prison. They put a lot of obstacles up for the businessman who employed us, making the checks of the garments very onerous, and he ended up leaving. So, we began making face coverings for hospitals, and time kept passing. This group had its rules as well; about how to close the workshop properly, etc. The kitchen and the sewing workshop show how women can work collectively as a team to overcome the difficulties of the prison: we women help each other, we support each other, and teach one another to work.

### ***Sorority with those outside***

The main experience of prison is separation from those 'outside'. I didn't see my family for many years. I couldn't go to my daughters' graduations. I couldn't support them; I couldn't even be a spectator. There were so many things that I missed, people who died while I was inside. I missed the birth of my grandson; I couldn't care for my daughter. But I did have the good fortune to make new alliances

with women outside. Our chompis (friends) Aida, Marina, Elena, and other Sisters in the Shadow, their breakfasts, their food, their books, helped us forget our reality. We learned to write with them, and writing became an important escape from our problems. The Sisters were a breath of fresh air because they did not see us as criminals, they saw us as unlucky, or people who had made mistakes, people paying a high price for some arbitrary life lesson...

### ***Life after prison***

I will never forget the day I left. My nerves, the paperwork that had to be signed, the long wait outside because you know the date but not the time that they will let you leave. In these moments the love of your family is very important. A hug from your children cures all pain and all anxiety. More than anything I remember breathing the good air of the forest. Feeling that free air, I sank to my knees giving thanks to God for allowing me to leave prison, for letting me go home. Where my house had been was just flat land with nothing but trees. It had been built of recycled wood

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and cardboard and, as my neighbours later recounted, the very police who had arrested me had taken away everything they found in the house: the TV, the fridge, everything. That's our reality. It happened to lots of women I met in prison: sometimes they even do it while they are arresting you, they take everything of value and never return it. I had to start from scratch, from spoons to beds. I had to begin a new life and leave the past behind, overcome, let it go, and move forward.

In spite of the distances, I still maintain some of the social networks that the eye develops inside the prison including the Sisters in the Shadow. We stay in touch, and this is something very important. Their support has many forms: a visit, a call, a WhatsApp message, financial support... My teacher Shantal has been a real help in psychological, moral, and economic terms too. She is always there for me, and her support really gives me strength. I went to her house, and I slept, and I slept. That was real trust. My friend Alma also continues to give me moral support. We have not seen each other for years for financial reasons as she lives in Guerrero. Ángeles lives in Guerrero as well. One day we will see each other again.

I have faced many difficulties after leaving prison, such as adapting myself to my surroundings, adapting myself to technology, adapting myself to strangers. More than anything it is difficult to find employment. But I have used the knowledge that I gained in the prison to survive, like sewing work in a laboratory and from confectionery. I sell jelly, yoghurt with fruit, and cakes. Given my age it is not easy to find work, so I just have to sort myself out.

A friend told me, 'you reap what you sow'. I didn't get it at the time because I grew crops in the countryside, I thought she was referring my plot of land, but now I understand. It is about the friendships that you cultivate, the people that you meet.

Prison teaches us women to help one another to become self-sufficient. When I left prison, I rebuilt my house and went to work for myself. My friend Maria became president of her village, she took her

experience and did good things with it. Alma built her own house when she came out, and she also worked in the presidency of her state. She had been in prison because someone asked her to transport some marijuana. Her child had been shot and was paralysed. It was out of necessity; she just wanted to protect and help her son. But they have survived and are doing well, including her son who does para-sports.

How terrible is the government, I say. How terrible to take a mother from her children, and for what? The true criminals carry on as they want, robbing and killing. If they have money, they can get away with murder: it's as if they hadn't committed a crime. The people who should not outside are there inside. And vice-versa. It is so very hard. Thank God I survived it and my children. Now it is a new life.

## Discussion

These stories demonstrate how women in Latin America are unjustly imprisoned and, once inside, continue to suffer stigmatisation, abandonment, and discrimination. Compounding this problem is the fact that of the 428 prisons in Mexico, only 10 are exclusively for women, which means that 40.2 per cent of the imprisoned women find themselves in women's prisons, while 59.8 per cent are in mixed centres with a small area assigned to women in a mainly male facility.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, and as the above testimonies reveal, there is much less space for them, they do not have the full range of services, activities, or spaces for recreation, and what is more, they are subject to policies and procedures which have been designed for the men's prison population.<sup>20</sup> It also means, as Anna describes in the case of the Naranjo sisters, that women are often imprisoned very far from home. This fact, combined with the systematic gendered stigmatisation, leads to family abandonment and results in a significant lack of visits by family members and partners of women in prison, compared to men.<sup>21</sup> This is particularly significant in places like Mexico, where the importance of regularly receiving 'visita' for people imprisoned cannot be overstated. In Mexico's neoliberal prison

I have faced many difficulties after leaving prison, such as adapting myself to my surroundings, adapting myself to technology, adapting myself to strangers.

19. CNDH (2019). *Albergan 18 penales femeniles al 40% de las mujeres privadas de libertad*. Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos.

20. Hernández Armas, C. A. (2018). El estigma de las mujeres en reclusión en México: Una mirada desde el interaccionismo simbólico. *TraHs*, 3(1), 159–171.

21. Wittner, V. (2016). *Salud mental entre rejas: una perspectiva psicosocial y de género*. JVE Ediciones.

system in which even the most basic necessities like hygiene products, tampons, and medicine must be bought or brought in by visitors, a lack of visits is not only damaging for women's mental health, it can potentially cost them their lives.<sup>22</sup>

Marthita's account, is strongly marked by her indigeneity. As a woman from the Tsotsil indigenous group in Chiapas, her lack of literacy and facility with Spanish combined with poverty and social exclusion, mean she was targeted and easily scapegoated by organised crime, and lacked the social and economic resources to defend herself. Her experience of the criminal justice process shows how indigenous women are disproportionately discriminated against. The invention of race by Western colonial powers — since colonisation but extending to the present day through enduring structures of coloniality — has legitimised discrimination, repression, and human rights abuses against the indigenous peoples of Latin America.<sup>23</sup> For racialised women, this has been compounded by their gender.<sup>24</sup> As Hernández Castillo underlines, criminality in Mexico is 'permeated by gender and ethnic difference'.<sup>25</sup>

*Prison in Mexico is for poor people who coincidentally are mostly brown and of indigenous descent (many of them urban marginalised people who have been racialized by exclusionary ideologies and practices). [...] In Mexico prison has a colour and failing to recognise this is to deny the racism that continues to rule in our society.*<sup>26</sup>

However, Marthita's testimony also demonstrates how indigenous women resist the triple stigmatisation

that they suffer through sorority with other racialised and marginalised women, and through the construction of alternative identities. Specifically, Marthita describes the figure of the hard-working woman, which has very different associations from that of neoliberal capitalism: for Marthita, the hard-working woman is a figure of mutual support, collectivity, and sorority. In fact, given the 'absent state' — and the consequent lack of education programmes provided by state authorities — women like Marthita gain education, skills, and experience thanks to the support of other hard working-women. This also explains the acerbic criticism Anna directs towards the new authorities and their rules and restrictions that prevent free association. Such rules made life in prison much more difficult by preventing contact between those who had been 'processed' and those who had been 'sentenced', thereby breaking the connection between 'hard-working' women and their 'trainees'. Indeed, while part of the value of this work is social, another is economic: on the inside, an important mechanism of resistance and survival is the creation of ways to make money. That is why many of these hard-working women teach the learners skills like sewing, cooking, embroidery, etc. and either pay them for their work or give them the tools so that they themselves can earn money through the sale of their products. In the absence of state support, these women show that creative sorority of this sort must be mobilised to fill in the gaps.

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22. See footnote 21: Wittner, V. (2016).

23. Quijano, A. (2007). Questioning 'Race'. *Socialism and Democracy*, 21, 45-53.

24. Lugones, M. (2011). Hacia un feminismo descolonial. *Revista La Manzana de la Discordia*, 6, 105-119.

25. Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2013). ¿Del Estado multicultural al Estado penal? Mujeres indígenas presas y criminalización de la pobreza en México. In M. T. Sierra Camacho, R. A. Hernández Castillo, & R. Sieder (Eds.), *Justicias indígenas y estado: Violencias contemporáneas*, 299-338. FLACSO: CIESAS.

26. Hernández Castillo, R.A. (2013). Viajes compartidos: metodologías feministas en espacios penitenciarios. In *Libertad anticipada: Intervención feminista de escritura en espacios penitenciarios*, 55-85. Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, 56.

# Silence and Punish: Forgetting as an Apparatus of Torture. Deconstruction, Solidarity, and Popular Education as Modes of Resistance

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**The following is a collaboration between Nicolás, an imprisoned student and teacher from the Argentinian educational collective Cuenteros, Verseros y Poetas [Storytellers, Tale-tellers and Poets], and Oliver, Joey, and Lucy, three British scholars who work in European universities and research topics related to imprisonment in Latin America. It is the result of solidarity work between Argentine lawyer Alberto Sarlo, cartonera (cardboard book) publishers from Mexico and Brazil, and academics at British universities. Sarlo is an activist who founded Cuenteros, Verseros y Poetas, which has run philosophy, literature, and boxing classes in Unit 23 of Florencio Varela Prison in Buenos Aires Province since 2010.**

Our approach draws on Sarlo's critical reflections on the paternalistic fallacy of 'giving' imprisoned people a voice when this voice already exists.<sup>1</sup> We construct a dialogue between distinct critical perspectives on imprisonment, a dialogue marked by our starkly different positionalities and logistical challenges of communication. We build on the conviction that reflexive, collaborative knowledge production between incarcerated and non-incarcerated people can help understand imprisonment as a structural phenomenon that harms, and is resisted by, people both inside and outside prison.

When initially invited to collaborate on this article, we envisioned a standard impersonal piece. On reading

Nicolás' early drafts, however, we realised that his writing had a power and personality that we did not want to dilute with academic norms. Rather than 'giving' Nico a voice, the main task for the research team was to make sure that his message is clear for readers who are unfamiliar with the context in which he writes. This work of contextualisation is informed both by academic literature and our own experiences in the United Kingdom, Argentina, and Mexico, among other countries, as educators, researchers, and, inevitably, privileged prison 'spectators' or 'tourists'.<sup>2</sup>

Nicolás' personal testimony serves as a vehicle through which to make broader commentary on the 'politics' of 'common' mass incarceration, power dynamics in prison, and modes of solidarity and resistance that counteract the widespread 'forgetting' about people inside prison. In translating his reflections on these wide-ranging topics, we have endeavoured to convey the particular intensity of the high-register, philosophically-inflected language that he mixes with visceral, humorous, and occasionally violent terms rooted in the *jerga tumbera* (prison slang) spoken by imprisoned people in their everyday lives.

The overriding relationship between imprisoned and non-imprisoned people in Argentina is defined by hostility felt by the latter towards the former. The general intensification of this animosity over the past thirty years has been discussed by Argentine criminologist Máximo Sozzo in terms of penal or punitive populism.<sup>3</sup> The concept of penal populism was

1. Sarlo, A. (2021). *Espectros del pabellón*. Edición Cartoneros.

2. See Wilson-Nunn, O. (2022). Pedagogy Behind and Beyond Bars: Critical Perspectives on Prison Education in Contemporary Documentary Film from Argentina. *Latin American Research Review*, 57(4), 903–921; Whitfield, J. (2016). Other neoliberal penalties: Marching Powder and prison tourism in La Paz. *Theoretical Criminology*, 20(3), 358–375; Bell, L., Flynn, A., O'Hare, P. (2022). *Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America*. University of Texas Press.

3. Sozzo, M (2009). 'Populismo punitivo, proyecto normalizador y prisión-depósito en Argentina', *Sistema Penal & Violência*, 1.1, pp. 33–65. And (2016). 'Postneoliberalismo y política penal en la Argentina (2003–2014)', in *Postneoliberalismo y penalidad en América del Sur*, edited by Máximo Sozzo, pp. 189–283. CLACSO.

first developed by Anthony Bottoms to describe a process whereby politicians manipulate punitive discourses about crime and punishment for electoral advantage.<sup>4</sup> People in prison are typically constructed as irredeemably evil, in stark contrast to the supposedly honest and hardworking nature of 'the people'. At the core of these divisions are class and race, with imprisoned people in Argentina often referred to pejoratively as 'negros de mierda' (fucking low-lives). In this context, 'negro' is used in a pejorative way that, while racist, does not map neatly onto racism as it is typically conceived of in English-speaking countries, referring instead to a complex overlapping of lower socio-economic status and often non-white skin colour.

Sozzo notes that binary oppositions based on criminality, 'respectability', class, and race in Argentina are produced both 'from above' and 'from below'.<sup>5</sup> Supplementing Bottoms' focus on the discourse of politicians, Sozzo highlights that calls for hardline penal policies have also come from civil society, often in the aftermath of high-profile, intensely-mediatised crimes. In this vein, a crucial tension that runs throughout Nicolás's writing is the coexistence of hatred and forgetting, hypervisibility and invisibilisation, state violence and societal violence. His account undermines reductive discourses of crime and imprisonment that exacerbate feelings of anger and animosity at moments of acute violence and 'crisis' while obscuring the structural inequalities and unsafe material conditions that might elicit empathy.

The scarcity of empathy for people in prison and the common desire for their basic rights to be violated are particularly striking in a country that has often been at the international vanguard of human rights movements following the systematic state terrorism carried out during the country's last civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983). The motto 'Memoria, verdad y justicia' (Memory, truth, and justice) has been the lynchpin of much human rights activism in recent decades, leading not only to increased awareness of the

estimated 30,000 people who were killed or disappeared by the state but also to the rediscovery of identity for people who, as children, were given to other families after their biological parents were killed or disappeared. The push for the memory of 'political' prisoners and disappeared people during dictatorship is matched by the forgetting of supposedly 'common' prisoners in contemporary Argentina. Nicolás' writing attests to the fact that 'common' imprisonment never exists in a political vacuum but operates within social, economic, and political systems and inequalities that trouble binary distinctions between the conditions of dictatorship and democracy.

## The push for the memory of 'political' prisoners and disappeared people during dictatorship is matched by the forgetting of supposedly 'common' prisoners in contemporary Argentina.

*Cuenteros, Verseros y Poetas* use writing to combat such dichotomous divisions that often structure both political debate and academic studies that exclusively prioritise 'political' imprisonment as the locus of prison-based resistance.<sup>6</sup> Their work is premised on the potential for language to shape reality. As Sarlo writes, 'I will use the term 'torture centre' to refer to the prisons because the battle must begin first in language, if it hopes to be materially effective'.<sup>7</sup> Following Nicolás, the group has developed 'cultural and intellectual weapons [...] as the only way to carry out a sustained, long-term resistance against social amnesia and the hegemony of class power. And these weapons work to transform, to create an oasis that

seeks, by its very nature, to proliferate'. Nicolás' words that follow form part of this project, the 'epic idea of generating and transmitting culture' as a means of resisting systematic forgetting.

### Nicolás' testimony

'Why is it that there is something rather than nothing? This question, which troubles us because it is the question of being, because it is the question of nothingness, lies, for man, in forgetting about it. In order to forget about this question, man must

4. Bottoms, A. (1995). 'The Philosophy and Politics of Punishment and Sentencing'. In C. Clarkson & R. Morgan (Eds.), *The Politics of Sentencing Reform*. Oxford UP.

5. See footnote 3.

6. See Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987), in which the analysis of prison writing is centred on the works of political prisoners whose resistance is associated with causes that are internationally recognised by the liberal consensus, such as anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa.

7. See footnote 1.

dominate other things, conquer them and subjugate them and even reduce other men to things, to objectify and dominate them.’<sup>8</sup>

Here, I offer a first-person account of how forgetting is used as an apparatus of torture that begins at the moment of our arrest and gets worse in the ‘big house’. This would not happen if it were not for a punitive state that has been embraced by a large part of our society as the only suitable response to those who are presumed to have broken the law.

To speak about forgetting calls into question an issue that makes people feel uncomfortable because it is a common-sense mechanism in the lives of everyday citizens, one that encourages people to stop caring about crime once the state intervenes. ‘Punishment is the remit of the courts’. Once we uncritically accept this idea, people stop caring about what goes on to happen to people who have been accused. This paves the way for impunity and corruption.

To varying degrees, everyone is complicit in this. ‘They must have done something, there’s a reason they’re there, let them rot in prison’. People create and perpetuate these ideas tirelessly as the only possible explanation for the way things are, making full use of a variety of media platforms. Yet they never question the circumstances that trigger such criminal activity, nor the role of law enforcement, who, empowered by collective disinterest, use increasing levels of violence and enjoy increasing levels of power. Forgetting makes torture possible and more violent, detached from the multiple, structural perspectives that need to be considered in order to tackle this topic.

### ***Crossing Between Worlds***

I had managed to evade the law for over two years. Usually, money would settle everything in the first few hours with the police, but not this time. Too many witnesses. I was caught with my hands in the air, gesturing to them to cease fire. They were shooting and just a few metres away a crowd of kids was coming out of a primary school. I was cornered and now unarmed, so I thought it best to cooperate. Once I was handcuffed and on the ground, they kicked me all over. Their boots buried in between my ribs, they tried to stop me from protecting myself by stamping on my face. That was just the start. When, at last, they threw me into an empty cell and closed the porthole, I collapsed, too weak to stay standing. The merciless cold

of the concrete pierced right through my back and I slumped into a dirty corner of the most secluded dungeon in the building. In this place where the offenders were waiting, everyone was guilty until proven otherwise. Punishment in these places abides by no rules.

The next morning was a long time coming. I saw the shadows of two men, clearly in a hurry: ‘Up! Come on! Up, up, up!’, they barked. ‘Against the wall, hands behind you!’. They crushed my hands in handcuffs that they tightened forcefully, waiting to hear me squirm. The day before, I could make sense of their adrenaline-fuelled anger after a lengthy chase; but violence became a habit throughout my stay. The guards would use the same tone whenever they spoke to the prisoners. With time, I came to understand this ‘punitivism’ and its wide-reaching effects. Those who dare to react in more thoughtful ways are condemned to never-ending persecution.

After a few days, I was sent off to await my trial in Ezeiza federal prison complex. It was the first time that I had been inside a prison and only a few months had passed since my eighteenth birthday. Eighteen brings with it unyielding responsibilities, duties, and demands that, whether we understand them or not, are imposed on us. And this is what I did, clinging faithfully onto the lessons that a lifetime of poverty had taught me.

The entrance of the prison complex looked like the border between two countries at war. Giant spotlights on top of buildings set against the background of the dark night’s sky and silhouettes of uniformed, camouflaged, and armed officers. Dogs, barriers, inspection points. Everything came together to create a world that was drastically different from the one that I had previously taken for granted.

What goes unseen and unheard gets forgotten. That’s why those walls are so high. They build spaces for mass incarceration in isolated locations, miles away from city centres. You might think that they were built like this to stop inmates from escaping. In reality, it is so that nobody can see us, so that nobody listens to us. If they did, that grand fortress of lies that they call democracy would come tumbling down.

### ***Bodily and Symbolic Violence***

‘Hands behind you, head down, let’s go, run!’, said the first person waiting in line for me to run the gauntlet that ran from the truck to those monumental

In this place where  
the offenders were  
waiting, everyone  
was guilty until  
proven otherwise.  
Punishment in these  
places abides by  
no rules.

8. Feinmann, J. (2013). *La filosofía y el barro de la historia*. Planeta.

cell blocks, thirty or forty metres wide, where people were left to fend for themselves.

All of a sudden, the first well-rehearsed blow took me by surprise behind my ear. I immediately forgot everything. Next, a blow to the head, another to the back, and another to the ribs. The last people kicked our ankles, willing to see us fall over. I had given up trying to stop them, all I wanted was to reach the end. With this initial ordeal coming to a close, I instinctively covered my temples with my hands. 'Go on then! Defend yourself! Defend yourself!' they mocked churlishly, looking for unprotected parts of my body to pound down. Trying to defend myself only made things worse. Two of them then lifted me up and twisted my arms behind my back. A few hours later, I ended up in an individual cell and, when the huge metal door closed behind me, I felt inexplicably safe.

On the wing, I looked up to a horde of helmets, shields, batons, and faces. They came in beating their shields with their batons like medieval knights. The sound of the whistles marked the beginning of the search. After a few minutes, all of us on the wing were crammed into a corner of the tiny inner courtyard. The shields were rammed into us from all directions in synchronised response to the superior's call to 'crush them'. And so they did, over and over again. The air between us started to disappear.

A whack on the back was another sign to turn around and strip as quickly as possible. Body search. When my turn came, I received one standard blow and then a real sucker punch.

'First name, last name, and cell number'. Whack. They were in a hurry, I tried to comply but I could only let out a weak, incoherent stutter, which annoyed them even more. They realised that continuing to hit me was not getting anywhere, so they had to leave me to one side and wait for me to get my breath back. One by one, they made their way through the pile of guys, sending them to another corner but now entirely naked and piled on top of each other. These people would still maintain the line of social reintegration, no matter how little they believed in it. When I got to my cell once the search — or, rather, beating — was over, all I could do was curl up in the foetal position on the metal sheet that served as a bed. With nothing left to do, I fell asleep.

This was no accident. The prison system takes zealous care to grind down the energy of the few people who support us, the few who still remember us as human beings. People are forced to travel hundreds

of kilometres with items that are crucial for the survival of prisoners yet are never provided by the failing infrastructure of the institution. The endless, unannounced transfers that we might be subject to on any given day to any one of the thirty-five federal prisons across the country's thirteen provinces or any one of the fifty-eight provincial prisons scattered across Buenos Aires province represent another uncertainty for families. Following us becomes an impossible task. After just a few years or, perhaps more accurately, a few months, the human body just cannot take it any longer.

Visitors are subject to extreme humiliation at the hands of prison officers. The officers break lots of the items that visitors bring and refuse to let in lots of others for supposed security reasons. They are left to stand completely naked on icy concrete, unable to say anything about their situation out of fear that they

might make things worse or delay their entry. Whether someone is allowed in or, for some small reason, made to go outside and queue all over again is down to the whims of the guards. After a while, you just cannot deal with it all, not physically, not mentally, not economically. Typically, it is women and children that you see in the never-ending queues to get into prison, exposed to the elements, out in the open for hours on end just to hug and

help their loved ones. This is how we become gradually cut off from love and care, just as we have been from material necessities.

The officers break lots of the items that visitors bring and refuse to let in lots of others for supposed security reasons.

### ***Permanent Strangers***

One night, without warning, the guards announced, 'Kid, you're being transferred'. They opened the door and stood waiting for me to gather my belongings. I asked where I was off to, to which one replied, 'Come on, get on with it, get your stuff ready and get out. Why so many questions? You scared?'. Of course I was scared, but I did not say so because that is what they wanted.

The sudden transfers that come without any logical explanation, offering little hope of better surroundings, transform people into permanent strangers. Wherever they are, always thinking about leaving, in a constant state of insecurity. Cherishing anything that you have around you becomes pointless; anything and everything is a potential weapon to defend yourself. You think about freedom all the time but more of your attention is taken up trying to work

out where the next blows will come from, what the intentions of the new people around you are, and how to defend yourself, even if it is not always possible, especially when the people who pounce are those you least expect.

I arrived at the admission cells at Devoto prison at 3am. It was a cold, winter morning, so as soon as I got to the wing, I automatically went over to the fire of a camping stove. It had been a long time since I had seen or felt any kind of heating. They gave me some powdered milk and, as I was keenly mixing it with water, I started to greet and take stock of the people around me. Some were surprised by my behaviour; you would expect a new arrival to be more concerned about first impressions and formalities. But honestly, I was hungrier than I was interested in socialising. The information that I had heard about the place was fifty-fifty good and bad. I, like any other prisoner, had to know in advance who and where the people setting the rules on the wing were so as not to fall into the trap of arriving as a complete stranger. Nobody would risk helping a stranger.

### ***'Prisons shall be healthy and clean'***

I was on my way to the second floor of Cell Block 7. Hot shower, food and a phone to speak to my family, who I hadn't heard from in a long time. I hadn't had the best of starts, but at last a respite would come in the midst of so much tension. So I thought. When I got close, I saw four guys carrying a freshly stabbed man on a blanket. The wounded man made no sound, no complaints, he just bled with his arms bunched up inside the blanket. Drops of blood fell from the blanket, creating a line of small reddish flowers on the ground. I stood there paralyzed, staring at the bleeding sack until I lost sight of them as they turned down the hallway. The guards commented that he was from Block 7.

I could hardly walk any further. My belongings now weighed twice as much. I sighed heavily and moved on, what else could I do? I started the ascent with my stuff on my back up the stairs to the second floor. Unpainted, dark, covered in grease and fresh blood. In the previous prison there had been individual cells; here, there were collective blocks. Eighty people in a rectangle; kitchens, bathrooms and showers shared for every waking and sleeping moment. Anger, sadness, envy, hallucinations, nightmares, separations, and family deaths. We went from maddening silences to total chaos every day. I was entering another world,

one incapable of affording people the time, space, or calm needed to achieve the personal development that the words of the law demand: '...prisons shall be healthy and clean for the reintegration of prisoners and not for punishment' (Article 18 of our constitution). Of course, this situation is no accident. It is a strategy.

### ***Hierarchy and Protection***

The guard responsible for the 7th floor appeared with a notebook and pen, asking me for personal information. When he finished, and for no other reason than to play at being one of the guys with a newbie, he said: 'Here's your mattress, your bed is number 52 and the guys will explain to you what you've got to do.' I did not know much about prison, but it was clear that I could not let this pass. On this side of the bars, we managed our own lives, he had no business doing this. An officer could not give me an order on how to live or what to do inside the cellblock and I could not just accept it. People remember all your words and actions, ready to discredit you or break your self-esteem, in case you become a rival. Or they might be used immediately so that you never become an enemy with the right to fight. I didn't want any of that to happen, so I exploded with fury:

'You stick to opening the lock. Not you or anyone else is going to tell me what I have to do or how I am supposed to live, that's why I became a crook!' I exclaimed. He didn't answer, he just opened the lock and a guy who was much taller than me with curly hair rescued my stuff and dragged it to his bed. It was Big Ariel, who had been in prison for a long time:

'Look, Nico, I'm not usually one to welcome someone I don't know, but you were right in what you said to that screw. They always want to play smart, waiting for a reaction, but if you hit one, all of them will hit you. That's how they handle things. There's only a few of us in our crew but we all fight, so here you'll get your bed and your own little shank. You go ahead,' he said to end the welcome. That was the first time I had my own knife in prison. It represented a chance to survive.

'Hey, but is it all cool with the people around here or is it as bad as everywhere else?' I responded innocently. I asked mainly because I was surprised that this was the first thing he was telling me. Many years later, the knife alone would have been enough to get my gratitude.

The words of the law demand:  
'...prisons shall be healthy and clean for the reintegration of prisoners and not for punishment'

'Oh sure, don't worry, we're cool here, the best, but sometimes shit goes down and we can't drop our guard.'

Before he stopped speaking, I saw a plastic chair fly and explode into pieces against the bars. One of our guys ran by, looking among his things for a metal rod that he had attached to the end of a stick, ready for anything. That night we all fought, crew against crew. When it was my turn, something became very clear: I had no idea how to fight. All that I could think to do was to imitate the moves that I had just seen others making. Suddenly, my opponent's first swing went for the centre of my stomach. A jump backwards kept me alive. The terror of dying paralysed me once again, so I dodged stabs almost instinctively. I didn't even want to try to hurt my opponent, only to dodge when the blade passed close and to cover the attacks from a distance with the harpoon.

An hour later the guards came in, hitting and humiliating us as usual. That night I understood the real value of being welcomed and given a knife. Otherwise, they would have hurt me and stolen everything. That was the beginning of many long years in prison. Less than two months later I was holding towels on two near fatal wounds that Big Ariel suffered. The fights didn't need big motives, in fact the causes were always absurd. Taking someone else's kettle off the flame, using someone else's washing line, half an onion, things that in themselves had no rational explanation could unleash the worst filipinos, as we call the all-against-all fights. I started taking cocaine, pills of all kinds and whatever it took to get me out of that unbearable reality. More than once I ended up in hospital.

To enter prison is to leave your life in the hands of fate, to enter a place where poverty, illiteracy and violence are exacerbated and reproduced. To have been a prisoner in Argentina leaves you branded with a mark that is impossible to forget for both your community and the working world that you are supposed to enter back into. In these shadowy places, no one looks and nothing is seen. If something is shown to the world, it is always made bizarre, alien, and morbid. Here, the law is but a poem.

### **Unattainable Duties**

On the outside, my life did not improve, quite the contrary. Things were not much different from the years before my conviction, so it didn't take long for me to repeat history and for history to repeat itself in me.

I was taught at school and at home about good and evil, about how a man should become honest, worthy, and respectable — criteria based on the opinions or approval of others. But nothing was said about the real costs, what it costs to keep up the

appearance of these traits, let alone embody and sustain them. For those who are deprived of dreaming in the long term, all you can do is deal with each day as it comes and plan the next one when it arrives. But the rewards were there for those who did everything to the letter. School grades symbolised the pillars for success, those beacons that would light the way to happiness. They offered promise but were sustained by theories that were far beyond the reach of the working class in those marginal neighbourhoods. It didn't add up but it was drilled into us — it still is. The images and symbols of meritocracy were everywhere. They were revered. Seemingly close and attainable. In my confusion, I learned to steal for fear of being left behind and ignored, without food and without a home. Fear of not becoming 'someone in life', of passing through the world without seeing it. Stealing was my education, the one with better offers and concrete solutions for the here and now where *negros* live, not for some uncertain future.

Due to my social class, the idea of 'duty' kept me as a debtor rather than acting as any kind of ethical guide. We came into the world with debts, no guarantees, not even the basic ones. Debts that we will never get rid of — 'case closed.' Any attempt to swerve away from such a fate, by the shortest path, let's say, would lead to loneliness, jail, and death, in the order that destiny prefers. The real storms had not yet appeared, but immediate material needs had. My patriarchal upbringing insisted on being 'the man of the house', the one who did anything necessary to help with the family finances, to take care of my sisters and my old lady. Innocence takes everything literally. When you die of abandonment so many times and you understand the bottom line, you can see the constant that repeats itself, the particular places where the hunt takes place, which people pay for their crimes with jail, which ones do not and why. There are broader networks that escape glassy-eyed citizens and they do so very efficiently.

### **State Policy and Popular Organisation**

A few weeks after being sentenced again following a plea bargain, I was transferred to Unit 23, where I am today. I write from my position as a member of the cartonera publisher Cuenteros Verseros y Poetas, which operates in Cell Block number 4 of a forgotten prison in Buenos Aires. The story begins with a Boca fan from the city of La Plata, who had the misfortune of seeing prisons from the inside, but chose not to forget, he could not. As part of his law degree at the end of the 1990s, Alberto Sarlo visited Penitentiary Unit No.1 in Olmos, one of Argentina's worst prisons. There, his whole vision of reality would crumble and his drive to reveal what was happening in this ignored and

forgotten world would be born. A normal guy who simply turned his eyes and ears away from the worldview that privilege had taught him and entered and then re-entered these buildings.

Sharing mates (Argentine tea-like drink), chatting about the conditions that we guys faced every day, talking about books, football, dreams, history, philosophy and the fate we had to go through. These were the real spaces of the work, where we met with joy and sadness. Companionship generated a real means of enduring oppression. We were all learning to write, read, and edit — ways to express ourselves and be heard. For a small group of people trapped in a world where they don't belong and nobody wants them alive, this could become the moment to learn to perceive ourselves as human beings, to not go on as the blinded and restricted people that we had been.

It saddens us like never before when we see and experience the state policies imposed on people of our social class, our families, friends, and neighbours, and even more so with what the leaders propose for those of us who live in prison. To understand the consequences of this state apparatus, it is important to understand prison life, its internal system of order, what keeps its gears grinding, and the abyss between the law, judicial resolutions, and reality for human beings in prison. Prisons are mostly divided into maximum, medium, and minimum security sections. In reality, the terms refer to the different levels of self-management, that is greater or lesser intervention by the penitentiary service. They also determine the number of hours of confinement per day inside the cells, designed to hold two thirds of the people who occupy them today.

According to the principle of 'individualised treatment' (which has never been individualised at all), incarcerated people are supposed to be able to progressively advance towards obtaining the benefits and rights that the law dictates as rewards for their 're-socialisation'. They must demonstrate their voluntary evolution by obtaining certificates from vocational training courses, basic education, or university studies. As they complete these requirements, they may be re-housed in blocks and/or units with a lower security level. According to the laws around sentencing, progression, and parole, the length of the sentence should be determined by these factors. But there is a

problem. There is a long list of requirements demanded of prisoners, but the system makes it impossible for most people to fulfil them. They are only available to the highest bidders.

At this point, the concepts of solidarity, community and popular education take over. They arise from the exhaustion of waiting for the same justice system that controls and imprisons us to recognize our rights. Cultural and intellectual weapons emerge as the only way to carry out sustained, long-term resistance against social amnesia and the hegemony of class power. And these weapons work to transform, to create an oasis that seeks, by its very nature, to proliferate.

### ***Deconstruction and Resistance***

The first thing that had caught my attention about Cell Block 4 was the boxing school. It sounded interesting to practise a discipline, especially one that was actually possible within the space we live. In places where simply coexisting generates endless fights — with knives, sharpened objects or anything that might do damage — they were teaching people to fight as a discipline. When I eventually entered, I was met with a surprise. The boxing school was but one of many parts of the project, which has now been running for more than twelve years and almost seven without any cases of violence.

With no exceptions, the main requirements to be part of this group are to not take pills (sedatives or antidepressants) or possess knives (or sharpened metal shanks). If these conditions are not met, you must leave, but with all your belongings and without being harmed. This way of resolving disagreements is exceptional. Usually, if you do not abide by the rules or try to change them, you are lynched or stabbed and thrown out without your belongings. I didn't quite understand what I saw when I first entered. Mistrusting our first impressions is a tool that usually keeps us alive in prison.

But there, in that high-risk cell block in a maximum-security prison, they were discussing whether essence precedes existence or vice versa, whether they agreed with David Hume's proposals about empirical knowledge or with Idealist Cartesian concepts, or with Hegelian dialectics and Historical Materialism. Then I saw another group of people who, between sips of maté, were teaching a rather grey-

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haired guy to read, how to pronounce syllable by syllable, laughing at his failed attempts, but in total solidarity and empathy. Arriving at a place with these characteristics, having just nearly died in hospital from a stab wound to my neck, made me doubt the truth of its existence. How was such a place possible? Going to sleep without being conscious that someone wanted to take your belongings, even just taking a bath without taking a hidden knife. Such things have an incalculable value, unknown to those who have not lived through such an experience. They asked me if I had eaten, if I had hygiene items or something to cover me from the cold. Nobody was calculating how much they would make by selling my sneakers or my jacket, or all my belongings together. It was fantastic, literally the stuff of fantasy.

As the days passed, the intensity of the debates and the discovery of the meaning of words such as subjectivity, alienation, community, deconstruction, holocausts, modern warfare, structures, ideologies, capitalism, liberalism, resistance, and power relations encouraged me to participate actively in the task of transmitting knowledge. Due to the exploitation to which my parents were subjected as they raised and educated me in a marginal, extremely hostile, and neglected neighbourhood, I only attended primary school. It had a diverse but disordered curriculum, the content was absurd and fragmentary, typical of state schools in those kinds of places. The fact that I knew how to read and write relatively well compared to my comrades was not saying much, as most people inside cannot at all. In jail there are only forgotten guys from forgotten neighbourhoods. I asked myself if it wasn't too much of a coincidence that bad people only come from these places, at least according to the news, the enemies of history... I wondered if it was only the poor who became violent addicted thieves who transgressed society's norms. Poverty was the common denominator, otherwise, people from all social classes would be rubbing shoulders in prisons, but they don't.

In 2016, I made my limited faculties known to those leading the project and I joined the coordination team. Of course, trying to build a space like this in a place where so many intensities converge, with people conditioned by a very specific way of living life in prison, will always involve some unwanted tensions. That is where the work of deconstruction (a concept developed by Jacques Derrida) begins for the coordinators. Having the right temperament and enough intellectual and emotional maturity to understand that changes and processes in people require time, energy and, above all, mutual will is the main thing you need to maintain internal balance. What distinguishes us from other educational spaces is our empathy and solidarity. We know which situations are the ones that worry the comrades, when the feeling

of impotence in the face of systematic torture strikes, when the anguish in response to reprisals against family members arises, and when the distress of discouraging bureaucratic requirements that are impossible to achieve surfaces. We go into the cells when people get sick and collect medicines, and nobody goes without food either.

We explain that we are not looking for the best readers, writers, or boxers in the world, but for people to show camaraderie in cohabitation and respect for everyone's effort in creating this space. In return, they will develop a wide array of tools that will be vital both for coping with life inside these torture centres and for facing reality on the outside in different ways. The recommended readings vary according to different levels of comprehension and literacy and are presented in group meetings where everyone explains their own interpretations. In this way we can more carefully tailor our work, both individually and collectively. First letters, then syllables, then words, and finally sentences. That's how we ensure that no one is left out of learning about culture and the art of expressing themselves.

The project is completely self-managed. As a collective, we discuss the topics that will be addressed, form ideological opinions based on real data, and even consider how to manage leisure time so that it can take place as harmoniously and as respectfully of each other's timetables, noises, spaces and habits as possible. We teach literacy inside and outside the cell block, we offer classes in music, technical drawing and painting, muralism, grammar, silk-screen printing and boxing; we also formed a rock band called The Warsaw Ghetto and a theatre group that has already participated in film festivals with short films. Currently each member chooses what artistic expression he wishes to experience or develop. In philosophy and history classes or in sessions where a classmate prepares a specific topic that he wants to share with the group, as well as those classes where we debate and analyse various topics with Alberto, we all attend without exception. On days when cartonera books are published, we all work together. We have written, corrected, edited, published, and donated more than thirty-two thousand books of different literary genres to playgroups and community centres in the most precarious sectors of the provinces.

We resist being forgotten through a vibrant project with the epic idea of transmitting and generating culture, expressing the voices of the nobodies through art and awakening in people ideas that go beyond the material world and their personal situation of confinement. We philosophise, publish books, and develop skills that we didn't even know we could have, but above all we create community. We rethink the concept of resistance to wrestle it away from future plans of individual merit or progression and more about the development of a critical awareness of ourselves

and the world around us. We emphasise the need to make this project visible so that it cannot be easily dismantled. Since it is not a government organisation, its existence depends strongly on this visibility. We are not trying to find or sell a checklist of how things should be done, to install an ideal type of morality or a safe path to follow. Each life and each hell is unique and non-transferable, we can only invite you to reconsider the possible alternatives, like this one that exists and resists through Cuenteros Verseros y Poetas, building from our individualities to more general, communal struggles.

## Conclusion

Where Nicolás speaks of forgetting (*olvido*) as a mechanism of torture, he is describing the fact that imprisonment is a mechanism of control characterised by systematic abandonment.<sup>9</sup> The politics of abandonment by state authorities takes place to some degree across the region of Latin America. Levels of state intervention and presence vary hugely across prisons, while new regimes and governments mean that power and conditions are constantly shifting. Overall, however, our research and experiences lend support to and further our understanding of the findings of the Peruvian scholar José Luís Pérez Guadalupe. In his comparative study of Argentina, Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil, Pérez Guadalupe concludes that although the state and prison authorities have huge power, it is prisoners themselves who play the 'primary role in the social construction of carceral reality'.<sup>10</sup> Joey's readings of prisoner writings from Latin America led him to write that the state is often arbitrarily absent, felt in the form of an extorting guard or a distributor of vindictive or even random acts of violence.<sup>11</sup> In a comparable vein, David Skarbek popularised the term 'self-governance' to describe situations in which the state has a nominally minimal impact on the organisation of prison life.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, Sacha Darke, writing on Brazil, has called this phenomenon 'inmate governance' to refer more specifically to the hierarchical relationships among prisoners, where some take on 'governing' responsibilities over others.<sup>13</sup> More recently, scholars of Latin American prisons have developed the term 'co-governance' to push against the idea of an entirely 'absent' neoliberal state, while others prefer 'contested

governance' to capture the conflictive nature of this relationship.<sup>14</sup>

Nicolás' descriptions of his own experience cuts across the categories of self-governance and contested governance, demonstrating the difficulty of defining and differentiating mechanisms of power. Even within a single prison, he outlines markedly varied modes of governance in different spaces and at different times. The exceptional nature of the situation in which he now writes in Cell Block 4 cannot be over-emphasised. Not for the degree of prisoner control per se but rather because of the nature of the organisation of which he is part. As he explains, most cell blocks are ruled either by gangs operating according to a dog-eat-dog logic of strength and violence, or by evangelical Christian groups. The community that Nicolás now belongs to, by contrast, defines itself as a community in resistance.

Nicolás' writing helps us to push against some of the critiques levelled at the term 'resistance' within some areas of Latin American Studies. Political rhetoric of resistance has sometimes been described as being in 'crisis'.<sup>15</sup> It has also been taken to refer to individual acts of resistance, often implying fleeting moments of protest without a worked-out political programme.<sup>16</sup> The men of Pabellón 4 have formed a community that lives in resistance in a manner that is closer to how the term is used by groups such as the Zapatistas in Mexico. There, to 'live in resistance' means to refuse the imposed political logics of capital and the Mexican state and to carve out autonomous communities that determine, as much as is possible, the conditions of their own realities. In the case of Cell Block 4, these conditions are determined not by the hierarchical logics of a coercive and neglectful state, predatory gangs, or religious fundamentalism but by free association, collective decision making, and mutual aid. Resistance here is not fleeting, futile or non-programmatic. It is a mode of sustaining survival and recovering dignity. The co-creation of this article — and the moral, symbolic, and material solidarity that its creation has afforded Nicolás — aims to play a small role within these processes.

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# Neurodivergence, specifically ADHD, in prison – a conversation

*Lucy is one of the co-founders of EPIC, an engagement and research organisation, working predominantly in health and justice. James works in a therapeutic capacity to support healing in others and has personal lived experience of the criminal justice system. 'James' is the chosen pseudonym of the author.*

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**While the term 'neurodivergence' is increasingly heard in discussions about the prison population, you are not alone if it feels unfamiliar. A 2021 report found that 86 per cent of the study's prisoner sample were also unclear about its meaning.<sup>1</sup> The term was first introduced in a doctoral thesis by Judy Singer, in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Singer offered a different lens through which to view the variability of the human nervous system. She argued that the world is a neurodiverse place, since no two individuals are exactly alike in the way they think.**

As such, the concept of neurodiversity recognises a broad spectrum of neurological experiences. Singer's work initiated a movement aimed at reducing stigma around what she referred to as 'neurominorities'. These may include conditions such as:

- ❑ Attention Deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD)
- ❑ Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)
- ❑ Dyslexia
- ❑ Dyscalculia
- ❑ Learning Disability
- ❑ Traumatic brain injury

Encouragingly, the use of the term has facilitated a shift away from deficit-focused language like 'disorder' towards a more empowering framework, acknowledging the unique skills and perspectives of individuals with a neurodivergent diagnosis. However, the recent surge in interest around neurodiversity has also led to some misunderstandings of Singer's original concepts. While she intended to broaden the understanding of neurological differences as a natural and valuable aspect of human variation, this concept has often been narrowed down or oversimplified.

For instance, neurodiversity is frequently equated solely with autism, neglecting its application to a wide range of neurological differences. Additionally, there is a tendency to either overlook the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals or to overgeneralise their experiences and needs, deviating from Singer's original nuanced perspective. Furthermore, the longstanding view of neurodivergence as a disorder remains challenging to overcome, as it is deeply ingrained in both medical perspectives and societal attitudes. This traditional viewpoint often emphasises deficits and pathologies, rather than the acceptance of neurological differences as natural variations instead of abnormalities.

## Neurodivergence in the prison system

Research tells us that all neurominorities are more heavily represented in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) including autism, traumatic brain injury and learning difficulties. When looking for estimates of these conditions within the prison estate, there is considerable variation between studies, and between conditions. Some examples are:

- ❑ A 2018 UK based study found the percentage of cases of ASD and learning disability in prison were 9 per cent and 9 per cent respectively, suspected to be higher than the general population.<sup>3</sup>
- ❑ 50 per cent of the prison population were found to be dyslexic, compared with 10 per cent of the general population.<sup>4</sup>
- ❑ Acquired Brain injury was found to be present in 24.7 per cent of prisoners,<sup>5</sup> rising to 64 per cent in a women's prison.<sup>6</sup>

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Looking at the whole picture, the recent 2021 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection report into neurodiversity stated that *'half of those entering prison could reasonably be expected to have some form of neurodivergent condition which impacts their ability to engage.'*<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, this represents a significant number of people for whom this paper is relevant. Importantly, the inspection report also highlighted how neurodiversity is often associated with the term *'difficult'* in terms of prisoner presentation and management, which alludes to the fact neurodivergent people can experience challenges and barriers on their journey through custody. Indeed, we (and others) recognise that while understanding neurodivergence can feel difficult to some operational staff, the prison environment and processes can also feel *'difficult'* to navigate when living with a neurodiverse condition. Research has referred to the *'insufficient support, inaccessible processes and intimidating system'* for those with ADHD,<sup>8</sup> and this is the lens through which we look at the system in this paper.

### About this paper and co-authorship

This paper is a collaborative effort among three friends and colleagues, each bringing a unique perspective to the topic.

James is a man with personal experience of a prison sentence and neurodivergent conditions (ADD and Dyslexia) and is, in his own right, a published author. As well as having his own lived experience of imprisonment, he has also worked for many years within the prison system and in a therapeutic setting supporting others.

Lucy met James a decade ago, when they began working on a shared vision to improve outcomes for people in prison. Lucy's experience spans 20 years in the Criminal Justice System, blending practical expertise with academic insight.

Chloe, an emerging researcher with a strong interest in neurodiversity in the prison environment, complements the team. Her role involves providing support to the EPIC team and contributing fresh perspectives to our collective understanding.

Together, we represent a blend of lived experience, professional expertise, and academic enquiry. We are committed to the lived experience movement within criminology, believing that it offers an invaluable

dimension to our understanding. Our learning tells us that listening to lived experience adds depth, emotion, and context; a depth and richness of perspective often missing from theoretical studies. Personal experiences help validate or challenge established theories, offering real-world insights that enhance our comprehension of various aspects of life within the criminal justice context. Yet we often observe lived experience being used in an extractive manner. To better understand co-production, we turn to the ladder of participation as a conceptual framework based on the *'ladder of citizen participation'*.<sup>9</sup> This ladder illustrates the steps towards co-production:

- ❑ **Educating with No-Participation:** Where individuals are informed but have no input.
- ❑ **Consultation:** Seeking input and feedback, but with limited influence on outcomes.
- ❑ **Engagement:** More active involvement in discussions and decisions.
- ❑ **Co-Design:** Collaborative development of solutions or approaches.
- ❑ **Co-Production:** Full partnership where lived experiences are integral to decision-making and implementation processes.

Progressing on this ladder ensures that people with lived experiences are actively involved, based on their unique perspectives and ideas, and are not merely tokenistic figures without the power to influence or affect change. The significance of co-production has been underscored by many, highlighting the unique value and sense of hope and pride it brings—elements rarely seen in traditional approaches.<sup>10</sup> It is especially impactful when individuals with lived experience are valued as equal partners within an organisation.<sup>11</sup> The co-authorship of this paper is a manifestation of this principle.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, we consider the concept of inflated neurodiversity within prisons. Then, we refer to the experience of being neurodivergent in prison. Thirdly, we investigate the necessary steps towards achieving greater neuro-inclusivity. Finally, we provide some concluding thoughts around how prisons might be able to achieve this. Throughout, James' relevant and direct experiences are indented and italicised to emphasise to readers where they are able to engage with lived experience accounts. We have intentionally used plain English throughout, aiming to create and share accessible and understandable insights.

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Due to the length of this paper, we will be focusing on just one neurodivergent condition. Given that one of our co-authors has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder (known as ADD or ADHD), this condition will be our primary focus. However, we anticipate that some of the experiences discussed may be relevant to multiple conditions while acknowledging the significant differences that also exist.

### Prevalence of AD(H)D within prison

In a similar way to the other neurominorities mentioned earlier, research indicates a higher prevalence of ADHD in prison at around 25 per cent,<sup>12</sup> when compared to a prevalence of 2-5 per cent of the UK general population.<sup>13</sup> But what is ADHD, and why might it be prevalent in prison? ADHD is associated with executive functioning deficits, including difficulties in impulse control, planning, organisation, and attention. Impulsivity, a common trait in ADHD, can contribute to impulsive decision-making and risk-taking behaviours.<sup>14</sup>

*'I believe neurodivergence formed part of my journey into the criminal justice system. From childhood, I had been impulsive and hyperactive. And though the hyperactivity was no longer part of my condition as an adult, I still found myself reacting impulsively and taking dangerous risks. I had little regard for authority, I think I also had something called Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) growing up, though it was never diagnosed, but nor was the ADHD or dyslexia.'*

James found he was frequently in trouble at school, and as a consequence, found himself with a disrupted education, challenges at home, social isolation and associated risks; all clearly impacting on his journey into the criminal justice system.

*'I think my condition and the subsequent feeling of being different, led to social*

*isolation early on. I was deemed too naughty and struggled to keep friends. There were some very lonely times, I had been labelled as a troublemaker. I learned to make my own fun. So it wasn't just the neurodivergence that was the issue but the social impact and consequences of an unmanaged, undiagnosed condition.'*

ADHD is associated with executive functioning deficits, including difficulties in impulse control, planning, organisation, and attention.

*'After being expelled from two primary schools, the local authority arranged for a teacher to visit me one hour a day at home. The rest of the time, I was allowed to roam the streets and ended up spending time in video game arcades with other kids who had dropped out of school. That's when I fell in with the wrong crowd. Looking back, I was unhappy in my family, as all they could do was criticise my behaviour. I was looking for somewhere to belong, another family. And I found it in the group of 'friends' who took me in. Before long I was playing the role of Oliver Twist, as an 11-year-old, helping 18-year-olds break into houses. By age 13 I was in court for burglary.'*

In many ways, given the connections highlighted in James' story, it amazes us to think that ADHD has not always been recognised within the prison system. It is arguable that screening should be considered across different points of the CJS, including within courts and police stations, as well as on entry into prison and within the probation service.<sup>15</sup> However, at the current time we know this is not consistent, and that there are many people living in prison who remain undiagnosed, despite exhibiting signs of the condition.

Several factors can complicate a diagnosis, particularly relevant to the prison population, and merit highlighting here. Firstly, ADHD often coexists with other mental health disorders, such as conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and substance use disorders.<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, research has stated that

12. Young, S., & Cocallis, K. (2021). ADHD and offending. *Journal of neural transmission* (Vienna, Austria: 1996), 128(7), 1009–1019.

13. BMJ Best Practice (2023). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in adults. BMJ Publishing Group. <https://bestpractice.bmj.com/topics/en-gb/814>

14. Shoham, R., Sonuga-Barke, E., Aloni, H., Yaniv, I., & Pollak, Y. (2016). ADHD-associated risk taking is linked to exaggerated views of the benefits of positive outcomes. *Scientific reports*, 6, 34833.

15. Takeda. (2022). ADHD in the Criminal Justice System: A case for change. Takeda. [https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda\\_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report_Final.pdf)

16. Martinez-Raga, J. (2019). When ADHD and Substance Use Disorders Coexist. *Attention Magazine*. [https://d393uh8gb46l22.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ATTN\\_Ap2019\\_ADHDSubstanceAbuse.pdf](https://d393uh8gb46l22.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ATTN_Ap2019_ADHDSubstanceAbuse.pdf)

'around 96 per cent of prisoners with ADHD have a comorbidity' and that there is an increased risk of co-occurring psychiatric disorders compared to prisoners without ADHD.<sup>17</sup> These comorbidities can complicate the management of ADHD symptoms and increase the risk of involvement in criminal behaviour.

*'It wasn't until many years later, after I had gone back to university and started using party drugs, that I became addicted to cocaine, which, in hindsight, I believe was self-medication for the ADD. The cocaine was a stimulant, but whilst a lot of people got very excited on it, I found it calmed me down and helped me focus, very much in the way my ADD medication had previously.'*

Further, there have been concerns raised over the overlap between ADHD symptoms and those of complex trauma, particularly childhood trauma. This, it has been argued, can complicate diagnosis and access to appropriate support. This is particularly important in the context of the CJS, where there is a higher prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), or childhood traumas, when compared to the general population. In a study conducted in a Welsh adult male prison,<sup>18</sup> it was found that 84 per cent had experienced at least one ACE compared with a Welsh average of 46 per cent, and nearly half of prisoners (46 per cent) reported they had experienced four or more ACEs, compared to 12 per cent in the wider population.

James reflects on his personal experience of both childhood trauma and receiving an ADHD diagnosis, and feels it is crucial for practitioners to recognise the potential interplay between the two, despite current research being inconclusive.

*'I've thought a lot about the correlation between my childhood trauma and neurodivergence. There's something about*

*feeling 'different' that has contributed to a lack of self-love over the years. I rarely felt safe with others, as I feared I would say something stupid or lash out in anger for whatever reason and be rejected. Much of the therapy I've had since being released from prison has focused on undoing the effects of those traumatic childhood experiences. I think these things have had a cumulative impact on my neurodivergence.'*

As is often the case, the most effective approach seems to be a preventative one. Recognising and supporting neurodivergent conditions early could potentially disrupt any existing link between ADHD and criminal behaviour. Ultimately, most people living with ADHD do not enter the CJS, and the condition is

known for strengths such as creativity and resilience.<sup>19</sup> However, it is understood that community teams are stretched, and waiting times for screening can be lengthy.<sup>20</sup> Without adequate support, there is an increased risk of entering the CJS and as such, it is vital to understand how neurominorities experience custody and to consider how prisons might become more neuro-inclusive environments.

### **Experience of prison with ADHD**

Research indicates that individuals with ADHD may face specific challenges within the prison system. The environment, particularly, is cited as being problematic and since it is unavoidable for prisoners, heightened awareness of the interaction of environment and neurodivergence is beneficial.

*'The impact of ADD in prison was significant for me. For starters, there's the physical environment. My attention was regularly pulled in different directions in such a noisy environment. There are heavy doors slamming, keys jangling, many conversations*

It is vital to understand how neurominorities experience custody and to consider how prisons might become more neuro-inclusive environments.

17. Takeda. (2022). ADHD in the Criminal Justice System: A case for change. Takeda. [https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda\\_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report_Final.pdf)

18. Ford, K., Barton, E., Newbury, A., Hughes, K., Bezecsky, Z., Roderick, J., Bellis, M. (2019). *Understanding the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in a male offender population in Wales: The Prisoner ACE Survey*. Wrexham: Public Health Wales NHS Trust, Bangor University.

19. Crook, T. and McDowall, A. (2023). Paradoxical career strengths and successes of ADHD adults: an evolving narrative, *Journal of Work-Applied Management*.

20. Takeda. (2022). ADHD in the Criminal Justice System: A case for change. Takeda. [https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda\\_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report_Final.pdf)

*happening around you and constant television chatter or music being played as loudly as possible. A houseblock or wing can feel like a cavernous, echoing chamber, full of random sounds.'*

Interestingly, a recent publication explored the 'soundscape' of prison, suggesting the importance of sound to both prisoners and staff, alerting them to potential danger, and evoking certain emotions. They argue that sounds can be associated with poor outcomes for several wellbeing issues and conditions, which includes those with neurodivergent needs.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the noise, the structured and rule-bound nature of the prison environment may lead to challenges for individuals with ADHD. Difficulties in maintaining focus, following instructions, and adhering to schedules may lead to disciplinary issues and the removal of privileges as a result (such as the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme).

*'Another symptom of ADD is forgetting things, which can also be a challenge in prison. You might receive a set of instructions from an officer but if there's a conversation happening over there, and in prison they're happening all around you, you're taking in more information than just what one person is telling you. There's a good chance you'll also forget what was told to you and there might be a consequence, like being disciplined for not following an instruction.'*

Without sufficient support, a significant number of prisoners will continue to face difficulties within the current system unless some form of assistance is provided. In a recent prison consultation,<sup>22</sup> only 15 of the 104 neurodivergent service-users interviewed said they had been offered adjustments around their neurodiversity while in prison. Adjustments included being given single cells, being let out for a walk when they felt overwhelmed or frustrated, having access to the gym to burn energy, access to noise-cancelling headphones, and being given specialist plates that kept

certain foods separate. The report made no reference to the impact of the support, although providing reminders for appointments while on probation was listed as an area of good practice, and one participant said he had improved 'a hell of a lot' since he was supported in his neurodivergence. Concerns persist about the difficulty of accessing support, particularly where awareness of neurodivergence is limited or when prisoners expressing their additional needs are not taken seriously.

*'Trying to explain the symptoms of ADD to someone who doesn't know about it is challenging, all the more so for a prisoner. There's always the thought that they'll think you're just making up excuses for yourself, that somehow you have a choice not to feel or react the way you do. It's common for people not to believe you in prison. Also, by the time you arrive in prison, you've had so many negative experiences as a result of this undiagnosed condition that it can feel hopeless trying to convince someone else of it, if you even know you have it.'*

## The 'soundscape' of prison, suggesting the importance of sound to both prisoners and staff, alerting them to potential danger, and evoking certain emotions.

An interesting Swiss paper,<sup>23</sup> highlights some of the attitudes of prison staff, which include a sense that ADHD is a 'fashionable' but also 'real phenomenon' that people can experience. Some tensions were articulated, which align with the aforementioned view that those with ADHD can be difficult to work with, and more likely to experience sanctions while in jail, including solitary confinement. James spent time reflecting on his experience of isolation, and how this impacted his personal progression.

*'At one point early on in my sentence, I enrolled in a college course. I was given assignments to work on in my cell in the evening. But I was so stressed by the feeling of being locked up that it impacted on my capacity for concentration. In the end I had to drop out of the course because I just couldn't*

21. Herrity, K. (2024). *Sound, Order and Survival in Prison: The Rhythms and Routines of HMP Midtown*. Bristol University Press.

22. User Voice. (2023). 'Not Naughty, Stupid, or Bad': The Voices of Neurodiverse Service Users in the Criminal Justice System.

23. Buadze, A., Friedl, N., Schleifer, R., Young, S., Schneeberger, A., & Liebreiz, M. (2021). Perceptions and Attitudes of Correctional Staff Toward ADHD-A Challenging Disorder in Everyday Prison Life. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 11, 600005.

*do any of the work by myself, all I could manage was to watch TV or play a video game. The combination of my neurodivergence and the stress of being locked up and isolated had such an impact on me that I couldn't process the information I was meant to be studying.'*

We understand individuals with ADHD also encounter distinct challenges after release, during resettlement into the community, and for many of the reasons already stated. Challenges include difficulties in maintaining employment, adhering to probation requirements, and accessing support services. This can also result in heightened reoffending rates.<sup>24</sup>

*'If anyone had told me that coming out of prison would be worse than languishing in custody I would never have believed them. But nothing could have prepared me for it. I felt so hopeless and stressed that it wasn't always easy to stick to my commitments to Probation. I never intended not to follow instructions but there were times when I was late to or forgot an appointment, which was really scary because these people had the power to send me back to prison.'*

Continued efforts to understand the experiences of those with ADHD, along with consistent data collection regarding outcomes, are needed if the system is to better manage the challenges presented and experienced by those with ADHD, and for the effective planning and commissioning of services.

## Looking forwards

Recognising and addressing ADHD in the prison system is crucial. Providing appropriate interventions, such as behavioural therapies and, in some cases, medication, can help manage symptoms and improve functioning. It is also important that every prisoner be granted access to assessments and screening for additional learning needs.<sup>25</sup>

The Prisons Strategy White Paper, published in December 2021,<sup>26</sup> refers to understanding the specific needs of people who are neurodiverse (including those with ADHD), and exploring what is needed to support them while in prison and on release.

There are clear training needs for all staff working in the prison environment. The 2021 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection report,<sup>27</sup> and other research,<sup>28</sup> has highlighted the need for frontline staff across all CJS agencies to gain a deeper understanding of neurodiversity. While not expected to be 'experts', staff should nonetheless be aware of these various conditions, their manifestations, the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals, possible adjustments, and referral pathways for additional support or diagnosis. The value of incorporating insights from neurodivergent

Recognising and addressing ADHD in the prison system is crucial. Providing appropriate interventions, such as behavioural therapies and, in some cases, medication, can help manage symptoms and improve functioning.

individuals into training programs has also been highlighted, stressing the importance of lived experience perspectives in training and awareness initiatives.

*'To me it's a no brainer. Just think of the paradigm shift if all prison staff were taught during their initial training, based on the findings that there are significantly more people with ADD in prison than in the*

24. Young, S., Adamou, M., Bolea, B., Gudjonsson, G., Müller, U., Pitts, M., Thome, J. Asherson, P. (2011). The identification and management of ADHD offenders within the criminal justice system: a consensus statement from the UK Adult ADHD Network and criminal justice agencies. *BMC Psychiatry*, 11, 32.
25. House of Commons Education Committee. (2022). Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity: Government response to the Committee's First Report. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/28707/documents/173902/default/>
26. Ministry of Justice. (2021). *Prisons Strategy White Paper*. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61af18e38fa8f5037e8ccc47/prisons-strategy-white-paper.pdf>
27. Criminal Justice Joint Inspection. (2021). Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System- A review of evidence. <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/cjji/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/07/Neurodiversity-evidence-review-web-2021.pdf>
28. Revolving Doors. (2022). Exploring the links between neurodiversity and the revolving door of crisis and crime. <https://revolving-doors.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Revolving-Doors-neurodiversity-policy-position.pdf>

*general population, that most of the people under their care were likely to be neurodiverse. It would help them better understand these individuals but beyond that it could contribute to lowering cases of violent reactions due to frustration — a win-win for prison staff and prisoners.'*

Positively, there has been some clear progression in improving how neurodiversity is addressed and managed in prison. We have seen the implementation of Neurodiversity Support Managers (NSM), whose are responsible for ensuring the prison knows who neurodivergent, and what support might be available. Neurodiverse wings have also been trialled (for example in HMP Pentonville) and some prisons have even become 'Autism Accredited' (including HMP Parc, HMP Wakefield and HMYOI Feltham). It is our understanding that the NSMs will support prisoners through the screening and diagnosis process while in prison, something that James actively encourages.

*'I think receiving a diagnosis of neurodivergence in prison would go a long way to decreasing rates of recidivism. For years I thought I was stupid, even when my university lecturers told me I could study at Cambridge. I was too impulsive to hold a job or get on with others in the work environment. Selling drugs was something I was good at; I was self-employed. So, to know that I am neurodivergent has been liberating. Turns out I'm not stupid. Even if it doesn't change the condition, knowing that means I can be less hard on myself, more compassionate.'*

These initiatives represent a significant step towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments within prisons. Importantly, they can contribute to a shift in identity for prisoners, which could provide a foundational catalyst for positive change.

*'For someone who has struggled their entire life with feelings of inferiority, to learn there's a name for what you've experienced, a way to begin to cope with it, I think could make all the difference.'*

However, it is important to acknowledge the 'cliff edge' faced by prison leavers in terms of continuity of care in the community, and that connections are forged with community teams as prisoners approach release.

## Concluding thoughts

As a team we were struck by how many of James' reflections on his ADHD focused on connections. These included his sense of loneliness in childhood and associated search for acceptance, his use of substances to calm him in social situations, and his reflections around trust and the importance of asking for help in prison. He also spoke of the value of trauma therapy in the journey to self-acceptance. It strikes us that any neuro-inclusive practices that come into the CJS must therefore be routed in connection.

*'I know of men that resist sharing any of this kind of information with people in authority, in case it'll be written down and later used against them. That's understandable when you've been in the system for years. Some people feel they have been unfairly pathologised and labelled, that their humanity has been revoked. Understandably, this creates a barrier to engagement. But beyond negative labels, a truly neuro-inclusive environment would contribute to a culture of safety in admitting that 'I am different'.'*

Prisons becoming more neuro-inclusive can benefit us all. Significantly, it has been stated that if ADHD is recognised in prisons and managed appropriately, we could expect to see a 32 per cent reduction in criminality for men, and 41 per cent reduction for women.<sup>29</sup> Prisons should also organise more peer support activities (group sessions, listeners, champions) for neurodiverse service users.

We believe neuro-inclusivity is achievable through the co-produced, collective efforts of policymakers, practitioners, and those with lived experience. Actions would include the rolling out of training to all prison staff, considering neurodivergence within new strategies and care pathways, and continued efforts to 'hear' the voices of neurodivergent prisoners.

Recent changes made within His Majesty's Prison Service are commendable, yet there remains progress to be made in engaging all staff and prisoners. However, by working together, we can strive for a more compassionate justice system, recognising the neurodiversity inherent in our society as an asset rather than simply 'difficult'.

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29. Takeda. (2022). *ADHD in the Criminal Justice System: A case for change*. Takeda. [https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda\\_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Takeda_ADHD-in-the-CJS-Roundtable-Report_Final.pdf)

# Collaborative research in a pandemic: Co-Producing solutions to a crisis

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**This paper will explore one innovative attempt at promoting knowledge equity in a largescale prisons research project utilising Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR has a long history in the social sciences but is utilised less frequently in prison research for a variety of pragmatic reasons. This paper will discuss the trials and tribulations of this collaborative method of data collection, and put forward reflections on how prisons could promote a greater culture of peer-research.**

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic transformed society as we knew it on a global level, resulting in lockdowns across nations and the mass introduction of Covid-responsive public health measures to contain the virus. Nowhere was this intervention more crucial than in prisons, historically hotbeds for contagion.<sup>1</sup> Prisons are vulnerable to disease due to the disproportionate prevalence of prior health conditions among those in prison, the rotation of short-term and transient populations, and an environment predisposed to overcrowding with limited access to health care.<sup>2</sup> This became apparent in the early stages of the pandemic — at the end of February 2020 half the reported cases of the virus in Wuhan, China, were within prisons,<sup>3</sup> while in the United States, penal institutions were at the epicentre of the pandemic with a rate of infection 5.5 times that of the general population.<sup>4</sup> In response to the heightened risk within jails and prisons, governments and prison institutions had two primary response options: decarceration measures, such as early release

programmes and increased bail provision; or, stringent containment within facilities.<sup>5</sup> In the United Kingdom, the Ministry of Justice initially announced the intention to release up to 4,000 prisoners, approximately 5 per cent of the prison population, however this was abandoned by October 2020 with only 275 prisoners released.<sup>6</sup> What was implemented instead, was a heavily restricted lockdown, with the majority of prisoners contained in their cells for 23 hours a day and the core regime of prisons suspended.<sup>7</sup>

To ascertain the impact of these measures, researchers from Queen's University Belfast partnered with the User Voice organization for the Economic and Social Research Council funded project, 'Coping with Covid in Prisons'. The aim of the project was to capture the lived experience of the pandemic from the point of view of prisoners during this period (early 2021 to early 2022). As an organisation led and staffed by those with lived experience of the criminal justice system, User Voice was uniquely equipped to carry out this task. Founded in 2009 by Mark Johnson (now CEO of the Lived Expert organisation with a similar structure but focused on knowledge production), User Voice was created to help democratise prisons, setting up prison councils across the HMPPS estate, and to carry out user-led research on a range of issues pertaining to the implementation of justice — from the point of view of those who experience it. Even before founding User Voice, Johnson pioneered a unique peer-led methodology for collecting data that has been utilised across dozens of important studies and consultations. With the help of Johnson and the User Voice

1. See Maruna, S., McNaull, G., & O'Neill, N. (2022). The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of the Prison. *Crime and Justice*, 51(1), 59-103.
2. Akiyama, M., Spaulding, A., & Rich, J. (2020). Flattening the curve for incarcerated populations—Covid-19 in jails and prisons. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382(22), 2075-2077.
3. Barnert, E., Ahalt, C., & Williams, B. (2020). Prisons: amplifiers of the COVID-19 pandemic hiding in plain sight. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(7), 964-966.
4. Byrne, J., Hummer, D., Rapisarda, S., & Kras, K. (2022). The United States Government's Response to COVID-19 Outbreaks in Federal, State, and Local Corrections. In *The Impact of COVID-19 on Prison Conditions and Penal Policy*, edited by Frieder Dünkel, Stefan Harrendorf, and Dirk van Zyl Smit. London: Routledge.
5. Maruna, S., McNaull, G., & O'Neill, N. (2022). The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of the Prison. *Crime and Justice*, 51(1), 59-103.
6. Grierson, J. (2020). Early-release scheme for prisoners in England and Wales to end. *The Guardian*, August 19.
7. Queen's University Belfast & User Voice. (2022). 'Coping with Covid in Prison: The Impact of the Prisoner Lockdown,' *User Voice*. Available at: <https://www.uservoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/User-Voice-QUB-Coping-with-Covid.pdf> (Accessed 19 February 2024).

organisation, this project was therefore conceived, designed and implemented with the subjectivity of those with lived experience at its centre, using an innovative Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology.

Below, we discuss the history and background of PAR and the methodology of including lived experience in criminal justice research. We then outline the ‘nuts and bolts’ of how we modified the PAR methodology for this study, outlining the three stages of the project: research design, data collection, and data analysis. In section three, we discuss reflexively the trials and triumphs of implementing a PAR methodology in the prison setting. Finally, we conclude with User Voice and academic reflections on best practice for PAR in prisons moving forward.

### “Nothing about us without us”: the value of lived experience

Even the most well-intentioned traditional academic research raises discomforting issues regarding narrative ownership and exploitation of others for personal gain. Advocates in the health, recovery and disability rights communities have led the call for ‘nothing about us without us’, a recognition that service-users have their own voice, and do not need others to speak for them.<sup>8</sup>

The value of service user involvement in criminal justice is well established, with criminalised people having a potential role as ‘wounded healers’ or ‘credible messengers’ who can use their histories to inspire and benefit others.<sup>9</sup> The UK’s penal voluntary sector is perceived as pioneering service-user involvement in criminal justice practice, amplifying the voices of

With criminalised people having a potential role as ‘wounded healers’ or ‘credible messengers’ who can use their histories to inspire and benefit others.

‘experts by experience’ to contribute their insights to inform policy and implementation.<sup>10</sup> Peer support/mentoring programmes are increasingly prominent,<sup>11</sup> exemplar being the Samaritans Listener scheme which has been running since 1991.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, as Buck and colleagues caution, while activation of lived experience in criminal justice can be a positive, rewarding and inclusionary experience for participants, equally, implementation can result in ‘exclusionary, shame-provoking and precarious’ practice.<sup>13</sup> Aspirations of the Penal Voluntary Sector (PVS) to centre lived experience in their practice can in parallel enact the diluting of prisoner voice and limit peer participation in knowledge production and institutional direction.<sup>14</sup> This could and should be redressed, with user-led organizations such as Lived Expert, the Prisoner Policy Network, Groupe d’information sur les prisons (France) and KROM (Sweden) instead aiming to ‘shape policy, affect delivery of services, and build grassroots confidence in self-determination.’<sup>15</sup> This means moving beyond traditional professional-led models that utilise the epistemology of lived experience, to ensure practice has an ontological foundation in prisoner agency and subjectivity, such as the movement for ‘convict criminology’ in academia.<sup>16</sup>

PAR has become another well utilised research tool for amplifying the voice of lived experience across multiple fields, holding the promise of converting research participants into co-researchers and collaborators in the production of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Emerging from the field of psychology and the ‘action research’ theories of Kurt Lewin,<sup>18</sup> expanded by

8. Charlton, J. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. Univ of California Press.

9. LeBel, T., Richie, M., and Maruna, S. (2015). ‘Helping others as a response to reconcile a criminal past: The role of the wounded healer in prisoner reentry programs,’ *Criminal justice and behavior*, 42(1), pp.108-120.

10. Clinks. (2017). *Criminal Justice Policy and the Voluntary Sector*. Clinks: London. Available at [https://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/clinks\\_clinks-thinks-2017.pdf](https://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/clinks_clinks-thinks-2017.pdf) (Accessed 19 February 2024).

11. Buck, G., Tomczak, P., and Quinn, K. (2022). ‘This is how it feels: Activating lived experience in the penal voluntary sector.’ *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(4), pp.822-839.

12. Jaffe, M. (2012). *Peer support and seeking help in prison: a study of the Listener scheme in four prisons in England* (Doctoral dissertation, Keele University).

13. Buck, G., Tomczak, P., and Quinn, K. (2022). ‘This is how it feels: Activating lived experience in the penal voluntary sector.’ *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(4), pp.822-839.

14. Aresti, A., Darke, S., and Manlow, D. (2016). ‘Bridging the gap: Giving public voice to prisoners and former prisoners through research activism.’ *Prison Service Journal*, 224, pp.3-13; Harriott, P. and Aresti, A. (2018) ‘Voicelessness: A call to action,’ *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 27(2), pp.17-53.

15. Harriott, P., and Aresti, A. (2018). ‘Voicelessness: A call to action,’ *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 27(2), pp.17-53.

16. Earle, R. (2018). Convict Criminology in England: Developments and Dilemmas. *British Journal of Criminology*, 58(6) pp. 1499–1516.

17. Schubotz, D. (2019). ‘Participatory action research,’ In *SAGE research methods foundations*. Sage.

18. Lewin, K. (1946). ‘Action research and minority problems,’ *Journal of social issues*, 2(4), pp.34-46.

psychologists 'in the trenches of social movements' including Myles Horton and Ignacio Martín-Baró,<sup>19</sup> the methodology was embraced and adapted across disciplines — for example, the Participatory Research Network was established in the education field by 1977.<sup>20</sup> At its foundation, PAR has an ethos of democracy and social justice, as an epistemology enacted through a lens of democratic participation. This lens understands that 'knowledge and expertise are widely distributed even if legitimacy is not', particularly among marginalised populations where knowledge is 'born in embodied intimacy with injustice...not a limit on objectivity, but a resource.'<sup>21</sup> The act of PAR then, can be 'revolutionary' in creating collaborative space for subjective experience that broadens participation of non-academic community-based members in knowledge construction.<sup>22</sup> The process of participation also breaks down power imbalances and hierarchies between the researcher and the researched, transforming both individuals participating, and the field of the discipline.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, PAR produces research, education and action directed towards fundamental social change, as critical reference groups and researchers explore problems and issues to improve social situations.<sup>24</sup> In this way PAR creates impetus for actions to produce changes in the community of those participating,<sup>25</sup> reducing socio-political inequities though 'empirically grounded liberation campaigns.'<sup>26 27</sup>

Although PAR practices have been at the heart of work carried out by the User Voice organisation since its inception, as a discipline, criminology has been particularly slow to embrace and incorporate PAR principles.<sup>28</sup> Recent examples of creative PAR in criminal justice settings include Harding's photovoice research with a women's centre community in England and Jarldorn and Deer's photovoice and poetry research with formerly incarcerated people in Australia. PAR has been utilised less frequently in prison research for a variety of pragmatic reasons — with Haarmans and colleagues' co-produced project exploring the experience of male prisoners on an OPD pathway in the HMPPS estate a prominent, recent outlier. In the USA, prison-based PAR has a longer history, rooted in education/prison partnerships that have produced action research outcomes.<sup>29 30 31 32</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of prison-led research was the survey, designed by Eddie Ellis (then incarcerated in New York State) with the help of psychologist and educator Kenneth B. Clark, which sought to capture the geography of incarceration state-wide and had a huge impact on the development of justice reinvestment.<sup>33</sup> Michelle Fine and her collaborators have also been prominent proponents of PAR in prison. Over 25 years, Fine and colleagues worked to fight the precarity of prison/college education partnerships through generation of peer-led evaluations.<sup>34</sup> More recently, recognising the over representation of people of colour

19. Fine, M. (2013). 'Echoes of Bedford: A 20-year social psychology memoir on participatory action research hatched behind bars,' *American Psychologist*, 68(8), p.687.
20. Hall, B. (1981). Participatory research, popular knowledge and power: A personal reflection. *Convergence*, 14(3), p.6.
21. Fine, M. (2013). 'Echoes of Bedford: A 20-year social psychology memoir on participatory action research hatched behind bars,' *American Psychologist*, 68(8), p.687.
22. Billies, M., Francisco, V., Krueger, P., and Linville, D. (2010). Participatory action research: Our methodological roots. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 3(3), pp.277-286.
23. Brydon-Miller, M. (1997). Participatory Action Research: Psychology and Social Change. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53: 657-666.
24. Wadsworth, Y. (1998). What is participatory action research? *Journal of Public Health*, 15, pp.52-60.
25. Billies, M., Francisco, V., Krueger, P., and Linville, D. (2010). Participatory action research: Our methodological roots. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 3(3), pp.277-286.
26. Lenette, C., Stavropoulou, N., Nunn, C., Kong, S., Cook, T., Coddington, K., and Banks, S. (2019). Brushed under the carpet: Examining the complexities of participatory research. *Research for All*, 3(2), pp.161-179.
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28. Haverkate, D., Meyers, T., Telep, C., and Wright, K. (2020). On PAR with the yard: Participatory action research to advance knowledge in corrections. *Corrections*, 5(1), pp.28-43.
29. Harding, N. (2020). Co-constructing feminist research: Ensuring meaningful participation while researching the experiences of criminalised women. *Methodological Innovations*, 13(2)
30. Jarldorn, M., and 'Deer'. (2020). Participatory action research with ex-prisoners: Using Photovoice and one woman's story told through poetry. *Action Research*, 18(3), pp.319-335.
31. Haarmans, M., PAR Team., Perkins, E., and Jellicoe-Jones, L. (2021) "It's Us Doing It!" The Power of Participatory Action Research in Prison: A Contradiction in Terms? – Phase 1. *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health*, 20(3), pp.238-252.
32. Fine, M., Torre, M., Boudin, K., and Wilkins, C. (2021). Participation, power, and solidarities behind bars: A 25-year reflection on critical participatory action research on college in prison. In P. M. Camic (Ed.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (2nd ed., pp. 85–100).
33. Fine, M. (2013). 'Echoes of Bedford: A 20-year social psychology memoir on participatory action research hatched behind bars,' *American Psychologist*, 68(8)
34. Fine, M., Torre, M., Boudin, K., and Wilkins, C. (2021). Participation, power, and solidarities behind bars: A 25-year reflection on critical participatory action research on college in prison. In P. M. Camic (Ed.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (2nd ed., pp. 85–100). American Psychological Association

in correctional settings, Payne and Bryant initiated an in-prison Street PAR methodology which provides 'culturally competent and comprehensive analysis of street-identified people of colour through an agency-theoretical, methodological and empirical paradigm.'<sup>35</sup>

PAR methodology then, recognises the critical knowledge of those incarcerated, knowledge of the policies, implementation, and impacts of prison life and accompanying ideas improving the system.<sup>36</sup> From a pragmatic point of view, PAR can produce better empirical results; peer researchers can establish trust with incarcerated research participants, gather data from hard to access research sites, and do so in 'the subjects' own language,'<sup>37</sup> producing more authentic, accurate findings. This was certainly the experience of this project, where peer-led focus-groups and survey collection in the prison led to the generation of engaging and powerful data.

#### PAR in a pandemic

Our own recent adventure in PAR took place in a time of Covid-responsive lockdowns inside the prisons, when most outside organisations had asked to withdraw from the prisons and a peer-led research model guaranteed the least intrusive and resource-intensive strategy for institutions already under strain. However, our interest in PAR transcended these pragmatic considerations.

From the offset, our research aimed to involve incarcerated and formerly incarcerated researchers at every stage of the project. The project commenced with the collaborative development of a six-module Peer Researcher Training package (Level 2, Open College Network) by a collective of four academic researchers from Queen's University Belfast and senior User Voice team members with experience in peer research and training. The training had six core theoretical elements: an introduction to peer research and the aims of social science research; an overview of research design including qualitative and quantitative methodologies

and research methods; research ethics broadly, and specifically to prison research; data collection considerations and sampling; data analysis and dissemination; skills practice. The co-produced training was delivered to ten paid staff members of User Voice (all with lived experience of the justice system) — who then acted as peer-researchers for the design stage of the research. Collectively, this group developed the mixed method research design, decided on criteria of selecting host prisons, developed focus group interview

themes and format, and, most importantly, designed the peer survey that would be used to collect the quantitative data.

The next stage of the research involved recruiting and training 99 additional research collaborators across 9 prisons (research was initiated at 11 different prisons, but only 9 were able to participate fully). These included a mix of local prisons, training prisons, and resettlement prisons, one women's prison, one young offenders institute, two contracted prisons, three Cat A prisons, and one Cat D prison. Peer researchers from each prison were recruited through one of 24 focus groups across the 11 prisons. Interested volunteers were offered an accredited six-module training on peer research methods (OCN Level 1) that covered similar ground (in less depth) as that offered to the User Voice researchers at the design stage of the research. The training was delivered over one or two days depended in prison

capacity. Like the Level 2 Peer Researcher training, it was developed by QUB and User Voice staff and was based on student-led learning pedagogy.

Once they were introduced to the basics of peer research, these volunteers then set to work designing a bespoke research strategy for their own institutions, showing tremendous creativity in figuring out how to survey their peers about their experiences of a lockdown that meant that peer interaction was greatly curtailed. These methods were then agreed with prison management and the peer researchers were left to carry out the surveys autonomously, with the User Voice

PAR can produce  
better empirical  
results; peer  
researchers can  
establish trust with  
incarcerated  
research  
participants, gather  
data from hard to  
access research  
sites, and do so in  
'the subjects' own  
language,  
producing more  
authentic, accurate  
findings.

35. Payne, Y., and Bryant, A. (2018). Street participatory action research in prison: A methodology to challenge privilege and power in correctional facilities. *The Prison Journal*, 98(4), p452

36. Farrell, L., Young, B., Willison, J., and Fine, M. (2021). Participatory research in prisons. *Washington, DC: Urban Institute*.

37. Toch, H. (1967). The convict as researcher. *Trans-action*, 4(9), pp.72-75.

staff available via email and freephone number to provide support. The User Voice team would then return after a few weeks to collect completed surveys, complete the training process and where possible, carry out a data analysis session of the focus group findings for each prison.

Surveys, including translations into four different languages, chosen by the peer researchers in each prison who had knowledge of their prison populations, were distributed between June 2021 — February 2022.

Overall, 1,421 surveys were returned from nine prisons, with sample size ranging from a 52 (YOI) to 360 (Cat A male prison). Response rates from individual wings and house blocks ranged from 21 per cent (Cat B Prison) to 72 per cent (Cat A Prison), averaging around 30-40 per cent of the total possible population — a strong rate in the context of a global pandemic and comparable to recent publications of prisoner surveys.<sup>38</sup>

The PAR methodology centres the intention to produce actionable change for those who participate. As a result, the research team produced rapid response reports for each individual prison to be presented back to stakeholders including peer researchers and the management teams of hosting prisons alongside HMPPS and NHS leadership. These reports highlighted both key findings and 'solutions' produced by research participants. As the research progressed, cumulative findings were fed back to additional stakeholders including HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation, and HMPPS Gold Command, the directorate charged with developing a recovery strategy for transitioning from the Covid lockdown.

The data analysis stage was an iterative process of inductive thematic analysis, which also centred the participation of those with lived experience of prison. Where possible initial findings were brought back to the in-prison peer researchers to garner input and feedback. However, the primary team of peer researchers involved in the analysis process were

members of the User Voice National Council, a volunteer body of formerly incarcerated individuals, several of whom had been incarcerated during COVID, including a few who had been peer researchers on the Covid project before their release. The National Council volunteers served a quality control function during the process of data analysis, making sure we understood the findings correctly, and were especially charged with developing the 'solutions for change' emerging out of the research.

### **The trials and tribulations of PAR in prisons**

Using PAR in prisons during a global pandemic is not for the faint hearted. Undoubtedly, the biggest obstacles faced were Covid related. Traditional research methods like focus group interviewing and survey distribution are made much more difficult in an environment in which social distancing is required and interpersonal contact could put people at risk.

Indeed, most prisons we approached were not able to facilitate the research. Even two of the 11 prisons that agreed to host the project had to withdraw from the study prior to the data collection stage. Key to success (and failure) was staff buy-in. In one prison, we got no response from staff champions after the initial training stage, and peers were not given time out of cell to distribute surveys. In another case, completed surveys were

taken from peers during security searches which led to the cessation of research at the institution. Peer researchers in participating prisons were able to negotiate strategies with the prison for the safe and confidential storage of completed surveys — a key difficulty in the prison environment that was a major sticking point for ethics committees.

An additional issue which immediately became apparent post-training, was our ability to achieve a representative sample across prisons. Time out of cell, and movement between landings/houses was severely inhibited due to the combination of Covid-responsivity and staff shortages across the prison estate. Even in

Traditional research methods like focus group interviewing and survey distribution are made much more difficult in an environment in which social distancing is required and interpersonal contact could put people at risk.

38. Ross, M., Diamond, P., Liebling, A., and Saylor, W. (2008). Measurement of prison social climate: A comparison of an inmate measure in England and the USA. *Punishment & Society*, 10(4), 447–474.

prisons with the largest samples, peer researchers faced challenges in distributing and collecting the surveys due to obstacles such as 'double-jobbing' when unlocked, competing obligations during time out of cell (including maintaining family connectivity, showering and exercising), and negative staff attitudes towards their role. As a result of all these factors, peer researchers were limited to sampling only their own wings, or houses at best. However, the demographic profile of the final sample was roughly similar to that of the wider prison population, bar the oversampling of the female population (14 per cent) in comparison to their proportion of the whole estate (4 per cent).<sup>39</sup>

Beyond the tensions of project implementation, this project raises methodological issues pertinent to prison research more broadly. When we look at the history of criminal justice research on reducing offending, what often happens is that information is removed from the hands of people that need it. It is collected from the ground — from prison landings and wings — removed, regurgitated back to the system, and implemented in a top-down way that is derived from the point of view of the collector. When research neglects partnership in this way, people in prison can become highly suspicious and cynical about the point of engaging with research altogether. The peer researchers who were responsible for data collection in this research were able to overcome these barriers through a peer-to-peer approach stressing solidarity and mutual empowerment in a hugely difficult time.

At the same time, although peer researchers were quick to gain the trust of their incarcerated peers, they had more difficulties earning the trust of the wider prison institution, and this manifested at each stage of the research. At the data collection phase, peer researchers at some institutions were supported and recognised for the important work they were doing. Whereas, at others, they were accused of manipulation, using the research as an excuse to try to circumvent restrictions on movement or peer contact. Likewise, at

the dissemination phase, some governors were highly receptive to the findings, treating the rapid reports almost as inspection reports and showing peer researchers how each of their conclusions were being addressed. However, at other prisons, the findings were largely dismissed due to the 'biases' of peer researchers and the agenda they may bring to the research.

Finally, the collaboration between academic and lived experience partners was not always smooth or easy. Although the two groups unquestionably learned a great deal from one another, inherent tensions between the two groups have been undeniable (even in the production of this article). Many of the problems have resulted from academic contributors finding it difficult to step back and not take the familiar lead role, especially around aspects of the work like writing up findings and analyses. Partnerships of this sort require a substantial amount of humility on the part of both LE and academic collaborators that takes work and effort, but is worth the pay off.

### Shared reflections

The use of PAR in prisons has the potential to offer rich rewards. As exemplified by our collaborative Covid project, peer-research can offer empowerment by facilitating agency to change their environment and create the generativity to produce outputs.<sup>40</sup> For the academic, while these rewards may not be grounded in grant funding

achievements and high impact journal publications, they can result in a rich diversity of knowledge that ensues from collaborative work — working 'with' and not 'on' incarcerated colleagues:

We may uncover stories that contest current ideologies and inequalities, honor the resilience and resistance of those who have already suffered, build community power and new solidarities, and dare to widen the social imagination for policies that challenge inequality.<sup>41</sup>

Importantly, though, enacting PAR methods 'is not simply a matter of signing on disenfranchised members

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39. See User Voice and Queen's University Belfast (2022). *Coping with Covid in Prison*, for full table of demographic profile. Queen's University Belfast & User Voice (2022). 'Coping with Covid in Prison: The Impact of the Prisoner Lockdown,' User Voice. Available at: <https://www.uservoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/User-Voice-QUB-Coping-with-Covid.pdf> (Accessed 19 February 2024).

40. Haverkate, D., Meyers, T., Telep, C., and Wright, K. (2020). On PAR with the yard: Participatory action research to advance knowledge in corrections. *Corrections*, 5(1), pp.28-43.

41. Fine, M. (2013). 'Echoes of Bedford: A 20-year social psychology memoir on participatory action research hatched behind bars,' *American Psychologist*, 68(8)

of a community to one's agenda or collecting favourable quotes for one's project', nor is it research to 'simply further academic careers.'<sup>42</sup> In the hyper controlled setting of carceral institutions, multiple tensions exist, not least the security concerns posed by translating PAR to a prison setting. Ethically and responsibly implementing these methods in prison requires careful thought on how to minimise potential harm of participants and avoid tokenism (on one hand) or exploitation (on the other). As Michelle Fine outlines, key to minimising potential harm is ensuring co-produced narratives, with researchers morally obliged to provide counter-discourse to sanitised official narratives, challenging 'dominant stories being told.'<sup>43</sup> For Fine, this means that:

We can no longer endorse empirical gated communities of demographically homogeneous researchers, distant from the conditions of oppression, who study and develop policy for Others and confuse

the products and sources of oppression...we must resist the impact factor publication rituals that may unwittingly reproduce epistemological violence.<sup>44</sup>

At the most fundamental level, the lesson of our own PAR research was that this work can be done; indeed, it can be done in the most extraordinarily difficult of circumstances (i.e. a global pandemic). We see no reason why greater use of participatory methods could not be used in more normal times, and cannot imagine reverting back to traditional structures of knowledge inequality ourselves.

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42. Billies, M., Francisco, V., Krueger, P., and Linville, D. (2010). Participatory action research: Our methodological roots. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 3(3), pp.277-286

43. Fine, M. (2013). 'Echoes of Bedford: A 20-year social psychology memoir on participatory action research hatched behind bars,' *American Psychologist*, 68(8)

44. *ibid*

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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The *Prison Service Journal* is a peer reviewed journal published by HM Prison Service of England and Wales. Its purpose is to promote discussion on issues related to the work of the Prison Service, the wider criminal justice system and associated fields. It aims to present reliable information and a range of views about these issues.

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