

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

March 2020 No 248



# Learning Together

# It's Time to Go: Exploring Prison Life of Those Who Abscond

## An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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### Background

Often within the media the term 'escapee' is used in place of the official definition 'abscond' which has a dissimilar meaning. 'Absconding is generally taken to refer to breaking the conditions of regulated authorised absences'.<sup>2</sup> Generally the distinction between absconding and escaping relates primarily to the environmental, procedural and relational states of which the breach occurs. For example, 'a prisoner escapes from prison if they unlawfully gain their liberty by breaching the secure perimeter of a closed prison'.<sup>3</sup> Whereas 'an abscond' is an escape that does not involve overcoming a physical security restraint. Thus, by meaning constitute different behaviour highlighting the fallacy of the media statements. Moral concern is born through such fallacy. The public are inclined to believe the phenomena is wider spread and more frequent than it actually is creating gratuitous fear and creating feeble ideologies of a 'failing prison system'.<sup>4</sup>

### Rate of Abscond: Who and Why?

It is not easy to construct an expressive measure of absconding due to definitional issues, lack of standardised measures and the varied calculations/recording systems used across institutions. There are currently 84,364 offenders detained within the UK prison system.<sup>5</sup> This is an increase of 1980 from the year previous.<sup>6</sup> There were a total of 139 'absconds' in 2018 compared to 2017 where there were 86

'absconds' across the national prison estate (note: the static population at these times were 82,384 in 2018 and 84,746 in 2017).<sup>7</sup> Therefore the absconding rate across these periods lies at less than <1.5 per cent (circa 0.1 per cent-0.16 per cent). Over the past 4 years (2015-2019) absconding has been at its lowest rate since 1995 (combined total of 511 over 4 years). Therefore, the rate of absconding is much improved.

The Prison Service vision is to '...prevent victims by changing lives'. HMPPS works collaboratively with providers and partners to achieve a transformed justice system with the aim to make communities safer, prevent victims and cut crime. This quadratic vision is bolstered by security (risk management) and decency (*rehabilitation and resettlement*) of the prison population. The aim is to establish a secure environment which seeks to reduce recidivism through a rehabilitative approach based upon the 'What Works?' charter.<sup>8</sup> Literature has demonstrated that rehabilitation contributes not only to reducing recidivism but can aid composure and compliance within a prison regime.<sup>9</sup>

The majority of absconds (2018-2019) were adult male prisoners from an open prison followed by male young offenders from an open prison and then female prisoners from an open prison. The remainder being adult males from category B, C and Cluster prisons. Suitably risk assessed prisoners are allocated to open conditions so that they can be tested in conditions that are as close to being in the community as possible, to assist in safe transition and resettlement to the community ahead of their release.

1. BBC, [online] (8th April, 2019) Available at < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/c4mld9r290t/prison-escapes> > [accessed 17th April, 2019]
2. Exworthy, T., & Wilson, S. (2010). Escapes and absconding from secure psychiatric units. *The Psychiatrist*, 34, pp. 81-82.
3. Ministry of Justice, (2012). National Offender Management Service Annual Report 2011/12: Management Information Addendum. Ministry of Justice Information Release.
4. Schichor, D. (1992). Myths and Realities in Prison Siting. *Crime and Delinquency*, 38: pp. 70-87
5. Ministry of Justice, (2019), Absconds, Available at < <https://data.justice.gov.uk/prisons/public-protection/absconds> > Accessed [18th April, 2019]
6. Ministry of Justice, (2018). Prison Population Figures: Population Bulletin December 2018. Ministry of Justice.
7. Ministry of Justice, (2018). Prison Population Figures: Population Bulletin December 2018. Ministry of Justice.
8. Martinson, R. (1974). What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform. *The Public Interest*, 35, pp. 22-54.
9. Perlin, M.L. (2012). *Preventing Sex-Offender Recidivism Through Therapeutic Jurisprudence Approaches and Specialised Community Integration*. New York Law School: Be Press

Public protection units monitor risk of abscond to ensure public safety; this includes exploring prisoner characteristics in order to understand who is most likely to abscond. 49 cases of adult male prisoners who had 'absconded' or 'failed in open conditions' were investigated<sup>10</sup> and of these cases it was found:

- ❑ 16 were life sentenced prisoners
- ❑ 33 were indeterminate prisoners
- ❑ the majority were post-tariff

Moreover of this sample 37 had 'failed in open' (and returned to closed conditions), 5 had 'absconded' and 7 had 'failed to return' (from ROTL<sup>11</sup>). This behaviour occurred within the first 6 months of transferring to open conditions suggesting sentence type, psychological readiness and the change in environment may hinder a prisoner's stability.

However a study<sup>12</sup> of 207 young offenders absconds found that these offenders were commonly serving short sentences and were at the earlier stages of their sentences. Thus, suggesting sentence type or time served may not be significant factors when identifying the characteristics of an absconder. Further evidence demonstrates being younger at the time of conviction, previous absconding, larger offending histories and/or antisocial behaviour are all factors in predicting the likelihood of future absconding.<sup>13</sup>

### Current Investigation

Since the Learmont Enquiry in 1995<sup>14</sup> HMPPS has been criticised for its performance in maintaining security. As such HMPPS is keen to understand risk of abscond in the context of lived experience that is 'what prison life is really like'. In understanding this it is hoped that improvement in services can be attained. Thus, improving the quality of prison life and preventing the prison abscond. This research utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore this phenomena.

## Methodological Framework

IPA is an 'attempt to unravel the meanings contained in accounts through a process of interpretative engagement with the texts and transcripts.'<sup>15</sup> Based upon IPA's internal structure and objective it is appropriate for the current research, allowing emphasis upon the importance of subjective experience.<sup>16</sup>

### Sampling

Purposive sampling was used enabling the researcher to construct a homogenous sample. All participants were recruited on the premise they were long term prisoners or prisoners serving indeterminate sentences for public protection (ISPP) who had absconded from a prison setting, given that these types of prisoners were overrepresented within the abscond data.

### Procedure

Participants engaged in a briefing and informed consent session. Data from interviews was retrieved through open questions devised on a semi-structured basis. The tape recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher identified thematic clusters which were then independently reviewed, to ensure reliability.

### Demographics

Participants were aged between 26-55 years old. Participant's had absconded from a different UK open prison, constituting 4 prisons nationally. Pseudonyms are used to protect the true identity of the participants.

### Analytical Findings

The analysis detailed recurrent themes which were phenomenological in composition (9 superordinate and

IPA is an 'attempt to unravel the meanings contained in accounts through a process of interpretative engagement with the texts and transcripts.

10. Matin, N.nasrine.matin@hmpps.gsi.gov.uk 2013. LT Prisoner Research. [email] Message to L M Chant (laura.chant@hmpps.gsi.gov.uk). Sent Monday 16 September 2013: 15:29. Available at: <Criminal Justice Secure e-mail service> [accessed 16 September, 2013]
11. ROTL (Release On Temporary License) - is granted temporary absence from the prison as authorised by the prison service (as governed by Prison Service Order (PSO) 6300). ROTL's aim to assist with rehabilitation and preparing individuals for community resettlement.
12. Beck, G. (1994). Absconding from HMPYOI Thorn Cross: Summary. Psychology Unit Paper: HMYOI Lancaster Farms.
13. Richmond, I., Dandridge, L., & Jones, K. (1991). Changing nursing practice to prevent elopement. *Journal of Nursing Care Quality*, 6, pp. 73-81.
14. Woodcock, J. (1994). *Report of enquiry into the escape of six prisoners from special security unit at Whitemoor Prison on Friday 9th September, 1994. The Learmont Enquiry*. Home Office: Crown Publication.
15. Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Adventures in theory and Method*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
16. Spinelli, E. (2005). *The Interpreted World*. London: Sage Publications.

40 subordinate themes). Themes that are most relevant to the research objective are presented.

### Our Reality

This derives from the participants' perception (how they view prison life, themselves and the world as *they know it*).

#### *False sense of freedom*

*Joe: ...its conflicting you tell me I am here for more freedom, but the walls are still here I just can't see them.*

This indicates a 'false sense of freedom' in that the physical restraint of the wall is no longer present. Yet 'freedom' remains suppressed by the conditions and rules of a prison environment.

#### *A Waiting Game*

*Joe: Here, I know the times I am banged up I can judge time...without a watch, I can plan my day around this at D Cat I have to occupy myself...all day every day it's not easy especially when you're not in work right away days can drag ...it's more depressing.*

*Ahmed: if your family is well off, or you're still doing crime in Cat D or you can work then your fine... but if you're like me and don't fit in any of them... what can you do? Except sit on your arse waiting for your time to be over, it becomes very depressing actually.*

'Time' is presented as a factor in the decision to abscond. They are waiting around which impacts their mood.

Category D 'as a simulation of the real world'

*Johnny: ...the money is crap and its embarrassing really it's definitely not like the real world.*

*Ahmed: In the community I am expected to work which is what I wanted to do but no...in D Cat it's the other way round...how am I meant to become a citizen again when they*

*are always changing the rules, and treating you differently to how you would be as a citizen.*

As Category D Prisoners Johnny and Ahmed are expected to reintegrate into society yet employment and finances are indifferent to that. So open conditions is only ever a simulation of the real world and they have difficulty adjusting.

#### *Identity*

*Ahmed: ...although I am a prisoner and society doesn't care I am a person as well, with goals, dreams, regret and I sometimes need help.*

Ahmed feels rejected by society which identifies him only as a 'prisoner'. He attempts to reinstate his social identity by maintaining goals and expressing remorse but feels others do not identify him by similar means.

*Joe: I was number one on the servery...I come back from Cat D got my job and that back... .*

Joe feels that within closed conditions he had a greater sense of identity, through his profile of a servery worker. Therefore, returning to closed conditions was not a deterrent, instead it reinstates a form of prosocial identity.

*Kacper: you get pushed pillow to post you become a name.*

*...I hadn't had my own clothes well a full outfit for like 22 years or something so it was a massive thing for me.*

Kacper feels he is identified by name only. This identity, too, shaped by the clothing he wears.

### Lack of Control

This theme emanated from the participant's interpretation of specific incidence, encouraging them to believe they lack control of their lives. This appears to embolden an 'us vs. them' culture.

#### *Dangling the Carrot*

This indicates a 'false sense of freedom' in that the physical restraint of the wall is no longer present. Yet 'freedom' remains suppressed by the conditions and rules of a prison environment.

Joe: ...you are in limbo, you're stuck, it's strange...like you almost don't want to be there. I tell you what it's like, like dangling a carrot above the donkeys head. I mean I am sat there, not had any freedom for 7 years and I am watching people come in and go out.

Kacper: ...whilst I was confined to the grounds I had to watch him get up go out and most Saturdays go into town...it's like showing a baby a sweet and moving it away.

Both sought freedom and felt teased by having to watch others receive it whilst they were on their lay down period. Thus lacking control regards when they were able to essentially progress.

#### Status and Power

Ahmed: You're stuck in there. There's nothing you can do.

Johnny: ...the establishment, parole board, government, this sentence...makes it impossible to set goals and achieve them, we are told all the time set goals, mini goals you do...you work through them you get to the last mini goal parole say no and that's it, the end post has moved.

Ahmed feels powerless to a system he views as much bigger than him. Similarly, Johnny views these authoritative systems including his sentence (ISPP) as in control. This impacts his esteem and creates uncertainty of progression.

Kacper: ...the majority of prisoners at D Cats are determinate or in as white collar or blue collar criminals, and those who have loads of money, those who have an active network of criminality whilst they are still inside they can get clothes, drugs, alcohol, money you name it they can get it in so it becomes a very competitive environment, with leaders and people in debt with them which gives them power.

Kacper feels indifferent to his peers and outlines a system of control based on power as a result of sentence type, money and criminal ability. Whilst this

accentuates risk it also gives understanding of a lived hierarchical system.

#### Self-Preservation

Joe: ...prison is full of men who think they are hard, egos bigger than their brains and you have to learn to stand your ground.

The ideology of needing to protect results in Joe feeling controlled by the situation he finds himself in.

#### Let down by the system

Johnny: ...you can have the best interests...you can want to change like I have but you become so angry at the system because they don't support you ...

prison is full of men who think they are hard, egos bigger than their brains and you have to learn to stand your ground.

Ahmed: ...I just want to go to college, but nope knocked back. It pissed me off for ages, I was angry at the system I did think fuck it, and for a long time I was demotivated...it probably was part of my decision to run, to escape it...

Feeling let down by the system induced anger which encouraged prisoners to give up allowing the situation to consume them; thus contributing to a decision to abscond.

#### Restrictions

Johnny: ...it doesn't prepare someone because it's a community of criminals and you're still restricted you can't choose your life there.

Johnny asserts whilst open conditions attempt to prepare an individual for release it is restrictive as it is unlike the real world. Rather he is forced to further live amongst criminals; controlled by a system without choice.

#### Staff Support

This relates to the participants' experience and interpretation of their relationships with professionals.

### Attitude and Decision Making

Joe: ...But as far as he was concerned, his attitude was I am the 'screw' you will do as you are told 1.

Joe feels that staff enforce an 'us vs. them' culture which he senses a lack of support.

Ahmed: ...when I actively asked for work their attitude is well you might become ill and sue us and the prison don't want that reputation or to lose money, so instead they let people fester but that's worse because that's when you get your absconds and people thinking fuck this off.

Ahmed believes staff have a poor attitude and make decisions based upon the reputation of the prison service. He feels staff do not trust him and assume he may litigate.

### Relationship Dynamic

Kacper: ...thought well they don't really care why should I?

Ahmed: ... they haven't taken time to get to know you, they don't care about your problem and they just brush off or say they will help and months pass and nothing.

It is evident that the relationships between staff and prisoners break down as prisoners feel staff do not care. Resulting in withdrawal and distanced relationships.

### Open vs. Closed

Kacper: ... staff, well in my experience, at the D Cat just don't have an interest in you as a person, they don't care. Here, I can go up to staff...talk to them, like a normal human being, I feel human here.

Kacper feels staff in open conditions are unapproachable. He also feels staff in closed conditions provide opportunities for him to express himself and are open in their feedback.

...staff...actively avoid talking to you it's very different to closed where staff will warn you and tell you before they write about you which gives you a chance to discuss it and explain yourself and apologize if needs be, D Cat staff don't.

Clearly prisoners perceive staff as unavailable. This appears to reduce prisoners' confidence in staff and they feel unsupported. Essentially, as presented within Ahmed's narrative it impacts their motivation.

### Presence and Availability

Kacper: ...there isn't much patrol.

Joe: ...I have literally wondered around for about half an hour or so and there isn't one single officer on the unit, there is no one there...

Ahmed: ...staff you hardly see them, you see them on occasional walk rounds but hardly ever...My offender supervisor, I saw once or twice....Offender manager I only saw him at parole, probation don't care they don't come in and see you so you don't bother with them either.

Clearly prisoners perceive staff as unavailable. This appears to reduce prisoners' confidence in staff and they feel unsupported. Essentially, as presented within Ahmed's narrative it impacts their motivation.

### Family and Friends Support

Personal support is paramount in offender rehabilitation.

This theme reinforces the importance of this, by identifying how access to family and friends and the quality of the relationships can act as a protective factor<sup>17</sup> and indeed a promotive factor.<sup>18</sup>

17. Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or larger society that mitigate or eliminate risk (Centre for the Study of Social Policy, 2013). 3 Promotive factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or larger society that actively enhance well-being (CSSP, 2013).

18. An 'indeterminate' prison sentence doesn't have a fixed length of time. This means no date is set when the person will be released they have to spend a minimum amount of time in prison (called a 'tariff') before they're considered for release by a Parole Board.

### Geographic Proximity

Joe: ... it was too far from my family so I felt more trapped and isolated.

...You are being fucked off up north, without a second thought its destroying all bridges again with family, when you have worked so hard to rebuild them = that's the prison service failing on its own aims of on one hand saying they are here to prepare prisoners for release by helping them rebuild family ties but then fucking them off 500 miles up north, it makes no sense 3.

The distance between Joe and his family hindered his emotional state and his progression became meaningless. As such this may hinder rehabilitation on the basis of destabilisation and a lack of support.

### Relationships

Joe: I was then getting angry a lot because of the stress. I didn't know anyone there.

...To build relationships, that's something prison doesn't teach you it's a false environment you only build detached relationships with people, people who mean very little most of the time you don't get visits so you are not in touch with real people so socialising which is a normal task to most, becomes very difficult for long term prisoners.

It is evident prison can be restrictive in the development of interpersonal relationships particularly for long term prisoners.

### Risk and Victimization

This superordinate theme is comprehensive, although commonly the manifestation of risk and victimisation is noted within the social milieu.

### Substance Misuse

Joe: There were literally drugs everywhere.

...I wasn't there really smoking it, don't get me wrong I tried it...But I saw what it done to

other people, I mean the state of some of them they were in debt and everything<sup>1</sup>.

Evidently substance misuse is a problem within open conditions. Joe states this impacts individuals and increases the risk of debt. Moreover, Ahmed feels predisposed to risk from determinate sentenced prisoners he feels the services provided to support prisoners are also at risk.

Ahmed: straighters trying to sell you drugs, drink or trying to get you caught up in something so there is more temptation...even one of the listeners I went to once was rattling his back out, clearly on crack or smack and he is asking me if I want to talk, I was like get out of my room you need more ... help than I do.

### Gang Culture.

Ahmed: ...it's every man for themselves you don't really make friends unless you're...one of the druggies or...part of a gang or know people in from the out so you literally I have no one to talk to.

Whilst Ahmed's narrative identifies a lack of support it also emphasises a risk of isolation if you do not assign to a particular group thus, assuming gang culture existence.

### Sentence Type

Joe: So that's the problem, for straight sentenced prisoners they treat it like a party they don't have anything to lose...it's like they don't care.

Ahmed: you have straighters who know when they are getting out so they come about all cocky trying to mess shit up... that's why people get to the point, thinking yeah fuck this I am off.

Joe feels determinate sentenced prisoners have nothing to lose and therefore behave inappropriately, as there is no perceived sanction for their behaviour. This can become aggravating for life sentenced prisoners (LSP) and Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoners (for public protection) (ISPP) 19 generating risky situations:

This superordinate theme is comprehensive, although commonly the manifestation of risk and victimisation is noted within the social milieu.

Joe: Some lifers get preyed on by determinates with money and contacts, and they end up in debt and face the consequences of that like having to do something in return it's a dangerous game mixing all different types of criminal's and sentence types and lengths with each other. Lifers and that can't refuse to help the determinates as violence may break out and there are much greater sanctions for lifers and IPPs than there is determinates and they know that, that gives them power.

*Violence as an acceptable means*

Joe: If you say your piece people will generally leave you alone. You can't be someone who lies there and takes it.

Johnny: It's scrapping, everyone for themselves.

Kacper: The only way to avoid trouble is to put on a front act dangerous.

Violence appears to be acceptable as a means of preservation within a seemingly volatile structure.

*Peers and Social Suicide*

Joe: I spoke to an officer, to tell them I didn't want to be around smoke, but he said unless I was willing to point out who actually was smoking then there was nothing he could do about it... I was like hang on, I am coming to you for help and you can't help because I won't say who it is he knows I can't say who it is, that's social suicide, I put myself at risk if I do...I say that I am an outcast, a victim.

Joe highlights how by liaising with staff about specific incidents can create a risk of victimisation. Furthermore, Ahmed's experience demonstrates how hostile thinking and anti-social behaviour can be reinforced by peers at the time of vulnerability; increasing risk.

Ahmed: I met up with this guy I knew from a hostel...I told him what I had done, he gave me advice to abscond.

## Living Situation

The themes represented pertain to the participants' experience of residing within open conditions and services available to them.

*Accommodation*

Kacper: we have walls with holes in, dirty mattresses, flat pillows, tiny space smokers shoved with non-smokers...Some D Cats have shared toilets that are separate and these are awful like public toilets not cleaned well not inspected so although it's your home you can't make it feel like home. The walls in the dorms are thin you can hear through them, so it impacts your sleep and because there isn't much patrol people have music on until stupid o'clock which is shitty when you have to get up early.

Kacper experienced an uncomfortable living situation, particularly regards mixing smokers and non-smokers.

*Facilities and Services*

Ahmed: I stopped going doctors when I was ill because it was like the Spanish inquisition except no action they weren't interested in helping you they saw you to get their numbers up that's it.

Ahmed felt distrusted by doctors. He thought the service they provided was aimed at fulfilling audit requirements as opposed to an interest in his health and wellbeing. Both Ahmed and Johnny, found alcohol and drug services unhelpful believing these services could only assist in light of current issues.

Ahmed: You see in Cat D you expect to have loads of support services but you don't, not really like the only one there was CARATs which is for druggies and that and I am not so they can't even help you, so you do feel lost.

Johnny: ...there is absolutely jack they can offer you, like they talk to you but they just go over the same stuff you have already done and give you contacts and unless you're

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currently on drink or drugs they don't really care like there's nothing they can give you.

### Employment and Finances

Ahmed emphasises the importance of financial security in relation to rehabilitation and progression.

*Ahmed: without work you can't have money and without money how do you do everything else town visits.*

However, Johnny notes the difficulty of obtaining meaningful employment due to the competitive environment induced by prison procedure and control.

*Johnny: You go to Cat D with all these plans and none of them are achievable well not for the first 6 months or something because like I said your waiting until you get your leave or whatever and everyone competes for the same job so you end up doing shit that's meaningless so it doesn't prepare you for the reality at all.*

...without work you can't have money and without money how do you do everything else like town visits.

### Transitional Stages

This superordinate theme is underpinned by factors hindering progression during the transitional stages.

#### Readiness and Adjustment

*Joe: Staff need to just not sit there and think we are fully ready for this, or completely self-sufficient because we are not. Most of the time we haven't been given a chance to even set goals or a plan for cat D so we go into it blindly.*

*Kacper: ...because of security issues they don't always tell you when and where you're transferring to so you can never really prepare yourself physically or mentally...*

Joe feels staff have too great an expectation of prisoners that is perceived as ready and able to cope. However this is hindered by a lack of opportunity to plan for progression. Similarly Kacper feels mired by security regulations which restrict planning.

### Institutionalisation

*Joe: but yeah to be out at first it was different... nice... it was... refreshing. I could see sheep and see for miles, which screwed my head up a bit. I even saw a hedgehog, which was strange, as I had been inside walls for nearly all of my life...once the, I guess you could say the euphoria had worn off it was weird... it was like it's not that clear...*

*Johnny: ...when someone has come from closed after like 10 years or whatever its proper weird for us to adjust things change like, it sounds daft but its brighter than you remember, greener like cars that look different they definitely move quicker.*

Noticeably, Joe and Johnny's world as they know it has clashed with the reality of outside; generating a euphoric and indifferent view of the world. This impacts their psychological state (becoming overwhelmed and confused) and they have difficulty coping.

*Kacper: ...lifers and IPPs its riskier, and the transition after 7-30 years of institutionalisation is just too much, I don't understand why psychologists and governors and those at the top don't see that, it needs to be more gradual than it is.*

Kacper states there is a heightened risk for the long-term prisoner. Identifying change as outsized leading to an inability to adjust.

#### Environmental Changes

*Joe: There are other things that are strange too, they have actual council houses there for later on people who get to move into them to help prepare for their release, I'm thinking houses in a jail, it seems alien its weird, I've just not seen houses for a long time, they seem a lot smaller than I remember. There are no bars on my window, everything like that is just like 'whoa' this is so different. I did feel it was too much, I told myself I need to take a step back here it was just really strange.*

## Discrimination

The environment of open conditions is different to what Joe is used to. Kacper feels the removal of the wall is problematic to adjust to as temptation to leave is presented particularly at times of difficulty. Kacper states this is exacerbated by having to share living space with others and he becomes uncomfortable/confined.

*Kacper: ...here because of lock up and individual cells where at worse you are sharing with one other you can get space away... D Cat it's a giant fish bowl you all chucked in there isn't any escape someone is always poking around that just isn't comfortable for me... it's tempting to just walk out of the perimeter just to get your space away from others, I remember in the last few days at D Cat I would walk round the whole jail, right close practically on the perimeter, just circle and circle like a stir craze donkey just so I could feel free.*

### Expectation vs. Reality

*Ahmed: I had heard a lot about D Cat, read a lot about it and I got there and for me it was a total disaster... like how they help you get back into the community and help you find work and that. And how they support...long term prisoners in the prison, it's just not what you hope for. And, how we struggle to make ends meet, they don't care about that, we are another number to them, and it's not very supportive. So what I read it was all just a lie.*

*Kacper: You see when you get to this environment and it's sold to you by professionals as a progressive move when you haven't been to one before, whilst apprehensive you are open minded but you get there and it's very much...more of the same really.*

Ahmed and Kacper feel the information they had prior to transition encouraged a different view of open conditions to what the reality was.

This theme highlights perceived experience of discrimination based on a number of factors on both a, personal and contextual level.

### Health Issues

*Ahmed: ...the work stuff well, there at D Cat its even worse than closed prisons because they look at me and because I have a health condition....epilepsy, and they always worry about if something happens to me and not because they care, but because they are scared I will sue their arse they don't want you to work.*

Ahmed felt discriminated against as he was unable to obtain employment due to his epilepsy. Moreover, Kacper experiences bullying due to his appearance due to a lack of opportunity to have his glasses fixed. He feels this is indifferent to the health services he would be provided with in the community.

*Kacper: ...look at the state of these...they are taped up at the sides here and the glass is as thick as jam jars and make you look a complete dork it does nothing for your self-esteem that's already rock bottom but it also makes you an easy target like your just laughed at all the time its bullying I guess, and a man of my age it's embarrassing*

*and it riles me...here I can lock myself away in D Cat you can't it's everyday, but opticians won't pay to thin the glass and fix them cheaply and they break again so I have given up, I have to wear them because I can't see but then I put up with snide comments again a victim of circumstance.*

### Judged and Labelled

*Joe: ...the first thing he has said is so you are X and yeah I am X he said yeah I have just*

...here because of  
lock up and  
individual cells  
where at worse you  
are sharing with  
one other you can  
get space away... D  
Cat, it's a giant fish  
bowl you are all  
chucked in there  
isn't any escape  
someone is always  
poking around  
that just  
isn't comfortable  
for me...

*read half your file I will be watching you, not you know asking questions or making me aware of his support it was a direct threat of I am watching you... it made me annoyed, he doesn't know me. I thought who do you think you*

*are? I have earned my place here, I have served my time, I have done my courses and reduced my risk, I deserve to be here.*

Joe felt labelled based on his past and Johnny feels unable to seek support in fear he will be judged.

### *Absconding Intentions*

This superordinate theme isolates specific factors that directly influence the decision to abscond at the point of actually absconding.

#### *Escapism*

*Kacper: The only thing we have is escapism whether it's through reading, exercise or literally walking away.*

Kacper feels 'escapism' in some form is the only option he has to cope with his circumstances. Both Ahmed and Johnny seek an alternative reality that is to feel free and they find this in leaving the premises and pursuing comfort in others.

*Ahmed: I went on home leave one time and I met someone, and we starting talking we would have a laugh and I remember feeling less stressed and more happy well happier than I had been since being in prison.*

*Johnny: I just wanted some normality, like be able to speak to someone about how I felt or just to escape the shit for a bit.*

#### *Seeking Transfer*

*Kacper: I was thinking if I walked out I would have made a statement. I had been asking for a transfer since I arrived but got nowhere. So for me I guess it was like... if you are not going to do this I will do that. I knew it would get me back into a healthier place.*

*Ahmed: I used to write to my family told them I want to go back to closed, and that I was depressed and it was a shit hole...so yeah... that's that really.*

Kacper and Ahmed's absconding intentions were to seek a transfer back to closed conditions.

#### *Impulsivity*

Whilst this subordinate theme is coded here (as it led directly to absconding) it is characteristically different to the other subordinate themes noted within 'absconding intentions'. Here, 'impulsivity' presents as a causal factor for absconding as opposed to a person absconding with the intention to be impulsive.

*Kacper: you feel trapped nowhere to turn to, you become wrapped up in the anxiety, frustration and I guess anger to a degree and you don't think of consequences or think things through...*

*Ahmed: I don't remember thinking too much about it, I just went and walked to the bus and made my way to London, I was walking around London and thought I would just chill out for the day didn't think of the consequences or anything, I don't even think I was planning to run away I was just fed up.*

#### *Lack of Punishment*

*Kacper: ...the punishment of going back isn't really a punishment so people don't really care.*

*Joe: Prison becomes a way of life, no wait it becomes life so it's not a Hassel, it's not a punishment it's just a part of your life.*

Both perceive a lack of punishment thus are not deterred from absconding. Interestingly, Joe perceives prison as a way of life as opposed to punishment which perhaps encourages an insensible attitude.

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### *Lack of Reward*

*Joe: ... I am just rolling with the punches it's fine, it only becomes a problem when you get to cat D and you begin to see the real life again, people going out, seeing more and hearing more and yet you are sat there not able to engage in that real life, you are still waiting I am not rewarded in any way.*

*Johnny: ...we are told all the time set goals, mini goals you do and you work through them you get to the last mini goal parole say no and that's it the end post has moved.*

Both feel unrewarded and therefore become demotivated.

### *Proving a Point: Evoking Change*

*Kacper: ...we cannot prove ourselves because they don't believe in rehabilitation they believe in keeping a good reputation and these absconds are just out proving this...*

*Joe: ...I was thinking if I walked out I was making a statement.*

It is evident that one of the intentions of absconding is to prove a point by making a bold statement that prisoners are not coping with their institutional and personal situation.

## **Discussion**

Distinctively these findings outline a number of factors that contribute to absconding within the forensic population at both a contextual and individual level. For example: those that have absconded felt open conditions provide a false sense of reality, they felt powerless to their sentence and the establishment, they perceived a lack of support, and some absconded to 'prove a point'. They felt a lack of readiness in their transition to open conditions, and felt at risk from others particularly those whom are on a different type

of sentence. The risk of substance abuse and violence are also factors in their decision making process. It is the combination of these factors which perhaps heighten the risk of absconding.

The demographic of the sampled population supports previous research findings in that there is no one 'type' of prisoner that absconds or indeed fails in open, although ISPPs and LSPs are over represented. This distinction is noted heavily throughout the elicited themes in that ISPPs and LSPs appear to have difficulties coping in open conditions thus which may impact their decision to abscond. Prisoners feel denied opportunity and sometimes seek a transfer to closed estate; where support, structure and comfort can be found. The lack of gradual transition, little or no planning and withdrawal from personal and professional supports creates a vulnerable psychological state to which prisoners become susceptible to stress. These factors demonstrate the criticality of the transitional period to which most absconds occur (within the first 6 months).

Clearly characteristics of absconding are not idiosyncratic and therefore measuring this phenomena quantitatively poses a challenge. Seeking demographic patterns can be considered unhelpful and non-predictive; therefore, it is argued that focusing upon the exploration of the phenomena in its purist state (i.e. qualitatively) provides greater understanding of individual and socio-environmental factors that contribute to absconding.

This research outlines a number of important factors contributory to the rationale for absconding within the UK Prison system. It provides understanding of 'what prison life is really like' for long term sentenced prisoners. Whilst this provides rich and meaningful information, it can be considered limited as it collates experience from the perspective of four long term prisoners thus, not be wholly generalisable. Therefore, there is a requirement for further academic exploration as well as practical investigation and changes to assist in understanding, managing and preventing abscond. Further to this, it would be helpful to examine experiences of prison life between non-absconds and absconds to further understand the critical differences between their experiences; or indeed if there isn't a critical difference, explore why and how this then relates to the decision to abscond?