

Assaults among young people in prison

Kimmett Edgar highlights factors to address in tackling prison violence.

The revised *European Prison Rules* state: “Procedures shall be in place to ensure the safety of prisoners, prison staff and all visitors and to reduce to a minimum the risk of violence and other events that might threaten safety” (Council of Europe, 2006: at 52.2).

In November 2006, there were almost 12,000 young people in prison in England and Wales, of whom almost 2,800 were under 18. How well does the State live up to its duty to ensure the safety of children in its custody?

The prisons inspectorate regularly conducts a survey of prisoners which covers perceptions of safety and experiences of victimisation. Its comparison figures for juveniles provide an overall measure of self-reported victimisation.

- 31% felt unsafe in prison
 - 30% had been assaulted or insulted by another prisoner
 - 25% had been shouted at through the window by other prisoners
 - 5% had been subjected to racial abuse
- (HMCIP, 2006: Appendix III)

High rates of assault, threats, and exploitation convince some prisoners that they need to be prepared to use violence; the social environment seems to require demonstrations of toughness.

Statistical data about victimisation have limited value: they can define the extent of the problem, but they provide very little insight into solutions. Official statistics about perpetrators of violence who have been caught ignore the unreported majority of incidents. It cannot be assumed that their profile accurately represents the total group of prisoners who assault others.

The roles of victim and perpetrator largely overlap for verbal insults, threats of violence, and assaults. High proportions of prisoners who have been assaulted also commit assaults. In a study conducted by HMPS Safer Custody Group (2003), half of the respondents said that while in prison they had been involved in fighting or calling someone hurtful names. The authors reported: “Of those who had reported being victims of negative behaviours, considerably more were likely to have used these behaviours against others (78%) compared with those who had never been a victim (44%)” (HMPS,

2003: 18).

Conflicts between prisoners are certainly exacerbated by the risk of victimisation. High rates of assault, threats, and exploitation convince some prisoners that they need to be prepared to use violence; the social environment seems to require demonstrations of toughness.

The HMPS study defined victimisation in terms of a wide range of hurtful behaviour: rumour-spreading; being stopped from participating in activities; staying in the cell out of fear; being made to shout from windows; having property taken; being coerced to bring in contraband; being assaulted; or being threatened. The study reported that some young prisoners used aggression to defend themselves from victimisation, employing bullying as a strategy for their own protection (HMPS, 2003: 4).

Widespread victimisation leads to a perverse cycle: acts which the individual sees as self-protection increase the problem at a societal level. A prisoner who feels unsafe worries that he will be victimised (assaulted or exploited) if others consider him weak. To demonstrate toughness, he assaults

another prisoner. As a result, the risk of assault in the prison community as a whole is increased, and the safety of all is compromised.

This rationale illustrates that a high-risk environment (such as a YOI) can motivate individuals to engage in threats and assaults. When staff are unwilling or unable to challenge everyday insults, verbal threats, or to prevent theft, prisoners feel that they have no option but to defend their interests with force.

The second key factor that promotes violence among young offenders is a lack of skill at managing conflict. Tactics prisoners employ in disputes – including accusations, threats, invasions of personal space, issuing commands, and hostile gestures – aggravate the situation, making violence more likely. Such tactics are coercive; they limit the opponent’s options for resolving the dispute. Prisoners who do not want to fight may feel that they have no choice. Asked what he might have

done to prevent a fight, a young offender replied, "I could have responded differently, but I don't know how".

A third influence, more potent among young offenders than adult males or women prisoners, is a code of values that views violence as a means of resolving conflicts. Some prisoners espoused the view that if you are wronged in prison you have not only the right, but a duty to retaliate with force: "If someone takes the piss you do them, full stop. They've done you a wrong 'un, so you've got to do them a wrong 'un" (Edgar *et al*, 2003: 134).

In YOIs, fights to resolve conflicts often take place by prior agreement. A young offender described an argument he had with another prisoner. They made two attempts to have a fight, but were prevented by staff. The argument continued, however, increasing the tension between them. The young offender explained his frustration: "He was threatening me, 'I'm going to kill you' etc. Talking, talking. I was getting tired of this. We had to settle this, we had to have a fight".

Many young male offenders genuinely believe that violence can solve their differences. They do not fully appreciate how violence damages relationships. Comparisons with adult prisoners who have been in fights suggest that young offenders are slower to recognise conflicts as they develop, and then more impatient to bring the conflict to an end.

These three factors – the high risk of victimisation, the lack of conflict management skills, and the pro-violence ethos – provide explanations of prison violence and suggest effective means of prevention. They show why staff must confront low-level anti-social behaviour, such as shouting at others from the windows. The prisoners' use of aggressive tactics highlights the need for training in specific conflict resolution skills; training that would have life-long benefits. Prisons also need to champion an ethos of non-violence.

The Violence Reduction Strategy (Prison Service Order 2750) exemplifies a pro-active, whole-prison approach to safety in prisons. It features an expectation that officers will confront low-level problem behaviour as a means of nipping conflicts in the bud; a non-stigmatising response to anti-social behaviour; and a strong link between a fair and decent regime and personal safety. Its stated purpose is: "to reduce violence, promote a safe and healthy prison environment and foster a culture of non-violence among all staff and prisoners" (HMPS, 2004).

The strategy highlights subtle ways that people can hurt each other. Vigilance against all forms of victimisation can prevent many disputes escalating into physical violence. Hence violence is defined as: "any incident in which a person is abused, threatened, or assaulted. This includes an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health. The resulting harm may be physical,

emotional or psychological" (HMPS, 2004).

The response to violence should not be to stigmatise the perpetrator but to encourage a change in behaviour through the promise of reintegration: "Whilst an assailant is left in no doubt that the behaviour is unacceptable and will not be tolerated, sustained, reasoned change in behaviour rather than retribution is sought" (HMPS, 2004).

The Violence Reduction Strategy sets a high standard for practices within prison establishments: "By constructively and consistently taking action to prevent violence and promote fairness and decency, prisons can offer a structured environment in which to influence future behaviour, encourage positive communication and develop social skills that assist offenders with rehabilitation" (HMPS, 2004).

When young offenders are sent to prison, the state undertakes a duty to ensure their personal safety. Against a background of intolerable levels of victimisation, *The Violence Reduction Strategy* provides a coherent, evidence-based framework for improving safety. But it requires every prison to pursue a shift in its culture, so that the whole prison community is committed to the values of non-violence.

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References

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