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Special Edition

**PRisoN: Unlocking prison
research**

Editorial Comment

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In recent years, we felt driven to use our knowledge and experiences to create awareness of the state of prisons, the experience of imprisonment and the social impact of imprisonment in the wider community. Our ambition has been to create a supportive network of likeminded individuals interested in prison research by bringing together researchers, charitable organisations, prison staff and local communities to pursue new collaborative research and project opportunities. During an initial meeting in 2013 to discuss how we might approach this, we began by considering the obvious question “Where do we start?”. After many cups of tea, considering a range of ideas and writing several ‘to do’ lists, we agreed that we initially wanted to gain an understanding of who might be interested in joining us in our vision to create a network that would welcome anyone with an interest in prisons and the wider social impact of imprisonment.

A call was put out to prospective members, both within and external to our own university (Leeds Beckett), the academy in general, and external contacts within the criminal justice system. The responses we received amazed us, and the power that can be generated from one single email version of a ‘call to arms’ highlighted just how relevant and needed our network might become. Our initial call for interest, which was facilitated by the University Research Office at Leeds Beckett, provided us with a membership list from a wide range of subjects. Before this, we had not realised research was being conducted with prisoners, ex-prisoners, families of prisoners, (and a host of other topics) by staff within Architecture, Art, Criminology, Design, Health Promotion, History, Law, Physiotherapy, Play Work, Psychology, Sociology and Sport. External interest was forthcoming from the Prisoners’ Education Trust, The Intelligence Project, NHS, Probation Service, English Pen and representatives of a small number of prison institutions.

The Prison Research Network (PRisoN) was launched at an event held at Leeds Beckett University on 28th April 2015. Leeds Beckett researchers presented their current work before a keynote lecture from Nick Hardwick, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons. The launch event was designed to showcase the work being done by members both internal and external to the university and open the network to a wider audience. Research presented included: Dr James

Woodall’s National Institute for Health Research-funded work on peers in prison; Mike Wragg’s studies around children’s stress when visiting parents in prison; Karl Lenton’s Wellness Pod, an initiative based at the University’s Enterprise and Innovation Hub, bringing portable spaces within prisons and currently being trialled at HMP Leeds; and a presentation by Jenny Landells on enhancing access to probation interventions: a partnership between Speech and Language Therapy and Probation staff.

The response we gained from the launch was beyond our expectation to say the least. We were particularly enthused that attendees acknowledged the welcoming and somewhat informal environment we had strived to create at the launch to encourage networking and the sharing of ideas — an environment that we feel represents the nature of the network itself. The event resulted in the creation of new connections between PRisoN members and those who had attended to find out about the network. Following the event we welcomed new members from Nottingham, Manchester, Hertfordshire, Canterbury and Bedfordshire universities, Probation, and organisations including DISC, Ex-Cell Solutions and RMF Construction.

After the launch, we were interviewed for a profile piece in the Times Higher Education during which we were able to discuss the establishment and growth of the network and create further awareness of our work. We welcomed additional members (who had seen the article) from the Open University, Bath Spa University and the University of Queensland in Australia. The growth and development of the network has been incredibly encouraging and we have been delighted to engage with organisations and fellow researchers to listen to what they would like from the network. In reflecting on this, we are now in a position to consider where we are, what the network is for and who might benefit from the network’s establishment.

For us, PRisoN has become a central hub of knowledge and experience concerning prisons; whether this be researching prisons, working in prisons, or experiencing prison first hand. Included in this hub are those who work with people in the community through resettlement and reintegration processes. Our aim is to continue connecting people and organisations to encourage the pursuit of understanding about the

prison institution and the impact it has on society broadly. We provide information, advice and guidance for people wishing to pursue research projects and for organisations who need research to be conducted to improve their service delivery or evaluate the outcomes of their work. As we are based in Leeds, we have found that our university campus is an ideal meeting point 'up North' meaning that we can host events for organisations based in London that wish to connect with their colleagues and members in other parts of the country. Ultimately, our mission is to improve people's lives through the valuable resource of knowledge and experience — something that is significantly strengthened when researchers and organisations come together with a common purpose. We hope that our facilitation of these connections results in genuine change, promotes the positive outcomes of collaborative research projects and makes the most of the pool of expertise we have brought together.

We are delighted to present this special edition as an example of just a small number of areas of expertise held by PRisoN members. As we have found when exploring the expertise of our members, there are a seemingly endless amount of topics of discussion and inquiry concerning imprisonment that can potentially contribute to improving the lives of others and we feel that taking an interest in these varied subject areas is important in itself to encourage such work to continue.

In any prison visiting room, the volume of children present at any one time is difficult to ignore, yet rarely written about. This highlights the importance of Mike Wragg's article which encourages us to momentarily stop thinking of the impact that this environment might have on prisoners and shifts our attention to the impact that visits may have on children. Mike begins by identifying just how important it is in a child's development that they simply be allowed to 'play'. The importance of play within a child's life is of paramount importance, especially within the lives of children where happiness might be of short supply. If the prison estate is going to change, then so should the attitudes towards the hidden victims of imprisonment — children. This article links nicely into the discussion that Kinsella, Woodall and Frost provide in the following article regarding their study of a NOMS funded drama project that was run in a Northern England category B prison. The project saw three external drama practitioners working closely, over the space of a week, with a group of prisoners and their

children to bond over the putting on of a play. The results of the project highlight the real need for evidence based support in relationships between prisoners and children.

Moving on from children of prisoners, the focus of the next article stays with young people but focusses upon those who are engaged within the criminal justice system; more importantly, how they communicate within the system. Landell and James write passionately about the plight of offenders with communication and learning disabilities who are often seen by the establishment as being 'trouble'. A significant number of young people within the criminal justice system have poor language skills, which invariably leads to poor literacy skills. Something as simple as not understanding a question and being too embarrassed to admit it can manifest as belligerent behaviour resulting in sanctions for the individual, especially if it relates to court mandated behaviour programmes that form part of a sentence.

While this special edition does seek to think beyond the present and consider the future of the prison 'landscape', we have also endeavored to represent the current experiences of prison researchers who are in the process of trying to uncover and make sense of the lived experiences of serving prisoners. To this end, we are pleased to present an article by PhD

candidate, Gemma Ahearne, whose reflexive account of her research on the experiences of imprisoned sex workers highlights an often ignored part of the prison population and also reminds us of the detailed nature of prison research. From her admission to naively underestimating the luxury of biscuits in the economy of the prison to the challenge of the representative probability sampling of 'hidden populations', Ahearne's article is an important read for anyone interested in this research topic and also the reality of conducting research in the prison environment.

In a journal aimed towards those who work in the prison service, it may seem strange that we have invited an article from an academic whose work is primarily focused on police culture. However, the article by Tom Cockcroft in this special edition draws our attention to the need to focus more on lessons from police officers for prison officers. In this insightful article, Cockcroft discusses the similarities and distinctions between the public-facing police and the officers behind prison walls to draw out their essential differences in occupational features but also highlight the potential similarities in their responses to politicisation.

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One of the many themes of this special edition is the potential for improvement in prison conditions. Safe Innovations present an article which considers how the implications of increasing challenges across the prison estate are impacting the wellbeing of prisoners. In their article, they explore the potential that *seedS* (a portable 'appropriate space') has to be used in multiple ways to improve access to healthcare, education and therapy on prison wings. Particularly noteworthy is the potential for *seedS* to also have beneficial implications for prison staff who may need a 'safe' space in the prison environment to manage their own wellbeing in the workplace by providing 'guided interventions' or 'quiet reflection' to reduce stress. This article explores the numerous potential benefits that *seedS* may have on issues such as promoting emotional intelligence, preventing deaths in custody, improving physical and mental health and preventing disruptive behaviour. Although Safe Innovations do not present *seedS* as a 'magic bullet' which will suddenly improve prison conditions, this article certainly demonstrates the multiple potential benefits of the implementation of new spaces in prisons.

Demonstrating the diversity of the articles in this special edition, which we hope exhibits the

inclusiveness of the Prison Research Network, we present an article from the Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) which provides an introduction to recent research on prison education including studies conducted by PET. PET is an organisation that raises awareness of the importance of education for prisoners in aiding rehabilitation and this article presents a coherent overview of current discourses on prison education with attention also being paid to the growing global network of academics working with PET to create rehabilitative cultures, bring universities and prison education together and to 'break the digital divide'. This article delivers a thorough introduction to PET for those who may not be familiar with the organisation and a welcome update for those who are already aware of their work.

We hope that this special edition reaches a varied audience and encourages further thought on prison related projects and collaborative work. We of course would be pleased to welcome new members to the network and would encourage readers to contact us if they would like to hear more about our work or tell us about their own.