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Race in Prisons

Editorial Comment

Black people and those from some minority ethnic communities are far more likely to spend time in prison than white people. In 2001, a little under 8 per cent of the general national population were Black or from minority ethnic communities but in prisons this is 28 per cent. Of course, this is not uniform across all minority ethnic groups, and it is young Black, African-Caribbean men than are most likely to be in prison.

The dramatic over-representation of Black people in American prisons has been criticised by many commentators, including sociologist Loic Wacquant, who has described that the disparity is so dramatic that it amounts to a recreation of racial segregation and domination that has been manifested in slavery, the Jim Crow system of separation, and urban ghettoisation. He has described that in America, some young black men from deprived neighbourhoods are so likely to experience imprisonment that it 'is woven deep into the fabric and lifecourse of the lower classes across generations'. Whilst the UK and USA are historically, culturally and politically distinct and the views of Wacquant would not represent a mainstream analysis of race in the UK, the fact that minority ethnic groups are over-represented by over 400 per cent in the UK does raise serious concerns and the warnings from across the Atlantic should not be ignored.

This edition of Prison Service Journal takes the issue of race as its focal point and has been co-edited with members of the National Offender Management Service's Equalities Group, Matt Wotton and Claire Cooper. The aim of these themed articles is to explore the issue of race in prisons with a focus on analysis and discussion but also on action and the shaping of practice.

The articles include an overview of the recent history of race in prisons, written by Claire Cooper. This sets out the changes that have taken place over the last decade and assesses their impact. This article sets out that whilst policies and practices have improved and overt discrimination has been virtually eliminated, there remains unconscious bias and differences in the use of discretionary power by staff including decisions about prisoner discipline and rewards, and the recruitment and selection of staff. A more personal account of the changes that have taken place over the last decade and the impact that they have had is contributed by Richie Dell. As well as

drawing on his own personal experiences, he also draws upon quotes and observations made by prisoners.

This issue of unconscious judgements and the use of discretion are explored in depth in two articles, by Matt Wotton and Chris Barnett-Page respectively. These articles explore how people form judgements, not simply about race but in all social interactions and in making discretionary choices. These judgements are shaped by a variety of factors including parenting, education, media, politics, social norms and personal experiences. These judgements are intuitive, instinctive and often unconscious. These articles will provide a valuable source of reflection for practitioners and will encourage them to deeply question their own thinking and behaviour.

A further practical example of what is being done in order to manage race in prisons is provided in an article by Dominic Taylor. This describes the use of structured communications tools. These are used in order to shape effective communication, make sure that valuable information is passed between groups and to provide a means through which discretionary decisions can be made. These tools have been adopted from other professions including health and are an important step forward in ensuring that the lessons are learned about effective communication from serious incidents in the past.

The other themed article, which is the one that opens this edition, is written by Jonathan Jackson, Tom Tyler, Ben Bradford, Dominic Taylor and Mike Shiner, and addresses the issue of legitimacy and procedural justice in prisons. In other words, this discusses whether having effective procedures makes prisoners feel that they are being treated in a way that is just and fair. This article is particularly important as it raises the point that race equality is not simply an issue in itself but is related to the wider moral texture of the prison. Where prisoners feel that they are treated fairly, reasonably and politely there is a knock on impact on improved safety including reduced self harm, engaging with opportunities for rehabilitation and perceptions of racial equality. Race is therefore part of the wider culture of care within an establishment.

This point can also be taken further by returning to the observations made by Loic Wacquant, cited earlier. His observations make the important point that prisons are not institutions that sit in isolation but

instead they reflect and enact wider social issues including power and inequality. The over-representation of Black and minority ethnic people within prisons is a reflection of wider social issues including poverty and discrimination. As prison managers and staff do not choose who comes into prisons they are to a degree powerless in resisting or changing this. However, what they can do is to take an active role in their own practice in ensuring that inequality is recognised, resisted and challenged and that diversity is valued and promoted. As the articles in this edition make clear, making this change is not simply a matter of adopting new policy statements or procedural documents but requires each individual to draw out and question their own unconscious assumptions, values and beliefs and the organisation to provide the tools, expertise and training in order to enable this to happen.

In the remainder of this edition there are non-themed articles that address other issues including Baroness Vivien Stern's recent lecture on prisoners' rights. This sets the development of prisoner rights in their proper historical and international context and illustrates the progress that has been made over the last half a century. There is also an interview with Sir Alan Beith, the Chair of the House of Commons Justice Committee. In this interview he discusses the Committee's recent work including a widely read report on the future role of the prison officer and another on developing 'Justice Reinvestment' as a more socially conscious alternative to the ever-increasing prison population.

It is hoped that this edition will provide a source of ideas and debate for a range of audiences including academics, practitioners and policy makers.