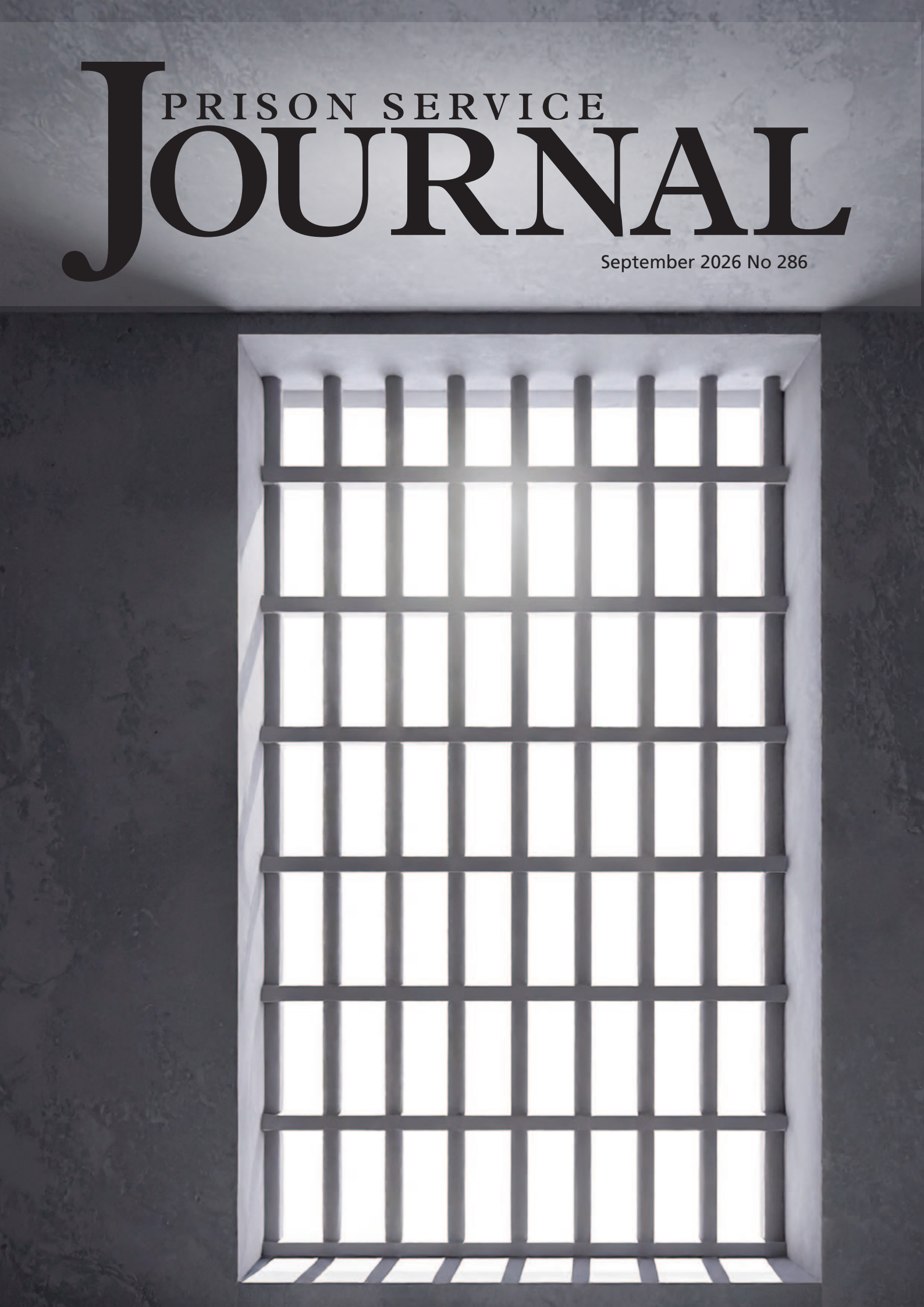
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60 **Crossing professional boundaries: Which factors increase prison staff vulnerability to wrongdoing?**
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The Editorial Board wishes to make clear that the views expressed by contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the Prison Service.

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Editorial

Dr Rachel Gibson *is a Forensic Psychologist within HMPPS and Co-Editor of the Prison Service Journal*

This general edition of the Prison Service Journal brings together a range of articles which we hope will be of interest to, and spark discussion among, our readers.

We start with a rapid evidence assessment exploring how the principles of high reliability organisations (HROs) could be applied to the custodial environment by **Emma Higginson, Robert Smith, Dr Catharine Booth,** and **Emma Preece.** Given the lack of published research in custodial settings, the article focuses on research conducted within healthcare settings, and identifies several ways in which the HRO principles could apply. However, the authors highlight two key barriers to the implementation of the principles, namely, the practicalities of their application and the wider culture of HMPPS.

Our next article by **Elden Morrow, Mariam Osmane, Katie Foster, Ella Toeyrylae, Scarlett Thomas,** and **Jakub Krajewski** describes how the frontline staff network within the Ministry of Justice helps to bridge the divide between the frontline and policy. The authors describe how 'inside knowledge' from previous operational roles mean that members have a unique perspective that can add value within policy roles. We then have an article by **Katie Ritchie** which reflects on the capacity of higher education in prison to support, and enhance, desistance. The article draws on an exploratory study exploring the barriers, and enablers, of educational experiences among people in prison engaging in higher education. The article considers whether these have the potential to support, or impede, desistance, and offers some reflection on what changes could be made as a result.

Next, we have an article by **Dr Nawal Ammar, Dr Brad Shoemaker, Dr Michael Ouellet, Dr Davut Akca,** and **Dr Carla Cesaroni.** The authors outline their strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) analysis of chaplaincy and religious services in Canadian prisons. Their work draws on the experiences of chaplains, and emphasises the impact of chaplains' spiritual care on the well-being of individuals in prison, while also offering strategic recommendations to address systemic challenges. **Risteárd McDonald's** article then describes research exploring whether religious spaces within prison can be made sacred. This was explored in two prisons, where spaces were found to be made sacred through a process of 'setting apart'. Such spaces are described as sites of transformation, spiritual development, respite, and, paradoxically, as reminders of the prison regime.

We then have an article by **Katherine Albertson** and **Chris Grace** describing the core practice factors which led to the successful delivery of HMP Risley's Creating Future Opportunities (CFO) discovery wing. The authors argue that HMPPS could make greater use of community hub delivery models in the mainstream prison custodial context. Our next article is a transcript of a lecture given by **Professor Dominique Moran** at the 2025 Perrie Lectures. The lecture considers the legacy of the Victorian prison and its future within a modernising prison system. It highlights how many Victorian prisons have deep meaning within local communities, and reflects on whether the rehabilitative potential of them is being fully realised.

Our next article within this edition is by **Hasan Al Banna, Dr Rosemary Ricciardelli,** and **Dr Matthew Johnston.** The article aims to address the gap in relation to the effects of shift work on correctional officers work-life balance and wellbeing. The authors describe how working frequent extended shifts and night shifts result in difficulties with sleep and work-life balance. Several policy considerations are made to promote positive wellbeing and a healthy work-life balance for correctional officers.

Our final article, by **Dr Bronwen Frow-Jones,** examines factors which increase prison staff vulnerability to wrongdoing. This exploratory study aimed to fill a gap in the literature on this topic through use of a survey and interviews at two prisons. The findings reveal a workforce which feels undervalued by managers as well as wider society, and identifies individual, organisational and societal factors which increase staff vulnerability to wrongdoing.

How can the lessons learnt from High Reliability Organisations (HROs) be applied to custodial settings? A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)

Emma Higginson *is a Forensic Psychologist in Training at HM Prison and Probation Service.* ***Robert Smith*** *is a Senior Registered Forensic Psychologist at HM Prison and Probation Service.* ***Dr Catharine Booth*** *is a Principal Psychologist at HM Prison and Probation Service.* ***Emma Preece*** *is a Regional Lead Chartered and Registered Forensic and Occupational Psychologist at HM Prison and Probation Service.*

The paradigm of High Reliability Organisations (HROs) emerged following studies of three technologically complex but functionally different types of organisations: naval aircraft carriers, air traffic control systems, and nuclear power. The researchers were interested in understanding why these high-hazard organisations 'with a disposition to fail had not' (p.11).[1] A range of sectors within society, such as nuclear power plants, aviation, hospitals, construction sites and the military, facilitate high hazard operations yet consistently operate safely and effectively long-term. Such sectors have been coined as High Reliability Organisations (HROs).[2]

The concept of HROs was developed further and five hallmarks were identified: preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify interpretations, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise.[3] Preoccupation with failure related to being alert to failures, preparing for and preventing failure where possible, and responding to and recovering from failures when they do occur. Reluctance to simplify interpretations highlights the importance of not overlooking subtle aspects of complex problems and avoiding classifying conditions into convenient or preconceived categories. Executing recovery following problem events and learning from mistakes relates to commitment to resilience. Sensitivity to operations refers to the acknowledgement that failures are often the result of more than one source or cause. Finally, deference to expertise is about ensuring that staff with the problem-solving knowledge, skills and abilities are involved in the solution identification process and avoiding restrictions caused by hierarchy.

Human factors linked to incidents

Human factors are 'about people in their living and working situations, about their relationship with machines, with procedures and with the environment about them, and about their relationships with other people at work' (p.1).[4] A consistently occurring factor which featured in almost all incidents within the maritime industry was the human element which suggests that the majority of these are avoidable if understanding and behaviour is improved.[5] Twelve factors, coined as 'the Deadly Dozen' (p.4), were identified as the most common conditions that can act as a precursor to human error:

- ❏ Situational awareness: Do you really know what's happening?
- ❏ Alerting: Do you really speak up when you should?
- ❏ Communication: Do you really understand everyone?
- ❏ Complacency: Is everything really okay?
  Culture: Do you really have a good safety culture?
- ❏ Local practices: Efficient or dangerous shortcuts?
- ❏ Fatigue: Just tired or dangerously tired?
- ❏ Distractions: Multi-tasking or dangerously distracted?
- ❏ Pressure: Just busy or dangerously overloaded?
- ❏ Capability: Is your team really capable?
- ❏ Teamwork: How well do you really work together?

1. Roberts, K. H. (Ed.). (1993). *New challenges to understanding organizations.* Macmillan Publishing Company.
2. Roberts, K. H. (1989). New challenges in organizational research: High reliability organizations. *Industrial Crisis Quarterly, 3*(2), 111–125.
3 . Weick, K. E., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2001). *Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity.* Jossey-Bass, a John Wiley & Sons.
4. Kharoufah, H., Murray, J., Baxter, G., & Wild, G. (2018). A review of human factors causations in commercial air transport accidents and incidents: From to 2000–2016. Progress in Aerospace Sciences, 99, 1-13.
5. Maritime & Coastguard Agency. (2016). HUMAN ELEMENT GUIDANCE – PART 2. The Deadly Dozen – 12 Significant People Factors in Maritime Safety. MGN 520 (M) Human Element Guidance - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The Deadly Dozen factors and HRO principles link in terms of their focus on problem identification and problem resolution.

Relevance to custodial settings

An overriding aim within His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) is that of protecting the public, including victims, children, and vulnerable adults.[6] Holding people in prison securely enables the prevention of further offences being committed which, in turn, protects the public. People in prison having the ability to overcome physical security restraints or barriers, such as a wall, a fence, or locks, can lead to escapes. These incidents often gain a large amount of media attention which induces fear among members of the public.[7]

There were nine escapes from UK prisons in the 12 months to March 2024.[8] One particularly high-profile escape occurred in September 2023 from HMP Wandsworth, a Category B prison. An unannounced inspection of HMP Wandsworth took place between 22nd April and 2nd May 2024 by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMIP).[9] The inspection revealed that, prior to the escape, security procedures had been neglected for some time. Within custodial settings, staff are required to meet the daily needs of many people with complex challenges. At the same time, they are required to communicate with each other on violent incidents, regularly complete head counts, and ensure all doors and gates are locked. Implementing the HRO principles in custodial settings could enable staff to understand the cause of mistakes, help predict what could go wrong in the future and thereby make prisons a safer place to work and live and improve protection of the public.

Holding people in prison securely enables the prevention of further offences being committed which, in turn, protects the public.

The current review

Several reviews have drawn upon the empirical literature regarding the relevance of HRO principles in settings such as hospitals, construction sites, oil refineries, the military, and aviation, and how they can be implemented.[10 11 12 13] However, at the current time, research into how HRO principles can be applied to custodial settings, does not appear to exist. To this end, the current Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) aims to answer the question of 'How can the lessons learnt from High Reliability Organisations (HROs) be applied to custodial settings?' and inform future policy and practice to improve physical security within custodial settings. Suggestions for future research have been made.

Method

Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs) are less exhaustive than full systematic reviews but should not be less systematic.[14] They are recognised for their use in informing policy and identifying areas for future research. The process within the current review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.[15] The guidelines focus on having a clear research question, search strategy, sources of information, reference management system, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and methods of quality assessment and data extraction.

Following the initial scoping review, search terms were developed and tested for each main concept of the research question to provide scope and rigour. The

6. Ministry of Justice. (2023/24). Guide to HMPPS Annual Digest. Official Statistics Bulletin. Guide to HMPPS Annual Digest 2021/22 (publishing.service.gov.uk)
7. Culp, R. F. (2005). Frequency and characteristics of prison escapes in the United States: An analysis of national data. *The Prison Journal, 85*(3), 270-291.
8. See footnote 6: Ministry of Justice. (2023/24).
9. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. (2024). Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Wandsworth.13 and 20-24 September 2021 (justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)
10. Memarian, B. (2012). *Development of high reliability construction work systems: lessons from production practices of high performance work crews.* Arizona State University.
11. Høyland, S. A., Skotnes, R. Ø., & Holte, K. A. (2018). An empirical exploration of the presence of HRO safety principles across the health care sector and construction industry in Norway. *Safety science, 107,* 161-172.
12. Lekka, C., & Sugden, C. (2011). The successes and challenges of implementing high reliability principles: A case study of a UK oil refinery. *Process Safety and Environmental Protection, 89*(6), 443-451.
13. Amici, B., & Farnese, M. L. (2024). Learning to manage the unexpected: applying Weick and Sutcliffe's HRO principles to oil tanker accidents. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal, 33*(2), 98-113.
14. Moons, P., Goossens, E., & Thompson, D. R. (2021). Rapid reviews: the pros and cons of an accelerated review process. *European Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing, 20*(5), 515-519.
15. Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J. and Altman, D.G. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *Annals of Internal Medicine, 15*(4), 264-269.

search string was inputted into ProQuest Central, OVID and Scopus. These databases were selected based on their relevance to the topics of health and social sciences, including psychology.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed using the SPIDER framework to ensure relevance to the research question.[16] The initial search yielded a total of 768 results across the three databases. Once 304 duplicates were removed, there were 464 results to be screened. After titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, 196 results were eligible for review of the full text. Following this, 17 papers remained to be quality assessed.

Quality appraisal was conducted using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) quality assurance checklist for Qualitative Research.[17] This tool was selected as it is considered useful for quality appraising qualitative evidence syntheses.[18] Total scores for each paper were converted into percentages and a cut-off point of 70 per cent was determined to indicate high quality. Two papers scored 60 per cent and were therefore excluded, which left 15 papers. These 15 papers included research which had been conducted in a range of settings, such as hospitals, construction sites and oil refineries. At this point, it was decided that only research papers which had been conducted within healthcare settings would be included. This was due to healthcare settings aligning most closely to custodial settings in terms of face-to-face contact with service users, staff working as a team, and challenges staff face such as burn out and stretched resources.[19] [20] Once papers in other settings had been excluded, six papers remained. Four of these papers scored 100 per cent using the CASP quality assurance checklist for Qualitative Research whilst the remaining two scored 95 per cent.

Meta-ethnography is defined as an interpretive and inductive synthesis methodology.[21] Using this approach, interpretations are made by the meta-ethnographer which generate hypotheses and high-level theorising, bring together consensus and contradictions within individual studies, and uniquely derive formalised new knowledge. This method of data synthesis was chosen as it is uniquely suited to producing conceptual models and theory.

Findings

Six studies published between 2013 and 2023 and comprising of a total of 214 participants were included in the synthesis.[22] [23] [24] [25] [26] [27] All six studies were conducted in hospitals. Five were conducted in the United States of America (USA) and one was conducted in Canada. Two studies used a sample of staff in leader/director roles only, whilst the remaining four used a sample of staff in a range of roles (e.g., Vice Presidents, registered nurses, medical doctors, and support staff). All six studies used qualitative methods for data collection such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, direct observation, and document analysis. Various methods of data analysis were employed, such as thematic analysis, constant comparison, and content analysis.

Open mindedness

Engage in root cause analysis. One paper discovered that high and low performing safety units provided different responses to mistakes: low performing units focused on providing education to specific staff who were deemed to have made the mistake whilst high performing units were motivated to identify the system error. Similarly, participants in two other studies highlighted the importance of 'maintaining a questioning attitude' to identify the cause of a mistake and avoiding attributing blame.

16. Cooke, A., Smith, D., & Booth, A. (2012). Beyond PICO: The SPIDER tool for qualitative evidence synthesis. *Qualitative Health Research, 22*(10), 1435-1444.
17. Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. (2017). CASP Qualitative Research Checklist. Qualitative Studies Checklist - CASP.
18. Long, H. A., French, D. P., & Brooks, J. M. (2020). Optimising the value of the critical appraisal skills programme (CAS) tool for quality appraisal in qualitative evidence synthesis. *Research Methods in Medicine and Health Sciences, 1*(1), 31-42.
19. O'Mahony, N. (2011). Nurse burnout and the working environment. *Emergency Nurse, 19*(5).
20. Finney, C., Stergiopoulos, E., Hensel, J., Bonato, S., & Dewa, C. S. (2013). Organizational stressors associated with job stress and burnout in correctional officers: a systematic review. *BMC public health, 13,* 1-13.
21. France, E. F., Wells, M., Lang, H., & Williams, B. (2016). Why, when and how to update a meta-ethnography qualitative synthesis. *Systematic Reviews, 5*(1), 44.
22. Murray, J. S., Cox, G. R., Watts, B. V., Montoya Jr, A., Sawyer, A. M., & Fankhauser, J. (2023). Leading for High Reliability During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Pilot Quality Improvement Initiative to Identify Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned. *Journal of Clinical Outcomes Management, 30*(2).
23. Mossburg, S. E., Weaver, S. J., Pillari, M., & Biddison, E. D. (2019). Manifestations of high-reliability principles on hospital units with varying safety profiles: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of nursing care quality, 34*(3), 230-235.
24. Scott-Martinet, K. (2016). *Implementing high reliability organization principles (HROPs) in a US hospital: A case study.* Northcentral University.
25. Jennings, B. M., Yeager, K. A., Feistritzer, N. R., Gullatte, M. M., & Martyn, K. K. (2018). Enacting high reliability principles while caring for people with Ebola Virus Disease. American Journal of Infection Control, 46(10), 1167-1173.
26. Goldenhar, L. M., Brady, P. W., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Muething, S. E. (2013). Huddling for high reliability and situation awareness. *BMJ Quality & Safety, 22*(11), 899-906.
27. Rotteau, L., Goldman, J., Shojania, K. G., Vogus, T. J., Christianson, M., Baker, G. R., ... & Coffey, M. (2022). Striving for high reliability in healthcare: a qualitative study of the implementation of a hospital safety programme. *BMJ Quality & Safety, 31*(12), 867-877.

Many participants commented that having a blame-free and non-punitive environment was an integral part of the definition of safety culture.

Adapt after mistakes. In one paper, it was highlighted that staff were 'in a state of constant learning'; they viewed near misses and accidents as an opportunity to seek improved practices. Adaptivity and flexibility were essential to ensure that staff were considering what was truly working; 'we've always done it this way' was not spoken. If something was not working, they would adapt or change protocols. If a protocol was needed but did not exist, it was developed. Similarly, another paper discovered that staff from high-performing units were proactive and unafraid of changing their strategy. Participants in another study reported that in order to be resilient, they needed to engage in adaptive and creative problem solving.

Long-term commitment

Embed processes into daily practice. Participants in one study reported that they kept the HRO principles on the forefront of their minds throughout their practice. Similarly, one paper discovered that participants viewed HRO principles as not a checklist but rather something that was woven throughout everything they did. They reported 'constantly infiltrating' their practice with patient safety and embedding safety discussions into staff meetings. Although the hospital scored highly in patient safety, they did not become complacent. Staff caring for patients with Ebola constantly reminded each other of the dangers of the disease which motivated them to adhere to protocols. They created a number of 'family rules' which included the fact that everybody was responsible for everybody else. These 'family rules' were repeated every morning in the daily huddles (meetings). Another paper discovered that hospital staff associated high reliability with standardisation and repeatability.

High performing units were motivated to identify the system error.

Do it properly. The staff in one study reported that the pace of their practice was always slow; for most of their protocols, there was standardised steps, and these were strictly adhered to which took time. Nurses had an 'obsession with cleanliness' and were of the view that 'if you have time to lean, you have time to clean'. Staff would wipe floors 'just in case' a droplet of blood had fallen. They viewed the mundane task of cleaning as of paramount importance. Participants used a 'safety buddy' who would act as a second pair of eyes to spot problems and/or offer reminders. Within three studies, participants reported that they would never proceed in the face of uncertainty. They highlighted the importance of stopping a process and reevaluating if something seemed wrong. In terms of implementing the HRO principles, many participants in one study highlighted the importance of working slowly and doing it 'the right way' rather than rushing it. They voiced that staff are already overtaxed and it is important that they are not further overloaded or overwhelmed; participants recommended that training is provided in stages.

Teamwork

Information sharing. One study discovered that 'daily huddles' (meetings) facilitated more and better-quality information sharing within and across units. It enabled staff to develop a shared understanding of the events that were occurring on each unit and everyone's role. This, in turn, facilitated accountability and trust and enabled them to deliver well-coordinated care. Participants in three of the studies reported that daily meetings served as a forum for staff to ask questions, raise concerns, and obtain answers in real time. Staff felt empowered to speak up and publicly express disagreement, even with those in power. It was reported that communication is a major responsibility, particularly when staff were changing roles.

A number of papers commented on the importance of reporting problems, mistakes, and near misses through electronic recording systems. A hospital within one study did this by reporting serious safety matters on the intranet. They also had a 'good catch' reporting tool to raise awareness of the kinds of mistakes that can happen. Similarly, participants in another study maintained a log of near misses and learnt from them. Reporting problems and mistakes was 'the norm' and actively encouraged. Another study discovered that staff from high performing units reported issues face-to-face during daily briefings.

Shared decision making: Staff of all grades were expected at all daily huddles (meetings) so that major decisions could be made as a group. Front line staff felt as though they had a credible voice and that their recommendations would be taken seriously and acted upon. It was noted in one study that the attitude of the managers was that 'whatever the nurses want to do, that's what we'll do'. Nurses were recognised as being experts in caring for critically ill patients, and physicians heavily relied upon them. Staff of all grades treated

each other as 'equals'. However, it was evident in three studies that there was a disconnect between decision makers and front-line staff. One study discovered that, in low performing units, physicians communicated with case managers instead of nurses. Another study found that managers often overturned the decisions of frontline staff. Similarly, a shared understanding of where the expertise lay was evident in another study but this often equated with seniority and professional background rather than expertise with the specific problem at hand.

Barriers

Practicalities. Difficulties managing competing priorities was noted as a barrier to implementing the principles. For example, participants in one study voiced that priorities, such as the staffing crisis, pulled them away from focusing on HRO roll out, and participants in another found that sometimes they were unable to attend briefings due to needing to care for deteriorating patients. Participants also found that implementing the principles took 'manpower and time'; participants faced difficulties as they felt pressure to be efficient. It was highlighted in another study that, with larger teams of staff, there is less opportunity for team bonding and communication across the whole team declines. Participants in one study raised concerns about the complex nature of HRO principles and communicating these to staff.

Participants viewed HRO principles as not a checklist but rather something that was woven throughout everything they did.

Culture. Participants in two studies raised that the culture of the organisation may be a barrier to implementing the HRO principles on a consistent basis. It was noted that long-term staff members can be comfortable with the status quo and reluctant to try something new. Staff may view HRO principles as 'just another initiative with a new name'. They might try new ideas for a short while and then revert to the status quo. It was noted that these staff members may actively sabotage the process by not adhering to it or making negative remarks which could have a detrimental effect on other members of staff. In both studies, managers found it difficult to sustain a high level of passion about safety on a regular basis, especially on units where staff are 'desensitised to danger'. Both studies also found that issues can arise over perceived authority, and staff can be fearful of being blamed for mistakes.

Discussion

This REA revealed several ways in which learning from HROs can be applied to custodial settings to improve physical security. Mistakes in custodial settings could involve a gate or cell door being left open or an escape. The above findings suggest that, rather than attributing blame to specific members of staff, the focus should be on establishing the root cause or system failure which led to the mistake. Staff should be open minded and not make assumptions about what the cause could have been. Mistakes should be viewed as an opportunity to learn and improve practices. This is in line with the HRO principles of reluctance to simplify, commitment to resilience and sensitivity to operations.[28] These findings are also in line with the research suggesting individual accountability and a learning organisation are key to developing a culture of reliability.[29]

Prioritising cleanliness in hospitals bears parallels with the importance of security in custodial settings. In order to embed HRO principles into daily practice in custodial settings, the above findings suggest that staff may benefit from constant reminders of the principles and reflecting on whether they are adhering to them, for example at the morning briefing. They may also benefit from constantly reminding themselves and each other of the consequences which could arise from leaving a gate or cell door open (e.g., a prisoner escaping, lone night staff being harmed, people in prison who are non-associates coming into contact with each other). It was identified that staff should not proceed in the face of uncertainty; this suggests that, if operational staff do not feel prepared to unlock people in prison, they should pause until they are ready. These findings are in line with the HRO principle of preoccupation with failure and the Deadly Dozen factors of culture, pressure, and complacency. Finally, methods of implementing HRO principles should be done gradually.

Staff in custodial settings may also find that meetings enable the sharing of high-quality up-to-date information and provide them with an opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns. Having an electronic recording system to report not just incidents but near misses and 'good catches', such as a gate being left open, may be useful. The above findings indicate that

28. See footnote 3: Weick, K. E., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2001).
29. See footnote 5: Maritime & Coastguard Agency. (2016).

decisions should be made as a group and the opinions of officers are particularly valuable. These findings are in line with the HRO principles of preoccupation with failure and deference to expertise. They are also in line with the research which suggests communication between staff and understanding each other are key to a culture of reliability and the prevention of human error.

The current research revealed two barriers to implementing HRO principles: practicalities and culture of the organisation. It is acknowledged that, similar to healthcare settings, staff and resources within custodial settings are stretched. The above findings suggest that competing priorities, such as imminent risks of violence and/or self-harm, may act as a barrier to officers adhering to procedures based on HRO principles. Distraction is a central factor in human error and accidents. In addition, staffing groups regularly change within custodial settings and there can be a high turnover of staff which could act as a barrier to group cohesion. Similar to hospitals, staff in custodial settings may feel pressure to be efficient, for example to unlock people in prison on time as being late would have a knock-on effect on visits and healthcare appointments. This is in line with the Deadly Dozen factor of pressure. A culture may exist in custodial settings where long-term staff are fearful of change. Further, blame culture may prevent staff from reporting mistakes.

Staff felt empowered to speak up and publicly express disagreement, even with those in power.

Limitations of the research

Given there was limited existing research into HRO principles and custodial settings, the findings from healthcare settings were utilised and applied. These findings were not intended to be generalised to custodial settings; therefore, caution should be applied. In addition, the research in the included papers was conducted in the USA and Canada which limits the generalisability of the findings to the UK as the setting characteristics may differ. Finally, a total of 90 papers which were identified during the search were inaccessible. However, upon reviewing the abstracts, several of these (81) would have been excluded due to them being conducted in non-healthcare settings and/or not including empirical research. The remaining nine papers could have provided further insight into the implementation of HRO principles and improving safety.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this REA have several implications for policy and practice related to safety and security in custodial settings. They are as follows:

- ❏ Daily staff briefings on the wing are highly important. Where possible, it would be beneficial for a range of staff from different grades and departments to be in attendance so that different perspectives can be heard. It would be beneficial to have an 'open door' approach regarding such meetings. Staff meetings are likely to be especially important when staff change shifts, for example when night staff take over from day staff and vice versa.
- ❏ Decisions regarding safety and security would benefit from taking a prison-wide approach. Specifically, incorporating the views of staff working across the prison rather than being made solely by a prison's Security Department and/or Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Contributions from operational and non-operational staff may provide different insights to risks and risk management solutions. The annual State of Security assessment would be a useful mechanism to use for this purpose.
- ❏ It may be beneficial for staff to continually remind themselves of the consequences of failures in physical security, such as leaving a gate or cell door open. This could be reinforced within daily staff briefings and displayed on posters in offices or by key cabinets. Staff from all grades and departments could also complete eLearning on basic security awareness via the Security Risk and Capability Learning Hub. This can be accessed through the intranet.
- ❏ The importance of double checking that the roll check is correct and that all cell doors and gates are locked could be reinforced. If resources allow, it would be beneficial to have a second member of staff to check that cell doors and gates are locked. This could be for a short-term period to support staff when new in post. Local policies should be adhered to. The importance of staff encouraging each other to adhere to HRO principles could also be reinforced.

- ❏ It is important that operational staff only unlock in the morning/after lunch when they feel prepared to do so. For example, when they are confident that potential risks can be sufficiently managed. If a risk to security has been identified, the unlocking process should be paused until the issue is resolved.
- ❏ When mistakes occur, such as a gate or cell door is left open, the focus should be on establishing the root cause or system failure which led to the mistake. Staff should be open minded and not make assumptions about what the cause could have been. It should be viewed as an opportunity to learn and improve practices. Involving Security Analysts to check for themes in mistakes could prove useful. For example, is it the same gate that is unlocked or is it at the same time of day. Mitigations can then be put into place.
- ❏ It is important that the environment is blame free and nonpunitive as this may prevent staff from reporting mistakes.
- ❏ The Security Intelligence Reporting (SIR) system could be used to report not just incidents but near misses and 'good catches'.
- ❏ Conversations within and between departments about promising practice and what is going well is important.
- ❏ As the concepts within the HRO paradigm are complex, consideration could be given to how this can be introduced to staff so that it is accessible. Awareness sessions could be delivered in full staff briefings, and posters and signs could be distributed in key areas (e.g., by gates, key cabinets, and in staff offices) to support the awareness sessions. Those leading HMPPS capability workstreams and learning and development could consider how the HRO principles can be embedded in learning and optimised in our practice.
- ❏ Two barriers to implementing HRO principles have been found to be practicalities and the culture of the organisation. Whilst it is appreciated that staff are likely to have many competing priorities, the importance of HRO principles and related processes should be highlighted in terms of how they move the organisation towards long term successful outcomes. To address the culture barrier, it may be beneficial for the awareness sessions to make links between the HRO principles and the processes the establishment already follows, rather than introducing them as entirely new concepts. For example, links could be made to the State of Security assessment and SIR system that are already in line with HRO principles.

Recommendations for future research

This research is one of the first, if not the first, of its kind. It is recommended that future research is carried out in this area to gain further insight into how the HRO principles can be implemented in custodial settings. Future research could also focus on how insight into HRO principles could be developed. Following the awareness sessions, the implementation of HRO principles could be piloted on a small number of wings in UK prisons, and research could be carried out to evaluate the success of this and any barriers that were faced.

Conclusion

This REA has synthesised the existing literature on HROs and associated principles and applied them to custodial settings for the first time. It has identified various ways in which HRO principles can be embedded within custodial settings and the benefits of doing so, but also the barriers to implementation. To this end, implications have been set out for policy and practice. The implementation of HRO principles could improve physical security within custodial settings which is a priority for HMPPS and key in protecting the public. As the existing research on this topic is limited, it is recommended that further research in this area is conducted.

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‘I now feel that I know people within the MoJ HQ I can speak to, and I hope they feel similar’: An innovative staff network putting the frontline at the centre of policy making

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The disconnect between central government policy-making and operational delivery has been widely recognised. A recent Commission on the Centre of Government noted that although frontline services often have a direct understanding of the problems that need to be addressed, their voices are ‘too frequently lacking in the discussion at the centre’.[1] Similarly, John Slater, former Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education, wrote that there is often a separation between ‘policy’ and ‘delivery’ which keeps policy makers removed from the reality on the ground and results in policy making which is ‘fundamentally inadequate to address the challenges we face’.[2]

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is one of the biggest operational delivery departments in Whitehall. The MoJ umbrella includes central MoJ, which is exclusively a headquarters (HQ) function and is responsible for setting policy. However, the MoJ also includes Executive Agencies, such as His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and His Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) which are responsible for the operational delivery of frontline services. Although HMPPS and HMCTS are predominantly operational, they both have HQ functions of their own. This set-up lends itself to opportunities for greater collaboration between policy and delivery teams than elsewhere in government where delivery functions are independent, but it does not mean that the separation described by Slater is not felt.[3]

In 2023, a team in MoJ interviewed frontline and HQ staff to understand the ‘gap’ between operations and policy. They identified a number of organisational barriers — including physical, cultural, and knowledge-based barriers — that limit communication and engagement between the frontline and HQ. Having worked in both frontline and HQ roles, these barriers were something we had experienced first-hand. While working in our frontline roles — as prison officers, probation officers and court staff — the world of HQ in the MoJ felt very distant; we knew it was where the policies were developed that influenced the work we did every day, but did not know how these policies were made or who was making them. When we transitioned into HQ roles, we found that this feeling ran the other way too — many of our new colleagues had not seen how the policies they developed were working in practice nor met the people implementing them. We found that there was little support for those transitioning from frontline to HQ roles, limited opportunity for those working in HQ roles to learn from frontline experience, and a gap between the two ‘sides’ of the organisation.

The Frontline Staff Network

In 2020, a small group of ex-frontline staff in MoJ HQ decided to address the aforementioned problems

1. Institute For Government. (2024). *Power with Purpose: Final report of the Commission on the Centre of Government.* https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/Centre-Commission-final-report.pdf
2. Slater, J. (2022). *Fixing Whitehall’s broken policy machine.* The Policy Institute. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/fixing-whitehalls-broken-policy-machine.pdf
3. See footnote 2: Slater, J. (2022).

and created the Frontline Staff Network. The network was founded on the premise that staff working in HQ can only be as effective as their understanding of what happens on the frontline, and staff working on the frontline can be better supported, empowered and enabled by stronger links to colleagues in HQ.

The network has three aims:

1. To create a safe space and support system for people who have moved from a frontline role to a HQ role in the MoJ, or one of its agencies or Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs).
2. To create a network of people with frontline experience who can act as a resource for colleagues across the department who might not have that experience, but who would benefit from being able to test their thinking with people who've lived it themselves.
3. To bridge the gap between HQ and the frontline, fostering learning for staff on both sides to better deliver the MoJ priorities.

The network is open to anyone working in MoJ, its ALBs, and wider criminal justice organisations like the Crown Prosecution Service, regardless of whether they have frontline experience or not. While some members join to access the support we offer for ex-frontline staff, others join because they have no experience of working on the frontline and are interested in learning more about others' experiences. There is great demand for the support we offer and opportunities we enable; our membership has grown from 130 members at the end of December 2021 (the first full year of the network) to over 1,500 members at the end of December 2024 — almost certainly the fastest growing network in the MoJ. We were recognised in the 2024 MoJ Awards, winning the award for the 'Justice Together' category, and have also been shortlisted for the 'Development' award in the 2025 cross-government Operational Delivery Profession awards.

The network is run by us, a small committee made up of MoJ colleagues, mostly with frontline experience, who are passionate about bringing the voice of the frontline into the heart of policy-making. The work we do as part of the network committee is voluntary and additional to our day-to-day roles. We have used our experience to develop innovative ways to overcome barriers and create opportunities for colleagues across the organisation to work better together. This article explores how we have done that — from navigating the unfamiliar environment and feeling like an outsider, to establishing connections between different parts of the organisation and using our operational expertise (and empowering others to use theirs) to make an impact across the department. We hope that by providing an evidence base and highlighting the effective practice of the network, we will inspire other government departments to consider how they too can address the disconnect to make more effective policy.

Staff working in HQ can only be as effective as their understanding of what happens on the frontline

From 'outsiders' to 'insiders'

When transitioning from a frontline role to a HQ role,[4] we recognised several changes in our working lives that contributed to us feeling a reverse culture shock and like 'outsiders' in HQ.

Time at work

The first of these was how time at work was managed completely differently — many frontline operational staff work in shift patterns (including weekends) to accommodate the 24-hour nature of the criminal justice system. Moving to a regular 'nine to five' with every weekend off felt very different and also uncomfortable as it suddenly means that you have weekends off when your friends who still work in frontline roles do not. In addition to this, particularly for many ex-prison officers, the contrast of a strict prison regime, where activity and actions are pre-determined down to the minute of every day, was very different from to the looser office timings where it was decided by individuals when to have breaks or lunch. A frequent reflection from network members is how strange it is to not have to ask permission to finish the working day (unlike in prisons, for example, when all people in the prison must be counted before operational staff may leave the building).

4. We define frontline staff in the Ministry of Justice broadly as individuals who directly contribute to the delivery of justice through either direct engagement with the public, victims, offenders, or through essential support roles positioned in frontline sites that enable these interactions. This includes operational staff such as probation officers, prison officers, and court personnel, as well as those staff based in frontline sites (e.g. prisons and courts) such as administrative support, case coordinators, intelligence analysts, and logistics personnel who ensure the effective functioning of frontline services.

Pace, tasks and workload

The change in pace, type of tasks, and workload were other marked differences experienced by staff who made this transition from a task-based role in which duties must be completed daily, to a role with longer-term deadlines and greater autonomy on how to manage the working day. In contrast to frontline delivery, for many ex-prison officers, the direct impact of their work was less likely to be immediately felt, which often made them question the value they add to the departmental objectives. A notable piece of feedback we received from a newer member of the network captured these changes as 'Previously you got paid to react to lots of tasks, now you get paid to think!', highlighting the more long-term, strategic nature of most HQ and policy roles compared with the more immediate decision-making required in many frontline roles.

Level of responsibility and management

A fundamental difference noted by prison officers who made the transition to HQ was that, when working on wings, they would often be responsible for large numbers of people, and make decisions that feel like 'life-or-death'. When transitioning from such an intense role, where at times it can be crucial to make quick decisions and 'think on your feet', to a HQ role decision-making may feel less 'high stakes'. There is also more frequent contact with line managers and those higher up the 'chain of command' when making important decisions. There can also be a level of reassurance being able to talk through decisions in slower time with colleagues, as this can remove the element of pressure that is felt so resolutely by officers.

All these challenges faced by early network committee members led to them establishing the first aim of the network: to create a safe space and support system for people who have moved from a frontline role to a HQ role. Their own experiences led them to understand that there were few resources to support staff who made the move to HQ as well as little wider understanding from HQ colleagues (who may not have direct experience of the frontline working environment) on how to support these colleagues through this transition. Since then, the network has worked with its members from across the MoJ frontline to produce several helpful resources to raise awareness of the challenges staff can face in transitioning to HQ, as well as a line manager guide on how best to support their staff (including how to take a trauma-informed approach to support). The network also runs a buddy scheme in which newly joined members are paired up with HQ staff who have had the same experience of transitioning between parts of the organisation, as a way of reducing the feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome and facilitating a safe space in which to ask questions. To date, over 80 buddy pairs have been set up, with many examples of those who moved to HQ and requested a buddy, now becoming buddies themselves.

Through these early initiatives, anecdotal feedback suggests that the network has been able to support many colleagues who have newly transitioned into HQ roles to feel a lot less like 'outsiders' who do not belong, and to become confident 'insiders' who are able to assuredly navigate the HQ working environment and leverage their frontline experience within their new HQ roles.

> We have used our experience to develop innovative ways to overcome barriers and create opportunities for colleagues across the organisation to work better together.

Inside knowledge

Despite facing the numerous challenges highlighted earlier, individuals with frontline experience have a unique attribute to offer — their insight and deep understanding into the realities of frontline delivery. As a network, we help these individuals realise the benefit of this and empower them to make positive impact across the department.

We quickly realised that individuals with frontline experience within the criminal justice system can leverage their expertise to support their colleagues in HQ, who may not have had the same operational background (or perhaps not as recently), in ensuring their work reflects the realities of current frontline delivery. We established a system where colleagues across the Department can find someone with relevant frontline experience who could provide insight into the area they are working on. Whether that is the Safety team wanting to test early ideas on a new peer support scheme, or the Data Science team wanting to develop a new digital tool for prison officers, their target audience (with the exact experience, grade and area of expertise required) can now be found with just one simple e-mail to the network.

While this is not a substitute for formal engagement with the frontline, the Insight

Commissions strand of the network offers an opportunity to easily tap into a wealth of frontline experience to test initial ideas, run workshops or collect feedback. This approach allows for early-stage ideas to be sense-checked ahead of formal engagement with the frontline, which has recently been under significant operational pressure.

One notable piece of work shaped by the Insight Commissions strand was the HMPPS 'Extraordinary Jobs' campaign. This campaign aimed to improve the recruitment and retention of prison and probation staff and marked the Department's first ever major national TV and radio advertisement effort to recruit for the HMPPS frontline workforce.[5] The MoJ Recruitment Marketing team approached us, recognising the experience that our members have working in prisons and probation and their connections with frontline stakeholders, which allowed them to get their 'foot through the door' into frontline engagement. The team was also able to rely on the operational experience of the network's members to ensure the campaign accurately depicted the day-to-day reality of life as prison and probation officers. With the help of the network, the recruitment campaign was launched in September 2023 and led to an increase in applications for prison and probation officer roles across England and Wales.

In a separate undertaking, when the User Research team worked on a project aimed at exploring the complex nature of behaviour management in prisons, they needed to recruit participants with operational experience of prisons to run a series of workshops. As a network, we were able to tap into our resource pool to put them in touch with the right people in a matter of days — a process which can sometimes take many weeks through other channels. Initial engagement with the network's members allowed the team to test the effectiveness of their approach and helped them tailor it to their target user group. This initial consultation highlighted a number of challenges, including navigating sensitive topics as well as understanding prison jargon, which the team was then able to better prepare for. This not only allowed the team to feel more confident in their approach, but also ensured the time they had with frontline staff was effectively used to produce valuable insights.

Engagement with frontline stakeholders is crucial to ensuring policies are grounded and reflect operational realities. However, it is equally important to recognise the significant pressures frontline staff face, ranging from prison capacity issues to insufficient staffing numbers. Any engagement should be carefully thought out to avoid adding further strain to their workloads while still making the most of their input. As a network, through the first-hand experience of our founders and members, we recognised this and set up a system that innovatively addresses this issue.

Innovation to foster connections

As discussed previously, working both in the frontline and HQ (whether it be policy, analysis, or other roles) gives an insight into the 'gap' between the two. Helping colleagues in both worlds understand each other better, and therefore collaborate more frequently, becomes an imperative for those with these experiences. Many people who have made the transition will have found themselves eagerly trying to explain the nuances of operational realities to HQ colleagues and to articulate the difference between the two worlds. Likewise, they may have difficulty explaining the work they do in headquarters to colleagues still in operations. As a network, we have formalised these types of conversations through a variety of innovative schemes which encourage mutual exchange and understanding, including events, a 'Bridging the Gap' scheme, Frontline Familiarisation Visits, and shadowing opportunities.

Engagement with frontline stakeholders is crucial to ensuring policies are grounded and reflect operational realities.

The network was born out of innovative talks by an empowered HQ staff member, who bravely and openly started sharing her experiences as a prison officer with colleagues, including at an event with the private office of the Prisons Minister. This event was incredibly well received and, from then on, the network continued to receive an increasing number of requests to organise talks on different topics. In the early days, these events focused on 'a day in the life' of staff working in diverse frontline roles, but soon evolved to include panel talks involving people with experience and expertise on 'hot topics' in the field.

Through the years we have established reoccurring traditions; for example, an event series called 'Getting

5. An extraordinary job. Done by someone like you | Prison Jobs

to know...' and an annual Festival, which is the culmination of the network's yearly calendar of events. The 'Getting to know' series invites fascinating people from diverse backgrounds across the organisation and wider justice sector to share insights into their experiences on a variety of topics of interest that connect with our network members. Some stand-out guests include a judge, who spoke candidly on their career and how the challenges faced by the sector have changed through time, and people with lived experience of the justice system which captured the imaginations of the network's membership, influencing and inspiring their work. As the repertoire and range of events offered previously has accumulated into an extensive catalogue, the events and their topics now rely less on requests from colleagues and more on us knowing what our members want to hear about.

The highlight of the year for the network is the annual Frontline Staff Network Festival, a two-week schedule of online sessions including panel discussions, skills sharing workshops and interviews with a few visits to the frontline offered during this time. The 2024 festival focused on 'Expanding Horizons' and the 1,300 attendees heard from collaborators across the justice sector such as the Zahid Mubarek Trust, people with lived experience, and representatives from diverse departments across the MoJ widening the perspective and understanding that staff have of the wider justice system.

From 130 members at the end of December 2021 (the first full year of the network) to over 1,500 members at the end of December 2024.

In addition to ensuring that operational realities remain front and centre in the minds of HQ staff through online events, we also offer schemes which foster connections between individuals, giving each participant a very tangible experience of the 'other side' of delivering justice. The 'Bridging the Gap Scheme', rolled out in early 2024, offered the opportunity to bring together frontline and HQ staff. The aim was to support staff in feeling more connected to each other and foster working relationships across the organisation, as well as facilitating knowledge sharing. The Scheme required paired staff to arrange three meetings (of up to 1 hour during working hours) over the course of three months, and included supporting materials to structure conversations during each meeting. The materials encouraged participants to share insights relating to their career journeys, roles and responsibilities, workplace practices and cultures, and views and experiences of different areas of work in the organisation. Where possible, participants were paired based on mutual work interests; for example, a frontline staff member interested in security was paired with a HQ staff member working in that policy area. In total, 75 frontline prison staff from 18 prisons and 92 HQ and policy staff signed up to take part in the Scheme. Of those that applied, 75 frontline and HQ and policy staff members were matched and participated in the Scheme.

We conducted an informal evaluation using questionnaires which captured participants' thoughts both before and after they took part in the Scheme. Analysis showed that prior to undertaking the Scheme, there was a lack of understanding between frontline and HQ participants about what each other's roles entailed. The Scheme appears to have been successful in improving the understanding of HQ work by frontline staff: of the frontline staff who signed up for the scheme, only 28 per cent stated they understood the work HQ does before participating, while 67 per cent of those who completed the Scheme stated that they did afterwards. Qualitative feedback from those who completed the Scheme indicated that it had the desired effect of 'bridging the gap' between HQ and frontline, with participants citing an improved sense of connection between HQ and the frontline, and a developed understanding of each other's roles. As one frontline participant responded, it helped them to understand 'that people in HQ and MoJ are actually here to help and aren't just faceless people who don't know the best interest of what it is like operationally.'

Innovation for the network has often been centred around ensuring those at different ends of the department no longer appear as 'faceless' to one another by promoting genuine opportunities for learning and information exchange. Our 'Frontline Familiarisation Visits' scheme is a key example of this. The visits scheme, which began in September 2022, is aimed at HQ staff with little experience of operational working and provides them with the opportunity to visit frontline sites such as prisons and courts. One of the aims of the scheme was to help civil servants working on policy, communications, analysis or other projects to develop their knowledge of how their work affected the frontline in practice and thereby reflect this both in how they engaged with the frontline, and within their HQ work.

Between September 2022 and December 2024, we facilitated 137 visits in total and enabled over 1,000 members of staff from headquarters to better understand the pressures faced by the frontline. In 2024 alone, the network delivered 77 visits throughout the year — 52 to prisons, 17 to courts, five to prison training centres (such as Newbold Revel), two 'Activity Days' bringing together HQ staff with people in prison and prison staff, and one to a Courts and Tribunal Service Centre. The impact of the visits is best expressed in comments given by scheme participants:

> 'For me personally, I wanted to understand the impact of a specific policy change on this prison, and I was able to see some of it and also talk to the Governor about it. That was really valuable. I also found it helpful to generally see different parts of the site and hear from our guide about some of the security and safety challenges at the prison.' (Policy Advisor, MoJ)

> 'I think this would be a useful exercise for all HQ colleagues, to understand the lived pressures of frontline staff'. (Analyst, MoJ)

> 'As someone who is office based within HQ it really was very insightful to be able to visit the prisons and get a better understanding of how they operate.' (Policy Manager, MoJ)

Ninety-nine per cent of the 481 visitors who have responded to our post-visit survey have stated they would recommend the visits scheme to another colleague. Prior to our establishment of the visits scheme, there was no centralised opportunity for staff in the department to visit prisons. This is just one of the ways that our insight has helped to build relationships across the department and bridge the gap between HQ and frontline.

Another innovative way we have facilitated HQ colleagues to spend time on the frontline is through developing our partnerships with third sector organisations and amplifying volunteering activity that is happening across the MoJ. In doing this, we have offered and supported multiple opportunities for MoJ staff to volunteer in frontline criminal justice settings. These provide colleagues with more exposure to frontline services and also support charities to increase their impact. For example, we recently partnered with registered charity Give a Book who provide books to children of people in prison.[6] MoJ volunteers spent time at family days in prisons, encouraging families to choose a book and read together. Our support not only gave MoJ colleagues the opportunity to spend a day in a prison supporting people in prison and their families but also expanded the support the charity is able to offer.

> 'The volunteers were incredibly kind, warm and passionate about the cause and the family day. It was such a treat to have their support.' (Family Day organiser)

We have facilitated HQ staff visiting the frontline, we have also arranged for frontline staff to understand more about HQ.

Just as we have facilitated HQ staff visiting the frontline, we have also arranged for frontline staff to understand more about HQ. This was initially offered through a series of 'Spend the Day in HQ' events, where colleagues working on the frontline were offered the opportunity to spend a day in one of the Department's central offices. As previously discussed, the world of HQ is often described by those on the frontline as an 'ivory tower', a mysterious and faceless place where policies are developed and decisions are made. By inviting frontline colleagues into this space to learn about the work that's done there and meet the people doing it, we hoped HQ would become a tangible reality that colleagues could feel connected to.

We created varied and interesting agendas for these days to expose frontline colleagues to the work of different teams, such as private office, or policy, learning and development, and communications teams. Feedback demonstrated that colleagues were surprised by the diversity of work and the passion of those involved in delivering outcomes that improve what happens on the ground:

> 'It really is an excellent initiative, and will recommend to all my colleagues, the networking opportunities and exchange of ideas is brilliant' (Frontline participant)

> 'Really found it useful to fill in the missing gaps and reinforce all the hard work that goes on.' (Frontline participant)

6. https://giveabook.org.uk/

There was overwhelming demand for the Spend a Day in HQ events; the most recent had over 20 applicants per space. In order to create more opportunities for frontline colleagues to gain exposure to HQ, we set up a shadowing scheme. This aimed to facilitate opportunities for frontline staff to shadow someone in HQ. Like the Bridging the Gap scheme, we matched frontline applicants with a colleague in HQ, with matches based on mutual work interests where possible. We provided HQ staff with guidance and resources about how to host a good shadowing placement, but gave pairs the freedom to decide how they would like to conduct their shadowing depending on interest, workload and availability.

We matched 72 colleagues from frontline prison and probation roles with HQ colleagues working across 40 teams in MoJ and HMPPS, including four senior civil servants. Feedback has indicated that this has been an incredibly valuable experience; of the 66 colleagues who responded to the survey, 98 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they found shadowing (or hosting a shadowing experience) an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. 95 per cent of frontline participants that responded felt they had a better understanding of HQ as a result of shadowing, and 84 per cent of participants that responded planned to stay in touch, continuing the connections they had built through shadowing.

> 'In 13 years of service, this is the most productive thing I think I have ever done.' (Frontline participant)

> 'I really valued the discussion around my policy areas and getting the fresh frontline experience from her to give me food for thought in how I progress my policies.' (HQ participant)

> 'I now feel that I know people within the MoJ HQ I can speak to, and I hope they feel similar.' (Frontline participant)

The disconnect between HQ staff and the people working on the frontline in courts, prisons and probation was one of the catalysts to the network's foundation — and connection has been the aim and the undeniable result of the efforts of the volunteers forming the network. The gap is shrinking one event, attendee, visitor and shadowing participant at a time. Beyond the vast number of interpersonal and professional connections fostered through the various initiatives, the network also enables its members with frontline experience to reflect on themselves and how they understand their identity as a headquarters colleague, with their invaluable frontline experience.

Conclusion

Despite our grassroot beginnings, the Frontline Staff Network is now playing its part in building a vital bridge between the operational and HQ worlds at the MoJ. By fostering collaboration and encouraging understanding between staff working in HQ and those on the ground in prisons, probation and courts, we have created meaningful opportunities for knowledge exchange and innovation.

Through our initiatives like the Insights Commissions, Bridging the Gap Scheme, and Frontline Familiarisation Visits, we have empowered those with operational backgrounds to share their experiences, allowing those in HQ roles to better design services and policies that reflect the true nature of operational realities. Our efforts not only appear to be transformative in fostering relationships and improving engagement between HQ and the frontline, but also to have led to positive tangible outcomes, such as helping to shape the first ever prison workforce recruitment campaign depicting the operational realities of working in a prison.

While the tremendous collective efforts from its volunteers have helped to embed the Frontline Staff Network in the Department, its rapid growth and increasing demand for its initiatives only highlight how much more work there is to be done. Despite this, the work of the network underscores a very important truth: the gap between the frontline and HQ is not a fixed divide, but something that can be bridged with the intentional and collective efforts of staff, and commitment to collaboration.

The positive feedback we have received so far, both from frontline and HQ staff, reflects the value of our network — it appears to be helping frontline voices not only be heard, but integrated into the decision making happening in HQ, hopefully making the MoJ better equipped to serve the needs of its staff and the very people they support.

The Frontline Staff Network is a volunteer-run Ministry of Justice initiative. If you are interested in learning more about what we do or how you can replicate some of our initiatives in your organisation, please contact us at.
frontlinestaffnetwork@justice.gov.uk.

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Higher education in prison: Could do better? Exploring the capacity of higher education in prisons to enhance the desistance journey.

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There is an extensive body of literature providing quantitative, statistical evidence for the role of prison education in reducing reoffending and improving employment prospects for those in prison.[1] However, there is, to date, more limited qualitative research on understanding the educational experience of prison students and what factors may enable or obstruct that experience[2] For example, Jon Collins, chief executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust, queries whether the mode of delivery (classroom, one-to-one or online) makes a difference, and notes also that there is a lack of evidence for the impact of prison education on the self-esteem and well-being of prison learners.[3] This article draws on an empirical qualitative study conducted by the author and a colleague, Siobhan Cullen. This study investigated the enablers of, and barriers to, study by prison students enrolled on the Open University's (OU) law degree, as perceived by the Associate Lecturers (ALs) who tutored these prison students.[4]

Background

The OU has been a provider of higher education to students in secure environments for over 40 years. There are approximately 1800 students in these settings studying with the OU on over 130 modules, spread over roughly 150 prisons in the UK and Ireland.[5] ALs, who are not based in the secure environments, work closely with their prison students, offering regular phone tuition on a one-to-one basis as well as providing detailed feedback on assignments. The ALs liaise with prison education officers to arrange the tutorials and, for example, check that the prison students have received printed packs of materials and marked assignments. The ALs are therefore well placed to give an insight into the study experiences of these students and the broader context in which these occur.

Study aim

This article seeks to explore, from the perspective of ALs, the factors which may enhance the study experience of prison students as well as those which may undermine that experience. It then considers the relationship between these factors and their scope to promote or obstruct what is termed the 'desistance journey' of prisoners. Where barriers are identified, this article discusses possible changes to improve both the educational experience of prison students and, in the longer term, the scope for their desistance.

The definition of 'desistance' in relation to criminal behaviour is contested, with some arguing that it requires long term and permanent abstinence from committing crime, whilst, for others, the concept is more fluid, with periods of relapse and recovery.[6] There seems to be a general consensus though that desistance is a process or journey, rather than an abrupt, one-off event, and that particular factors influence that journey.[7]

1. See, for example: Ministry of Justice (2021). *Justice Data Lab Experimental Statistics: Employment and reoffending behaviour after support from Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) - 4th Analysis.* Ministry of Justice.
2. Collins, J. (2024). Prison Education – *A Review of the Evidence.* Clinks.
3. See footnote 2: Collins, J. (2024).
4. The research was funded by the Open University's Scholarship Centre for Innovation in Legal and Business Education
5. The Open University (2021, July 22) *Supporting Students in Secure Environments.* https://www5.open.ac.uk/secure-environments/news/supporting-students-secure-environments
6. McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C., & Maruna, S. (2012). Re-examining evidence-based practice in community corrections: Beyond 'a confined view' of what works. *Justice Research and Policy, 14*(1), 35-60.
7. McNeill, F. (2014) Desistance, Rehabilitation and Reintegration. *Research in Sociology* https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/sociological-cultural-studies-research/blog//criminology/headline_666048_en.html

Methodology

An email invitation was sent in January 2024 seeking expressions of interest from ALs tutoring prison students on the OU's law degree (or who had tutored such students within the last 2 years) to ensure currency. From a pool of approximately 30 ALs, six responded and were interviewed. All six had at least 2 years' experience and four had over 3 years. Between them, the ALs had tutored over 200 prison students. Two of the ALs were tutoring groups consisting solely of prison students, with an annual average of 50 students between them (nearly half of the 120 prison students registered on law modules in 24/25). The other four tutored smaller numbers, but their experience extended over a much longer period (in one case, stretching back to 2009). Whilst the sample size was small, the range and depth of experience ensured that salient data was obtained.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and were semi-structured. One interviewer conducted the interviews although, for the first, both researchers were present to ensure a consistent approach to the style of questioning. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The aim was to gain an understanding of the ALs' perceptions of the enablers of, and barriers to study by prison students studying law. Questions, for example, attempted to elicit perceptions on the nature and effectiveness of tutorial provision and the broader context in which tuition took place.

The data was evaluated using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach,[8] with both researchers drawing on the six-step conceptual model for thematic analysis developed by Naeem et al. to ensure a consistent and methodical approach.[9] Through this process, key themes emerged that revealed perceived insights into the enablers of, and barriers to, effective study by prison learners in higher education.

Limitations

It is recognised that relying solely on the perceptions of ALs for these insights had its limitations as the students' experiences were interpreted and filtered through the eyes of the ALs. Interviews with other stakeholders, notably prison students and prison education officers, would have been useful to broaden and deepen understanding still further. Nevertheless, many of the observations of the ALs resonated with the conclusions of other bodies and agencies. Furthermore, whilst there are limited academic studies exploring the views of prison students themselves, those that do exist also corroborate many of the findings, considered more fully later in this article.

Findings

Perceived enablers and barriers to prison study

Four themes emerged, comprising the tutor/student relationship; mode of tutorial delivery; OU systems; and the prison environment. The ALs perceived certain aspects within these themes as enablers of, and others as barriers to, the overall study experience of their prison students.

> The ALs questioned the ability to build trust as quickly with students during phone tutorials because of the absence of visual cues.

Tutor/student relationship

The ALs, without exception, believed that the tutor/student relationship was an important enabler for their prison students in their study journey. Whilst it was acknowledged that some prison students did not take advantage of the one-to-one support offered by ALs, the ALs felt that there was proportionately much more uptake than amongst their non-prison students. This, they asserted, was due to the greater need of prison students for human interaction in a situation in which this was otherwise lacking. ALs observed that the prison students who engaged with the one-to-one support not only performed well academically but grew in confidence and developed a sense of purpose, with initial cynicism dissipating as the bond with the AL grew.

Mode of tutorial delivery

Whilst ALs regarded their relationship with their prison students as a positive factor, five of the six interviewed expressed concerns about the move from face-to-face tutorials to phone tutorials. This shift was initially in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (as a safety measure to limit virus transmission) but then became a permanent feature. ALs felt that it took

8. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.
9. Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22,* 1-18.

longer to build trust with their prison students over the phone than it had done face-to-face as it was not possible to read body language. They also contended that it was harder to understand what materials students had received, and to work through particular activities with them, and that considerable thought and time was needed to adapt tutorial materials for phone tutorials to cater for the needs of prison students. Two ALs in particular felt that the nature of phone tutorials meant that the focus was more on checking that students understood the mechanics of the module rather than facilitating the exploration of key legal concepts and developing skills. Only one AL was less critical of phone tutorials but admitted that they had had little experience of the face-to-face tutorials that had taken place previously. Most ALs observed that phone tutorials were at least easier to arrange and more cost effective to deliver.

OU systems and support structures

OU systems and support structures were generally regarded favourably by the ALs and seen as enablers of a positive study experience for the prison students. Whilst longer-standing ALs recalled a time when there were delays in prison students receiving their materials, they did not feel this was a particular issue anymore.

It was observed, however, that certain items were sometimes missing from the printed packs provided to the prison students — in particular, two ALs commented that their prison students did not seem to receive the guidance on referencing that should have been included and that this caused frustration for their students who often struggled with this skill.

Prison environment

The ALs felt that there were certain aspects of the prison context that positively impacted on their prison students' learning. For example, from the ALs' perspective, the prison education officers were generally supportive, which they felt was particularly important in motivating prison students in situations where they lacked family or peer support. However, the ALs felt that this support was not always consistent, and that in smaller prisons in particular the prison education officers often lacked the necessary time and resources. The ALs also identified a number of other issues related to the prison context which, in their view, were barriers to a positive study experience for their prison students. These included the issue of noise and lack of privacy; lack of access to educational settings such as the library; inconsistent access to digital infrastructure; lack of internet access; disruption caused by security lockdowns and movement between prisons; and competing claims on their students' time.

> All the ALs made it clear that for them the prison students were, first and foremost, students, and that they were not interested in why the students were in a secure environment.

Relationship between perceived enablers and barriers and the desistance journey

The aforementioned perceived enablers and barriers were then mapped against the four factors considered important in the desistance journey of prisoners — age and maturation, social bonds and relationships, identity, [10] and situational aspects.[11] Using this theoretical framework, and drawing on the wider literature relating to prison education, the aim was to explore what aspects of higher education in prison might support the desistance journey of prison students and to identify where there might be scope for change.

Impact on age and maturation

A key factor identified as relevant to the desistance journey is that of age and maturation, with criminal behaviour tending to peak in teenage years before declining.[12] It is recognised though that not everyone will desist from crime as they get older, nor desist at the same rate.[13] Whilst those in prison inevitably continue to age, the environment may not be conducive to the broader concept of active maturation (including increased sense of responsibility and self-control).[14]

10. McNeill, F. (2012). Four forms of 'offender' rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective. *Legal and Criminological Psychology, 17*(1), 18-36.
11. Bottoms, A. E. (2014). Desistance from Crime. In Z. Ashmore &R. Shuker (Eds.), *Forensic Practice in the Community* (pp. 251-273). Routledge.
12. Sparkes, A. C., & Day, J. (2016). Aging bodies and desistance from crime: Insights from the life stories of offenders. *Journal of aging studies, 36.* 47 – 58.
13. Rocque, M. (2015). The lost concept: The (re)emerging link between maturation and desistance from crime. *Criminology & Criminal Justice, 15*(3), 340-360.
14. Wizgell, A. (2021). *Explaining desistance: looking forward,* not backwards. Youth Justice Resource Hub

Former chief executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust, Rod Clark, has asserted that prison education has potential to overcome the obstacles that the prison context may pose to this sort of maturation by providing scope to develop thinking skills, empathy and overall experience.[15]

In the interviews with ALs there were some indicators that prison education can result in maturation of prison students. For example, most ALs observed a general change, during the course of the modules, in students' emotions, aspirations, attitudes and decision making, resulting in increased investment in their study and students being on 'best behaviour' for their ALs. The ALs perceived that these changes stemmed, at least in part, from the educational experience and the relationships that arose as a result of that experience.

These findings are supported by an ethnographic study conducted in 2019 which concluded that many prison students perceived the positive impact of education on their maturation and, with it, the willingness to take on new responsibilities and withdraw from less constructive influences.[16] That said, more than one AL recognised that certain students persisted in articulating feelings that the system was against them and that they were overlooked. It was also noted that some students tended to rush ahead with their studies, lacking perhaps the maturity to understand the importance of taking stock and reflection, although this may also be indicative of the uncertainties that prison students face.

Thus, prison education may have the scope to enhance active maturation, even if that is not always the case. Where such maturation occurs, it seems that social bonds may be a key influence, demonstrating the inter-relatedness of the four factors pertinent to the desistance journey. These social bonds are considered further next.

Impact on social bonds and relationships

Social bonds and relationships are recognised to be another key factor in the desistance journey. The theory is that 'people do not simply desist; they desist into something' (p.16).[17] Relationships seem to form a turning point, supporting the process of maturation and transformation, even if it is not fully understood why such relationships should be so instrumental.[18]

Clark has argued that educational involvement in prison may afford opportunities to build ties not just with the educators themselves but with other prisoners and families, which in turn may enhance social and emotional intelligence.[19] The Coates Report reinforces the role of education in this, talking of the need for education within prisons to build social capital and improve prisoner wellbeing.[20]

The interviews with ALs indicated evidence of prison education impacting positively on social relationships. All the ALs spoke very warmly of the bonds that they formed with their prison students — 'they're the best students you could have' was a typical comment. Most ALs observed that these bonds were indeed stronger and deeper than with students outside of secure environments, for example, one commented:

> 'I suspect it's easier [to build relationship with prison students] because it's one-to-one and it's personal communication… Most [external] students don't want a phone call. Even if you phone them, they wouldn't pick up.' [AL 1]

There was a consensus amongst the ALs that the prison students welcomed these relationships because they craved stimulation and interaction and derived enjoyment from the undivided attention they received in one-to-one tutorials, enhancing a sense of purpose and engagement. Helen Nichols' earlier qualitative research with prison students, on the role of relationships in prison education, supports these conclusions on the attitude to these relationships, noting that this may be because tutors, in comparison with prison staff, are seen as enablers, thereby promoting trust.[21]

The ALs commented that the prison students also developed other constructive relationships as a result of their study — relationships with the prison education officers, as well as with prisoners on their wing, for whom they could now be a source of support and advice. ALs felt that these relationships contributed to the prison students' increase in confidence, self-esteem, skills and maturation. These perceptions are corroborated by research carried out by the Prison

15. Clark, R. (2016). How education transforms: Evidence from the experience of Prisoners' Education Trust on how education supports prisoner journeys, *Prison Service Journal, 225*(3) 3-8. https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/prison-service-journal-225
16. Pike, A., & Hopkins, S. (2019). Transformative learning: Positive identity through prison-based higher education in England and Wales. *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversity in Education, 4*(1), 48–65.
17. See footnote 10: McNeill, F. (2012).
18. Sampson, R., Laub, J., & Wimer, C. (2006). Does marriage reduce crime? A counterfactual approach to within individual causal effects. *Criminology, 44,* 465-508.
19. See footnote 15: Clark, R. (2016).
20. Coates, S. (2016). *Unlocking Potential A review of education in prison.* Ministry of Justice.
21. Nicols, H. (2017). Encouragement, discouragement and connection: The role of relationships in prison education experiences. *Prison Service Journal, 233*(4) 4-10.

Reform Trust, whose interviews with prison students revealed that the relationships with education providers and prison education staff were greatly valued and promoted resilience.[22]

More than one AL commented that some of their students were otherwise isolated, with little family support, impacting on mental health, wellbeing and motivation. In addition, several ALs noted that whilst prison education officers were generally helpful, some were less so, particularly in smaller prisons, possibly due to demands on time and lack of resources. Where prison students did develop good relationships with prison education officers, it was observed that these could sometimes be terminated abruptly when a prison student was moved to another prison and had to start again in building new relationships with the prison education team there. This could also impact on the student's relationship with the AL. The frustrations typically experienced by the ALs interviewed are illustrated by the following quote:

> 'That's always a nightmare because we don't get told often that [the student has] moved. So you're carrying on trying as a tutor to chase the education officer and then find out, weeks and weeks and weeks later, [the student's] gone.' [AL 2]

The AL-student relationship, in the ALs' view, thus enabled their prison students to be more future-focused...

These observations resonate with that of a House of Commons Education Committee Report in 2022, which recommended that a prisoner's ongoing educational requirements be considered when making decisions on movement.[23]

Furthermore, whilst studying law enhanced the reputation and standing of some prison students amongst their peers, it was apparent to two of the ALs that some prison students lacked trust in their fellow prisoners and would not have felt comfortable sharing their new-found insights and knowledge with them. These impressions are reinforced to some extent by a report in 2016 which recognised that the machismo culture of prison can be challenging for those engaging in education, although it concluded that education ultimately has the power to transform that culture, creating positive networks of learners.[24]

All but one of the ALs interviewed expressed concern that the shift from face-to-face tutorials to phone tutorials had negatively impacted on the quality of their relationships with their prison students. This shift was initially a temporary response to the pandemic but has since become a permanent fixture. The only AL who was less concerned had not had prior experience of tutoring face-to-face. The ALs questioned the ability to build trust as quickly with students during phone tutorials because of the absence of visual cues. The ALs also observed that they were not able to see what materials students had been sent and could not understand so clearly what stage they had reached in their studies, which the ALs felt undermined the level of meaningful, structured support that they could offer. It raises the question of whether, for example, video conferencing tools could be used to address some of these issues. This would also potentially allow scope for group tutorials in which prison students could learn not just from the ALs, but from each other. This may provide opportunities for the development of social networks and communities of practice considered important in supporting learning.[25]

In summary, the perception of the ALs was that higher education in prison facilitates the development of social bonds between educators and prison students and may also have a similar impact on relationships with others.. This is corroborated by a number of earlier reports and studies. These relationships in turn seem to impact positively on maturation, resilience and confidence. Certain factors, however, including the move to phone tutorials and disruptive transfers between prisons, may interfere with this. As these social bonds are regarded as a core element in the desistance journey, exploring ways of overcoming these factors may be timely; for example, the scope for the use of video conferencing tools for tutorials and factoring in a prisoner's educational requirements when evaluating the need to transfer a prisoner.

22. Prison Reform Trust. (2003). *Time to Learn: prisoners' views on prison education.* Prison Reform Trust.
23. House of Commons Education Committee. (2022). *Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity.* House of Commons.
24. Champion, N., & Noble, J. (2016). *What is Prison Education for? A theory of change exploring the value of learning in prison.* Prisoners' Education Trust.
25. Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). *An introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses.* https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/#:~:text=In%20pursuing%20their%20interest%20in,their%20standing%20with%20each%20other.

Impact on identity

The desistance theoretical framework posits that changes in a prisoner's personal and social identity can also assist in reducing the likelihood of re-offending.[26] Prison itself may lead to a negative sense of identity, focusing on the characterisation as 'offender' and 'criminal'.[27] Clark has argued that, conversely, the educational experience can lead to a more positive sense of identity which regards the prisoner as student.[28] This change of narrative may stem in turn from the social bonds outlined above, which may also reinforce maturation, underlining the complexity of the desistance journey and the interface between its core factors.

Revisioning of identity, as a result of prison education, was indicated in the interviews with ALs. All the ALs made it clear that for them the prison students were, first and foremost, students, and that they were not interested in why the students were in a secure environment. The ALs formed the impression that this enabled the prison students to see themselves in the same way, with conversations centring on what these students hoped to gain from their study, rather than on why they were in prison. The AL-student relationship, in the ALs' view, thus enabled their prison students to be more future-focused, thinking about how they saw themselves (their personal identity) as well as how others saw them (their social identity).[29] Empowered by this new sense of identity, ALs told us that prison students would consider, for example, how they could support fellow prisoners, fight for the rights of others, work in a legal capacity or gain control of their own situation, giving them a sense of agency. There was some suggestion amongst the ALs that the prison community actually perceived these prison students differently (and positively) due to their educational status. For example:

> 'Quite a lot of students said to me that …there's a guy on the wing and he's been doing the OU and he's in his second year or third year and he's helped me a lot.' [AL 3]

These findings on identity resonate strongly with earlier research in which the perspectives of prison students were sought, which identified that higher education encouraged positive personal change in prison students by leading them to seek roles as peer mentors and counsellors.[30]

Two ALs, however, expressed concern that certain expectations of their students might be unrealistic; for example, some prison students failed to appreciate that their convictions might impact on their ability to take on certain roles within legal practice after release. For example:

> 'Some of them … they think they're gonna be a barrister at the end of it.' [AL 4]

There was also recognition that some prison students might revert to old habits once released. Two ALs noted that certain prison students became increasingly distracted from their study as their release date approached and ultimately gave up their studies on release.

It is worth noting at this point that there are funding restrictions applicable to loans for students in prison; prisoners with more than 6 years of their custodial sentence left to serve are unable to secure a student loan.[31] Bearing in mind the indications in this research of the positive impacts of education on sense of identity and purpose, as well as the distractions of impending release dates, this restriction seems unjustified and may be counterproductive. These findings support the recommendations of the Prisoners' Education Trust which argues that, for many prisoners, it makes more sense to complete their degree earlier in their sentence, ensuring that they have time to fully focus on this without the distractions of resettlement and employment issues that accompany an approaching release date or release on temporary licence.[32] This is particularly important given the increasingly long sentences that prisoners are serving.[33]

In summary, the findings suggest that higher education, and the relationships which form as a result, may have the propensity to inform identity in a positive way, albeit that a revised identity may bring with it unrealistic expectations, and that identity may also shift in response to other factors, particularly on release.

Impact on situational aspects

The fourth factor which has been associated with the desistance journey is that of 'situational aspects'.[34]

26. Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives.* American Psychological Association.
27. Boduszek, D. et al. (2021). Pathways between types of crime and criminal social identity: A network approach. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 72,* 101750.
28. See footnote 15: Clark, R. (2016).
29. Illeris, K. (2013) *Transformative Learning and Identity.* Routledge
30. See footnote 16: Pike, A., &Hopkins, S. (2019), which drew on in-depth semi-structured interviews with prison students to discuss the transformative power of prison education to shape new identities.
31. For England – The Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011 (as amended); for Wales – The Education (Student Support) (Wales) Regulations 2018.
32. Prisoners' Education Trust. (2024). *Getting prison education right – Priorities for the new government. Prisoners'* Education Trust.
33. Prison Reform Trust. (2024). *Bromley Briefings Prison Fact File.* Prison Reform Trust. '
34. See footnote 11: Bottoms, A. E. (2014).

Prison may be perceived as important in removing a person from a situation in which there is the opportunity to commit offences. However, the environment is not, in itself, conducive to positive change and may simply expose the person to others from a similar background.[35] Clark has argued that the educational settings within prison, including the prison library, can, however, foster a different mindset that is more positively focused on the future.[36]

The interviews with ALs might suggest, however, that this factor is not so positively impacted by prison education. In fact, all the ALs interviewed expressed a number of concerns in relation to the educational environment and context in which their students were studying. The ALs were under the impression that the reality for many of their students is that they have very limited time in the prison educational departments or libraries — frequently only 2 hours a week, if that. This was identified too by research carried out by the Prison Reform Trust in 2003, which revealed that the prison students valued the resources and services the library afforded, and the time away from their cells, but that lack of access was problematic.[37]

ALs also observed that student access to laptops appeared to be inconsistent and often inadequate. Whilst some prisoners had laptops in their cells, this did not seem to be widespread. These views resonate with concerns expressed in various reports that prisons are stuck in a pre-digital era, and that this is impacting detrimentally on prisoners' digital literacy skills, which ultimately has implications for their employability.[38] Similar issues were reported by the ALs with regard to the Virtual Campus. The Virtual Campus is a teaching platform on which prisoners can view the OU teaching materials, without gaining general access to internet sites and forums for communicating with other students. In England and Wales, all prisons theoretically have access to the Virtual Campus — the experience of all the ALs interviewed was that, in reality, this access was not uniform, supporting earlier findings that its uptake is dependent on individual prisons' priorities and budgets.[39] These impressions reinforce earlier recommendations in the Coates Report that there should be continuity of access to the Virtual Campus across the prison estate, and that terminals should be easily accessible within prisons.[40]

Even where prisoners had access to prison education office suites, there was some challenge to the notion that this created a suitable setting for phone tutorials. For example:

> 'Sometimes [in face-to-face tutorials] you saw them on the wing, sometimes it was an educational room…, But wherever you were, you were sort of dedicated, you and them together… When you arrange the phone calls, I think they often have to be in an education office or something and I just don't find it's quite the same, to be honest.' [AL 3]

Whilst lack of access to educational amenities and digital infrastructure were identified by all ALs as issues, they were not so sure that lack of internet access, in itself, was detrimental, observing that there seemed to be a 'reluctant acceptance' of this restriction. The ALs felt that their students were still able to perform well as the OU materials and textbooks were of good quality; for example:

ALs also observed that student access to laptops appeared to be inconsistent and often inadequate.

> 'I think it's very assuring for them to know that they can still hit those top marks by using what they've got in front of them so that they're not limited.' [AL 5]

More than one AL even felt that lack of internet access had certain benefits, for example, by removing the temptation to plagiarise. It was acknowledged, however, that for a subject like law, it inhibited the ability to develop digital research skills and, more generally, digital literacy skills. The increasing approach of educational institutions to permit limited use of generative AI for assessments and, in some cases, to require it, may also raise additional difficulties for prison students due to the lack of access to the relevant tools. The latter was not something explored in our research and does not seem to have been considered in any recent reports or research in this area, but may be a fruitful area for future investigation.

35. Bunce, A (2023) Desistance and Sentencing – *A review of research.* Sentencing Academy.
36. See footnote 15: Clark, R. (2016).
37. See footnote 22: Prison Reform Trust. (2003).
38. See, for example: The Centre for Social Justice. (2021). *Digital Technology in Prisons – Unlocking relationships, learning and skills in prisons.* Centre for Social Justice.
39. Earle, R., Mehigan, J., Pike, A., & Weinbren, D. (2020), The Open University and Prison Education in the UK – the First 50 Years. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry, 7*(1), 70-87.
40. See footnote 20: Coates, S. (2016).

As noted above, ALs reported that one of the most frustrating aspects of the prison context was the disruption caused when a prison student was transferred out of, or between, prisons. Not only did this impact the relationships those students had developed, but the ALs observed that it frequently led to loss of access for the student to their educational record and materials, leading to delays and the inevitable impact on motivation and achievement. These findings are supported by a House of Commons Education Committee report, which recommended that individual digital education passports should be introduced which would contain a record of the prison student's learning and needs.[41] Our research suggests these recommendations may not have been acted on, but that implementation might be desirable.

Most of the ALs had the impression that much of their students' study took place in their cells. Whilst there was not much else for them to do there, half of the ALs interviewed said that their students complained about the noise from other prisoners and lack of privacy.[42] In one case an AL had become quite concerned about the impact this was having on a student's health, noting that:

> 'He used to study at night and sleep during the day because there was too much shouting during the day.' [AL 1]

One of the most frustrating aspects of the prison context was the disruption caused when a prison student was transferred out of, or between, prisons.

Another aspect of prison education which may negatively impact on a prisoner's situation is that tutorials are generally scheduled for daytime only, meaning that prisoners may effectively be forced to choose between attending work or engaging in study, with the differential in pay inevitably incentivising the prioritisation of work over study.[43] Prison students who have been convicted are expected to work in prison and receive payment for this.[44] Whilst educational involvement also receives payment, it tends to be lower.[45] Several ALs confirmed that this has been their experience and would sometimes disrupt tutorial attendance or simply render their students too tired to study. This comment from an AL illustrates these concerns:

> '[the prison student] was working so he said he found it hard to find the time and then he said 'I'd go back to my cell' and he said, 'I literally just wanted to go to sleep so I wouldn't study much because I was just tired'.' [AL 4]

These findings are corroborated by the Prisoners' Education Trust which recommends that 'HMPPS should mandate that pay for participating in education should be at least equal to the highest-paid work within the prison' (p.28),[46] and that prisons explore the scope for more flexible tuition regimes to try and address these issues. Another benefit of the latter may be that it increases the pool of ALs available to tutor, given that ALs often do more than one job and may not be available for daytime tutorials.

In summary, whilst some aspects of the prison educational setting might encourage a more positive outlook and sense of purpose, motivation and achievement in prison students, the general sense from the ALs was that the capacity for this environment to support the desistance journey was compromised by a number of factors. These included lack of investment in digital infrastructure and general lack of support and access to settings in which prison students could properly focus on their study, free from noise and distraction. These findings are supported by a number of independent, authoritative sources. If the prison educational environment is to have a beneficial impact on the prisoner's overall situation and, thereby, their desistance journey, it would seem worthwhile to address these issues.

41. See footnote 23: House of Commons Education Committee. (2022).
42. See also footnote 22: Prison Reform Trust (2003), in which prison students interviewed reported similar issues.
43. See footnote 32: Prisoners Education Trust. (2024).
44. Prison Rules 1999, no. 728, Part II, Physical Welfare and Work, Rule 31
45. See footnote 32: Prisoners Education Trust. (2024).
46. See footnote 32: Prisoners Education Trust. (2024).

Conclusion

This article has considered an exploratory qualitative research study on perceptions of Open University tutors of the educational experience of prison students engaged in higher education. The mapping of this research against the four factors considered central to the desistance journey suggests reasons why such education can impact positively on that journey, particularly on three of these factors: social relationships, revisioning of identity and active maturation. The impact on the fourth factor, situational aspects, seems, however, to be less beneficial. Moreover, the broader context of prison life appears to limit the prisoners' educational experience, for example through the disruption caused by prison transfers. Whilst this research was admittedly small in scale and only explored the perspective of one group of stakeholders, it has been noted that many of these findings resonate with the conclusions of various bodies and agencies, as well as prior academic studies which have drawn on the views of prison students.

Desistance from crime serves not just the interests of prisoners, but society as a whole. Whilst prison education plays a vital role in desistance,[47] there may be scope to enhance the educational experience to maximise its contributory potential. If higher education in prisons is to have a positive influence on all four factors considered crucial to the desistance journey, particularly situational aspects, it may be appropriate to re-evaluate the environment and context in which prison students learn. Implementation, for example, of changes to funding criteria, alignment of educational payments with those for work, and greater investment in digital infrastructure, digital skills development and digital education passports may be justified to enhance the educational setting and experience and, thereby, desistance.

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47. There is a wide body of evidence to support this; see, for example, footnote 20: Coates, S. (2016).

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of chaplaincy/religious services in modern Canadian prisons[1]

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Chaplaincy in Canadian prisons is essential for incarcerated people's spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being.[2] It supports rehabilitation, reduces misconduct, and lowers recidivism.[3] According to the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), chaplains are integral members of the multidisciplinary team providing spiritual care to incarcerated individuals of all faiths.[4] However, the literature on chaplaincy in Canadian prisons remains limited.[5] Most research has centred on correctional officers, the evolving role of chaplains,[6] and the impact of policy on their function.[7] Little attention has been given to how chaplains perceive their work and evaluate their contributions. This article aims to fill that gap by examining how chaplains perceive their role as spiritual leaders in Canadian prisons using a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis.

Chaplains do not operate in isolation from the broader prison environment, just as prisons are not entirely detached from the society beyond their walls. Prison research has evolved from viewing prisons as closed, total institutions to recognising them as permeable spaces influenced by external factors.[8 9] Technological advancements have expanded this permeability, giving rise to 'smart prisons' (p. 1214).[10] The collaboration of multidisciplinary teams within prisons, combined with their increasing interconnectedness with the outside world, allows for a more nuanced analysis of chaplains' roles as they intersect with various internal and external influences. Given this dynamic context, a SWOT analysis—examining Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats—offers a valuable framework for understanding how chaplains perceive their work in prison settings.

SWOT analysis framework

SWOT analysis is a widely recognised strategic planning tool for assessing internal and external factors

1. This article draws on research supported by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).
2. Dodson, K. D., Cabage, L. N., & Klenowski, P. M. (2011). An evidence-based assessment of faith-based programs: Do faith-based programs "work" to reduce recidivism? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 50*(6), 367–383.
3. Duwe, G., Hallett, M., Hays, J., Jang, S. J., & Johnson, B. R. (2015). Bible college participation and prison misconduct: A preliminary analysis. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 54*(5), 371–390.
4. Correctional Service Canada. (2018). Evaluation of CSC's institutional chaplaincy services: *Summa Government of Canada.* Retrieved from: https://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/
5. Akca, D., Ammar, N. H., Shoemaker, B., Cesaroni, C., & Ouellet, M. (2023). Joy, compassion, And job satisfaction: Insights into the Canadian prison chaplaincy. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 0*(0).
6. O'Connor, T. S. J., Meakes, E., & Zhao, Z. (2024). Overview of the evolution of chaplaincy and spiritual care in the Canadian Province of Ontario (1973–2023): A Teilhard reflection. *Pastoral Psychology, 1*-22
7. National Council of Canadian Muslims & Islamic Family. (2021). A review of privatized prison chaplaincy services. Retrieved from: https://www.nccm.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Prison-Chaplaincy-Privatization-Report-1.pdf
8. Goffman, E. (1968). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates.* Penguin Books.
9. Crewe, B., & Ievins, A. (2020). The prison is a reinventive institution. *Theoretical Criminology, 24*(4), 568–589.
10. Imandeka, E., Putra, P. O. H., Hidayanto, A. N., Mahmud, M., & Mohr, D. C. (2024). Exploring the world of innovative prisons: Barriers, trends, and sustainable solutions. *Human Behavior & Emerging, 24*(1), 615-8154.

affecting an organisation's performance.[11] Identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats provides a comprehensive understanding of an organisation's internal and external environment and aids in strategic decision-making.[12]

The Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) component examines Strengths and Weaknesses, which are aspects within an organisation's control. Strengths are internal assets or advantages contributing to success, while weaknesses are areas needing improvement due to resource limitations or inefficiencies.[13] For example, a prison chaplaincy service might benefit from experienced staff or strong community ties but struggle with limited funding or inconsistent programming. The External Factor Evaluation (EFE) focuses on Opportunities and Threats that stem from external influences beyond the organisation's direct control. Opportunities include favourable conditions such as policy changes or partnerships that can enhance growth, whereas threats encompass external risks like budget cuts, political shifts, or changing public attitudes.[14] Potential collaboration with faith-based groups could present an opportunity in a prison chaplaincy setting, while political opposition to religious services might pose a threat.

Chaplaincy in Canadian prisons is essential for incarcerated people's spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being.

SWOT analysis in corrections: A strategic evaluation

SWOT analysis has not been widely used in corrections to assess institutional operations, rehabilitation programmes, and strategic planning. This analytical framework provides a structured method for evaluating internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats, making it a valuable tool for shaping correctional policies and programmes.

Ross applies SWOT analysis to explore the future of Convict Criminology,[15] [16] recognising its potential to assess an organisation's status and trajectory. He acknowledges that while SWOT analysis has limitations, it remains an accessible and effective tool for fostering discussion and identifying strategic directions. Similarly, Chakamba employs a SWOT analysis to evaluate Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes in a juvenile correctional training centre in Zimbabwe, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the technical education provided to young individuals in custody.[17]

Institutional applications of SWOT analysis are also evident in policy planning. The Florida Department of Corrections integrated a SWOT assessment into its 2018-2022 strategic plan to evaluate prison operations, though pandemic-related disruptions affected its full implementation. Likewise, in Queensland, Australia, the Townsville local government incorporated a SWOT framework into its 'Intensive Case Coordination of Families and Young People' project, targeting systemic improvements in correctional interventions.[18]

Reintegration programmes have also leveraged SWOT analysis to refine their approaches. In Michigan, a programme designed to facilitate post-incarceration reintegration used this method to evaluate its process, ensuring a strategic framework for assessing the needs of individuals preparing for release.[19]

SWOT analysis has not been systematically applied to prison chaplaincy services. A literature review suggests a gap in research examining chaplains' roles and their contributions through a SWOT framework. Given the complex institutional, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of chaplaincy work, applying SWOT analysis to this field can provide critical insights into its impact, challenges, and potential for improvement. By evaluating internal factors (such as chaplains' dedication and role clarity) and external

11. Silva, C. N. (2005). SWOT analysis. In R. W. Caves (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the City* (pp. 444–445). Routledge.
12. Ghazinoory, S., Abdi, M., & Azadegan-Mehr, M. (2011). SWOT methodology: A state-of-the-art review for the past, a framework for the future. *Journal of Business Economics and Management, 12*(1), 24–48.
13. Helms, M. M., & Nixon, J. (2010). Exploring SWOT analysis – where are we now? A review of academic research from the last decade. *Journal of Strategy and Management, 3*(3), 215-251.
14. For a detailed discussion, see footnote 14: Helms & Nixon (2018).
15. Ross, J. I. (2024). Thinking Critically About the Next Decade of Convict Criminology. *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 33*(1).
16. Convict Criminology is a critical perspective within the field of criminology that draws on the personal experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals—many of whom are now scholars—to challenge traditional views of crime, justice, and incarceration.
17. Chakamba, J. (2019). *Towards re-visioning the technical & vocational curriculum of a selected Zimbabwean juvenile correctional training centre: A program evaluation.* [Doctoral Dissertation]. University of KwaZulu-Natal. Retrieved from: https://ukzn-dspace.ukzn.ac.za/handle/10413/17953
18. Murphy, Z., Hofmann, M., & Miles, V. (2018). Townsville Stronger Communities Action Group: Intensive case coordination of families and young people. *James Cook University Law Review, 24,* 261–275.
19. Eberth, S. D., Diaconu, M., & Koob, C. (2022). A Cautionary Tale of a Prisoner Re-entry Initiative: Lessons Learned. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social and Community Studies, 17*(2), 167-177.

influences (such as policy changes and funding constraints), SWOT analysis can help identify areas where chaplaincy services require institutional support and highlight opportunities for enhancing religious and spiritual care within correctional facilities. This approach is particularly relevant as chaplaincy often remains underfunded and overlooked in broader prison reform efforts.

Canadian prisons and chaplaincy

Canadian chaplaincy includes pastoral care as a core component. Chaplains in Canada provide spiritual, emotional, and religious support to individuals in various settings, including prisons. Their prison work encompasses several key areas: pastoral counselling, religious services, spiritual guidance, interfaith support, cultural sensitivity, and crisis and end-of-life support.[20]

Canada's justice system is divided between federal and provincial authorities.[21] Individuals in custody sentenced to two or more years fall under federal jurisdiction, while those with shorter sentences, including all incarcerated youth, are managed by provincial and territorial governments.[22] Incarcerated people are entitled to religious services under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.[23] Fluctuations in incarceration rates from 2018 to 2023 highlight the growing need for chaplaincy services.[24] The 2013 privatisation of federal chaplaincy services has raised concerns about reduced access, particularly for minority faith groups.[25] This study includes chaplains' perspectives on these changes.

> Many chaplains view their work as a calling, leading to long-term dedication despite challenges.

Method and data collection

Seven online focus groups were conducted to explore chaplains' experiences in correctional facilities across Canada. Each session lasted approximately one hour, allowing for in-depth discussions on their roles, challenges, and perspectives. The study included 25 interfaith chaplains from five Canadian provinces, ensuring a diverse representation of regional experiences. Nearly half (48 per cent) of participants were from Ontario, reflecting the province's significant role in the Canadian correctional system.

In terms of religious affiliation, most chaplains identified as Christian (76 per cent), while others represented Muslim (16 per cent), Jewish (4 per cent), and Buddhist (4 per cent) faith traditions. This interfaith composition provided insights into the varied approaches to spiritual care in correctional settings. Gender representation was predominantly male (80 per cent), with women making up 20 per cent of the participants, highlighting the gendered dynamics within chaplaincy work in these institutions.

Participants served across a range of institutional security levels, reflecting the diverse environments in which chaplains provide spiritual support: maximum-security facilities (20 per cent), medium-security facilities (4 per cent), combined medium/maximum-security facilities (24 per cent), multilevel institutions (housing incarcerated people of various security classifications; 32 per cent), and remand/detention centres (temporary holding facilities for individuals awaiting trial or sentencing; 8 per cent). The size of these facilities also varied significantly, with some chaplains serving in institutions with fewer than 100 incarcerated people. In contrast, others worked in facilities with over 400 detainees. Notably, 32 per cent of chaplains were based in the most significant institutions (i.e., larger and in provinces with larger populations), highlighting the increased demand for spiritual and emotional support in these high-capacity environments.

This broad representation across security levels, facility sizes, and religious traditions enabled a comprehensive overview of chaplains' experiences and offered valuable insights into their work within Canada's correctional system.

Data analysis

Analysing chaplains' experiences in Canadian correctional facilities began with carefully transcribing

20. Government of Canada (2024). Memorandum of Understanding Between the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and the Interfaith Committee on Chaplaincy (IFC). Retrieved from: https://www.canada.ca/en/correctional-service/programs/offenders/chaplaincy/international-networks/memorandum-understanding-between-correctional-service-canada-csc-interfaith-committee-chaplaincy-ifc.html
21. Roberts, J. V., & Doob, A. N. (1997). Race, Ethnicity, and Criminal Justice in Canada. *Crime and Justice, 21,* 469–522.
22. Correctional Service Canada. (2024, October). *Quarterly financial report for the quarter ended September 30, 2024.* Government of Canada.
23. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (2024). Government of Canada. Retrieved from: https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csjsjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/
24. Statista Research Department. (2024, July 4). *Canada: Rate of adults in correctional services in provinces and territories 2001-2023.* Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/560907/rate-of-adults-in-provincial-and-territorial-correctional-services-canada/
25. Beckford, J. A., & Cairns, I. C. M. (2015). Muslim Prison Chaplains in Canada and Britain. *The Sociological Review, 63*(1), 36-56.

focus group discussions. Each session was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring that every perspective and nuance was accurately captured. The research team then reviewed the transcripts, identifying recurring themes and key discussion points.

Once familiar with the data, the researchers began a multi-stage coding process to organise and refine the emerging themes. In the first coding cycle, keywords and phrases relating to strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were highlighted, using an inductive approach to allow themes to surface naturally. As patterns became more evident, a second coding round helped refine these themes, grouping similar ideas and eliminating redundancies. This iterative process ensured that the findings maintained internal consistency and analytical rigor.

With clearly defined themes, the research team applied a SWOT framework to structure the analysis. The identified themes were categorised into four key areas (see table 1): 1) Strengths highlight the factors that empower chaplains in their roles; 2) Weaknesses, outlining the institutional challenges and barriers they face, 3) Opportunities, identifying potential improvements, and innovative practices, and 4) Threats, recognising systemic risks that could undermine chaplaincy work in correctional settings.

Table 1. *SWOT analysis of a sample of Canadian prison chaplains.*

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Chaplains Dedication	Role Confusion	Prison Chaplaincy Jobs	De-funding
Resilience Under Pressure	Role Limitation	Do Good Work	Non-multi-faith Chaplaincy
Chaplains' Community	Chaplaincy Vulnerability	Tech. in Chaplaincy	Chaplains Health
Safe Space for Inmates			

While this structured approach established a solid analytical foundation, meaningfully capturing chaplains' lived experiences was equally essential. To achieve this, narrative analysis was incorporated into the study. Firsthand accounts were carefully selected from the transcripts, ensuring representation from all focus groups. These narratives not only illustrated the practical realities of chaplaincy but also reinforced the effectiveness of the SWOT framework, bridging broad trends with firsthand experiences.

Findings

Strengths

Chaplain's dedication

Chaplains exhibited strong commitment and passion for their roles, creating stability in environments fraught with uncertainty. Their ability to foster meaningful connections with incarcerated people contributed to emotional and spiritual well-being. Many chaplains view their work as a calling, leading to long-term dedication despite challenges.

> 'We have incredibly compassionate people who legitimately care, and that cuts across all the faith groups.'

Resilience under pressure

Despite limited resources, understaffing, and institutional constraints, chaplains remained adaptable and ensured continuity of services. Their ability to navigate systemic challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated their resilience.

> 'Due to a lack of chaplaincy staff, I am dealing with four hundred people, and we have only one and a half chaplains in the institution. It is not possible.'

Strong chaplaincy community

Chaplains of various faiths supported one another, forming networks that promoted collaboration, mentorship, and shared learning. These communities helped chaplains to develop best practices and create structured training programmes.

> 'Through our community of practice, we have been able to interact and collaborate, leading to some changes in education and even the development of a chaplaincy curriculum.'

Safe space for incarcerated people

Chaplains provided a unique, confidential environment where incarcerated people felt safe expressing emotions, seeking guidance, and receiving nonjudgmental support. This role was particularly significant in rigid institutional settings.

> 'We provide a kind of kindness in a harsh environment, a human touch where we can connect with people, not just incarcerated people but staff too.'

Weaknesses

Role confusion

Chaplains often operated in a grey area within correctional institutions. While their presence was acknowledged, correctional staff and administrators did not always fully understand their role, leading to a lack of clear expectations.

> 'My superintendent[26] does not fully understand what I do. We are within the system but not quite part of the system.'

Role limitations

Facilities often lacked adequate spaces for chaplaincy work, limiting the ability to conduct services, group sessions, and private discussions. Institutional policies sometimes restricted their duties, reducing their ability to offer meaningful care.

> 'We do not have the private space necessary for meaningful conversations; we often meet incarcerated people behind bars or in a cage.'

Administrative burden

Chaplains were increasingly required to oversee administrative tasks, taking time away from their primary responsibilities of providing spiritual care. Institutional bureaucracy further limited their ability to engage with the incarcerated people effectively.

> 'You spend your day just typing messages, while on the other side, many people are waiting for your visit.'

Burnout and emotional strain

The demanding nature of chaplaincy, coupled with high caseloads and exposure to incarcerated people's trauma, contributed to burnout and secondary trauma. Many chaplains struggled to find institutional support for their mental well-being.

> 'Chaplaincy involves walking a fine line between being part of the institution and fulfilling our spiritual mission. If we cannot balance that, it becomes a significant challenge.'

Opportunities

Expanding chaplaincy roles

Due to legal and institutional requirements, there is a growing demand for chaplains in correctional facilities. These positions offered competitive salaries, benefits, and job security.

> 'There is a real opportunity for chaplaincy to grow within the correctional system, given the increasing recognition of our work.'

Supporting rehabilitation and reintegration

Chaplains played a key role in rehabilitating incarcerated people, helping them to develop spiritual resilience, cope with incarceration, and prepare for reintegration into society. This offered a chance to improve perceptions of chaplaincy as an essential rehabilitative service.

> 'This is a great chance for us to help with rehabilitation and reintegration, depending on where each person is in their journey.'

We are now using government laptops to help incarcerated people attend virtual funerals and religious services, something that would have been impossible before.

Leveraging technology

Integrating technology, including video conferencing, enhanced chaplains' ability to reach incarcerated people remotely, provide faith-specific services, and connect incarcerated people with family members.

> 'We are now using government laptops to help incarcerated people attend virtual funerals and religious services, something that would have been impossible before.'

Threats

Funding cuts and staff shortages

Chronic underfunding led to chaplain shortages, making it difficult to provide adequate care. High chaplain-to-incarcerated individual ratios reduced the effectiveness of spiritual services.

26. In Canada, the superintendent or warden is the head of the prison or correctional facility. In UK prisons, this person would be called the Governing Governor.

> 'We have gone from one chaplain per 150 incarcerated people to one per 250, making it impossible to meet individual needs.'

Inconsistent hiring practices

The shift from government-employed chaplains to contract-based hiring has led to instability and loss of experienced chaplains. Minority faith groups were often underrepresented due to limited hiring policies.

> 'Over a decade ago, the federal government defunded and outsourced chaplaincy. Now, contracts are awarded to the lowest bidder, which reduces the quality of services.'

Lack of multi-faith representation

Christian chaplaincy remained dominant, leaving minority faith groups underserved. Policies that required a minimum number of incarcerated people from a specific religion before hiring a chaplain limited access to spiritual care.

> 'There is no Jewish chaplain at certain facilities because there are not 'enough' Jewish incarcerated people. This leaves many without proper religious guidance.'

Chaplains' mental and physical health

Exposure to trauma, stress, and occasional threats of violence created significant risks for chaplains, impacting their well-being and ability to perform their duties effectively.

> 'Vicarious trauma is a real concern. Chaplains are constantly exposed to stories of hardship, abuse, and violence, yet we rarely receive mental health support.'

Policy recommendations

Drawing on the findings from the SWOT analysis, the following policy recommendations aim to address systemic challenges affecting chaplaincy services in Canadian prisons. These challenges stem from institutional limitations, external opportunities for reform, and barriers that hinder chaplains' ability to provide effective spiritual care.[27] To improve service accessibility and sustainability, targeted interventions, such as increased funding, interfaith collaboration, and enhanced training programs, are necessary.[28]

Implementing these policies would align chaplaincy services with chaplains' lived experiences and the more exhaustive empirical research, enhancing their ability to support rehabilitation, reduce recidivism, and uphold human rights within correctional institutions.[29] These recommendations, based on the SWOT analysis conducted as part of the current study, provide a framework for strengthening chaplaincy as a key component of holistic correctional care in Canada. Table 2 below summarises recommended policies drawn from this research study.

Table 2. *Key challenges chaplains face and proposed recommendations*

Key Challenges	Recommendation
Role confusion and institutional integration	Develop clear job descriptions that align chaplains' spiritual duties with institutional goals. Explicitly integrate chaplains into standing orders, crisis response procedures, and leadership meetings.
Professional development and recognition	Offer paid leave for training and establish formal acknowledgment programmes to highlight chaplains' contributions to rehabilitation.
Workload and burnout	Conduct Internal Factors Evaluations (IFEs) to assess chaplains' resilience, workload, and long-term well-being. Ensure chaplaincy services are adequately staffed.
Facilities and resources	Improve access to dedicated spiritual spaces rather than shared multi-use rooms. Establish policies that ensure chaplains can provide meaningful spiritual care. Address limitations in technological services due to a lack of tools and broadband.

27. Gacek, J., & Asfari, A. (2024). Islamophobia and the Benefits and Challenges for Prison Imams. *Islamophobia Studies Journal, 8*(2), 246-267.
28. O'Connor, T. S., Meakes, E., & Zhao, Z. (2024). Overview of the Evolution of Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Canadian Province of Ontario (1973–2023): A Teilhard Reflection. *Pastoral Psychology.*
29. Scallan, E., Lancaster, K., & Kouyoumdjian, F. (2021). The "Problem" of Health: An Analysis of Health Care Provision in Canada's Federal Prisons. *Health, 25*(3), 678–690.

Staffing and job security	Implement consistent hiring standards, ensuring chaplains meet qualifications like those set by the Canadian Association for Spiritual Care (CASC). Chaplains' staffing levels must account for absences due to illness, training, and leave. Facilities need more than the minimum.
Funding and multi-faith representation	Establish proportional hiring policies reflecting incarcerated individuals' demographics—advocate for provincial and federal funding to sustain chaplaincy services and support minority faith representation.
Technology integration	Develop standardised guidelines for chaplaincy technology use, ensuring secure virtual spiritual care without replacing in-person interactions. Allocate funding for infrastructure improvements (internet access, secure platforms).
Mental health and well-being staff interacting with chaplains.	Normalise mental health support by eliminating stigma, offering trauma-informed counselling, and using anonymous feedback mechanisms for chaplains.

Implementation strategies

Practical implementation strategies are essential for optimising chaplaincy services within the Canadian correctional system. Considering institutional constraints and the diverse spiritual needs of incarcerated individuals, structured approaches can improve chaplaincy's required work. Key strategies include enhancing resource allocation, promoting interfaith collaboration, and expanding professional development opportunities for chaplains. Moreover, incorporating empirical assessment tools can assist in evaluating chaplaincy's role in rehabilitation and reducing recidivism.

Addressing operational challenges and adopting best practices will help to ensure that chaplaincy remains vital to correctional care.

1. Legislative and policy integration: Position chaplaincy as a core component of rehabilitation and reintegration for imprisoned people to justify sustained funding.
2. Collaboration with multi-faith organisations: Strengthen partnerships with faith-based groups to co-fund chaplaincy services and educate majority faith chaplains about minority traditions.
3. Monitoring and evaluation: Establish independent reviews of chaplain-to-incarcerated individual ratios and diversity benchmarks and ensure equitable hiring and resource distribution.
4. Data-driven advocacy: Offer grants to independent researchers to collect impact metrics (e.g., reduced recidivism and improved incarcerated individuals' behaviour) to build a compelling case for funding.

Critical reflections

The present study adopts a structured approach to examining prison chaplaincy in Canada, employing a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to assess its key dimensions systematically. This analytical framework delineates the core issues within prison chaplaincy, making the findings accessible and actionable for policymakers. By integrating qualitative methodologies, including focus groups and narrative analysis, the study effectively captures the lived experiences of chaplains, offering a nuanced understanding of their roles, challenges, and contributions within correctional institutions.

A notable strength of this research lies in its inclusion of diverse perspectives, encompassing chaplains from various provinces, security classifications, and religious traditions. This breadth of representation allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the chaplaincy landscape in Canada. Furthermore, the study recognises the inherently complex and interdisciplinary nature of chaplaincy work, situating chaplains within the broader correctional environment and examining their interactions with incarcerated individuals, institutional staff, and external faith-based organisations.

However, the study is not without its limitations. The small sample size and an over representation of chaplains from Ontario constrain the generalisability of the findings to the national context. The study's reliance on self-reported data also introduces the potential for response bias, as it does not incorporate perspectives from correctional staff or incarcerated individuals. Moreover, the absence of a comparative dimension—wherein Canadian prison chaplaincy could be evaluated against international models—precludes a more expansive understanding of best practices and alternative frameworks. The study also does not

quantify chaplaincy's impact on key correctional outcomes, such as rehabilitation and recidivism rates, limiting its capacity to inform evidence-based policy decisions.

Future research should broaden the study's scope by incorporating a larger and more geographically representative sample to address these limitations. Expanding the range of perspectives by including input from correctional officers, institutional administrators, and incarcerated persons would enrich the analysis and enhance the validity of the findings. While the present study underscores the significance of chaplaincy in the Canadian correctional system, an expanded research agenda would bolster the evidence base, supporting the development of more comprehensive and informed policy interventions.

Conclusion

This study highlights the essential role of chaplaincy in Canadian prisons, emphasising (from the perspective of chaplains) its impact on spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being and its contributions to rehabilitation, misconduct reduction, and lower recidivism rates. Chaplains provide critical support to incarcerated individuals, offering a safe space for reflection, healing, and faith-based guidance. Despite their integral role, chaplains operate within a complex institutional framework, facing significant challenges that affect their ability to provide meaningful spiritual care.

Through a SWOT analysis, this research has identified key strengths such as chaplains' dedication, resilience, professional networks, and ability to foster trust with incarcerated people. At the same time, internal weaknesses—including role confusion, administrative burdens, inadequate facilities, and burnout—highlight structural issues that hinder their effectiveness. External opportunities like job security, technological advancements, and the potential for enhanced rehabilitation efforts contrast with threats such as funding cuts, inconsistent hiring practices, lack of multi-faith representation, and chaplains' mental health risks.

Policy recommendations to address these challenges include clarifying chaplaincy roles, improving working conditions, ensuring multi-faith representation, responsibly leveraging technology, and implementing mental health support for chaplains. Strengthening collaboration between correctional institutions, faith-based organisations, and policymakers is crucial to sustaining effective, equitable, and well-resourced chaplaincy services.

Recognising chaplaincy as a core component of rehabilitation and reintegration could help secure its long-term viability. By implementing data-driven advocacy, independent monitoring, and strategic policy changes, correctional institutions can enhance chaplains' effectiveness, ensure equitable access to spiritual care, and reinforce the rehabilitative potential of Canada's prison system.

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A place of greater safety: An analysis of penal sacred spaces

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The role of religion and chaplaincy in prison is significant in historical and contemporary settings, yet scholarly attention is limited regarding how chaplaincy spaces are experienced physically and relationally, and whether (and how) they are made 'sacred.' This article summarises qualitative research undertaken at HMP Berwyn and HMP Wormwood Scrubs towards completion of a thesis for an MSt in Applied Criminology, Penology, and Management. The article presents the ways in which sacred spaces had physical, imagined, and relational characteristics, and how the wider prison regimes enabled and inhibited access to sacred spaces for people in prison.

Existing literature suggests that interrogating the role of religion in prison life can deepen our understanding of the emotional geography of prison life.[1] Such work indicates that faith provides relief from the pains of imprisonment, albeit not entirely. Even religious spaces do not wholly escape the prison regime and may reinforce disciplinary measures or serve as reminders of what has been lost. This article employs a sensitising theoretical framework drawn from Edward Soja's notion of Third Space and compares how sacred space is made and felt in the two prisons from physical (bricks and mortar), imagined (ideas of a place) and relational (social) perspectives.[2]

A range of sources inform the term 'sacred,' which serves as a proxy term for strong cultural or religious associations of divinity, holiness, or extreme importance. The idea of 'setting apart' (like a religious festival or a holy untouchable object) consistently emerges as central to sacredness, and this became core to the working definition employed in the research. Although 'setting apart' did appear fundamental to sacredness in these prisons, the normalcy or sense of 'outsideness' of faith services surprisingly enhanced perceptions of sacredness, challenging traditional theories that sacredness and normality are worlds apart. What is considered mundane or 'usual' beyond prison walls (silence, food, friendship, etc.) can be exceptional inside, meaning that normalcy itself can feel rare and thus sacred. While 'setting apart' remains crucial here, the unique emotional landscape of prison life, and the role of religion within it, challenges interpretations of sacredness as only possible in holy churches and secret groves.

The title of this article is an ironic play on reductive interpretations of the supposed safety that chaplaincy spaces offer, which is a safety made possible by the constraints of the prison itself. Or as one prisoner put it, 'If prison wasn't this bad, the chapel wouldn't feel so safe'.

Literature review

The confinement of prison life is textured by a deeply layered emotional geography.[3] Individuals experience these institutions with frustration, tension, camaraderie, fear, and occasional solace. Although religion is not the central focus of most key literature, faith is widely acknowledged as reducing certain 'pains of imprisonment' by offering comfort and psychological relief.[4] Contemporary prisons, however, face considerable pressures, including excessive sentencing, changing demographics, staff shortages, gang affiliations, and intensified security measures.[5] These conditions shape every aspect of prison life, including faith-based activities.

At the same time, prison chaplaincy has historically been perceived as a form of 'soft control', intended to pacify tensions and to support institutional goals.[6] This perspective aligns with arguments that religion can

1. Crewe, B. W. (2014). The Emotional Geography of Prison Life. *Theoretical Criminology, 18*(1), 56-74.
2. Soja, E. (1996). *ThirdSpace.* Malden.
3. Crewe, B. (2007). The sociology of imprisonment. In Y. Jewkes (Ed.), *Handbook on prisons* (pp. 123–146). Willan.
4. Sykes, G. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison.* Princeton University Press.
5. Liebling, A., & Williams, R. (2023). Do prisons cause radicalization? Order, leadership, political charge and violence in two maximum security prisons. *British Journal of Criminology, 67,* 97–114.
6. Beckford, J., & Gilliat, S. (1998). *Religion in prison: "Equal rites" in a multi-faith society.* Cambridge University Press.

foster self-discipline in line with the stated goals of imprisonment.[7] Yet recent scholarship reveals a more complex landscape: while chaplaincy may reinforce control, it can also provide genuine opportunities for personal growth and social connection.[8] In a context where movement and autonomy are heavily curtailed, the presence of sacred objects or rituals can grant a rare sense of ownership or identity.[9] Understanding how sacredness emerges within prisons requires a broader inquiry into space and time. 'Carceral Geography' tells us that prisons are more than physical structures; they are dynamic arenas where social relations, power, and symbolism converge.[10]

Edward Soja's theory of Third Space considers how space is simultaneously physical, imagined, and relational.[11] He rejects binary thinking, such as inside/outside and real/imagined, and argues that space is constantly being negotiated and is rife with contradictions. This flexible approach resonates with prisons, where people living in prison and prison staff inhabit overlapping realities, each shaped by personal histories, institutional mandates, and power imbalances. Some studies show how temporary events, such as Christmas celebrations, can disrupt the typical free/captive binary, creating a festive 'in-between' state that feels closer to a domestic or communal environment.[12] From this perspective, even highly regulated spaces remain open to moments of spontaneity or reinvention. Or, rather, there are moments when a prison can foster countercultural spaces and practices that create nodes of 'anti-prison' activity.[13]

Third Space is not an exhaustive framework; rather, it is a 'sensitising' tool that accommodates new insights as they arise from fieldwork or conversation.[14] Its emphasis on the inseparability of space and time is especially relevant in prisons, where the regulation of time dictates the flow of daily life. Time itself becomes part of how space is perceived and used, generating conditions in which faith can assume heightened significance. Moments or places marked as sacred may therefore allow brief moments of escape from prison life. Situating religion within this reframes religious spaces in prison as neither wholly controlled nor entirely emancipatory. Such ambivalence underscores the dual role of chaplaincy: it functions both 'within' and 'against' prisons.

The 'sacred'

The sacred has historically helped communities to draw boundaries around important spaces, objects, and practices. Such boundaries are not uniform, however, because religious and cultural traditions differ. Therefore, this work adopts a cross-cutting definition, bridging the theories offered by Émile Durkheim (where sacredness is characterised by both 'setting apart' and its societal function),[15] and Mircea Eliade (for whom the sacred holds a genuine transcendent quality),[16] rather than trying to compile an exhaustive list of different theories.

> ...faith provides relief from the pains of imprisonment, albeit not entirely.

Constraints in prison, such as resource limitations, shared spaces, regimented timetables, affect the ways religious and spiritual activities are delivered and experienced. In such conditions, the boundaries between different faith groups can become more sharply defined, and a pluralistic approach to chaplaincy often leads to 'multi faith' rooms that accommodate various rituals. A 'multi-faith' strategy can grant minority faith communities separate spaces (sometimes called prayer rooms or mosques within prison walls), underscoring the deep entanglement of religion and institutional politics. Meanwhile, researchers note that religious gatherings can become moments of creativity or even resistance, where contraband is exchanged, or prisoners covertly challenge power dynamics.[17]

7. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.* Vintage Books.
8. See footnote 7: Beckford & Gilliat (1998).
9. Beckford, J. (2001). Doing time: Space, time, religious diversity and the sacred in prisons. *International Review of Sociology, 11*(3), 371–382.
10. Moran, D., Turner, J., & Schliehe, A. K. (2017). Conceptualizing the carceral in carceral geography. *Progress in Human Geography, 42*(5), 666–686.
11. See footnote 2: Soja (1996).
12. Munn, M., & Sanjenko, B. (2022). Captive Christmas: Unwrapping the third space. *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 61*(3), 329–346.
13. Gilligan, J., & Lee, B. (2004). Beyond the prison paradigm: From provoking violence to preventing it by creating "anti-prisons". *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences,* 1036, 300–324.
14. Chatterton, P. (2010). Seeking the urban common: Furthering the debate on spatial justice. City, 14(6), 625–628.
15. Durkheim, E. (1912). *The elementary forms of religious life.* The Free Press; William, L., & Vogt, E. (1979).
16. Eliade, M. (1957). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harcourt, Brace, and World. (Original work published 1956).
17. Gilliat-Ray, S. (2005). From 'chapel' to 'prayer room': The production, use, and politics of sacred space in public institutions. *Culture and Religion, 6*(2), 287-308.

Such complexity underscores the concept of emotional geography, as these chaplaincy areas or prayer rooms represent pockets of comfort, spiritual solace, or social connection within a broader punitive environment. They are 'set apart' in a literal, architectural sense, but also psychologically, as participants may temporarily feel less bound by the harsh routines of prison life. At the same time, the 'mundane' aspects of everyday life in prison (such as sharing a coffee or engaging in a heartfelt conversation), can feel extraordinary in a setting that severely restricts personal agency.

This section arrives at a working definition of sacred spaces as those set apart from their surroundings and which have a spiritual or otherwise impactful quality. Within the prison environment, this set-apartness interacts with the realities of confinement, reshaping how people in prison perceive and create meaning. Traditional ideas of the sacred may be supplemented, or even upended, by the unexpected significance that prisoners place on routine and personal connection. Overall, this discussion highlights how classical theories of the sacred must be reconsidered when applied to contemporary prisons.

'Carceral Geography' tells us that prisons are more than physical structures; they are dynamic arenas where social relations, power, and symbolism converge.

Method

This study adopted a comparative approach by examining two prisons (HMP Berwyn and HMP Wormwood Scrubs). Although not rigorously comparative, including both institutions enabled a broader scope for identifying shared or divergent themes rather than evaluating lone institutional performance.[18]

Data collection centred on participant observation, which spanned 1 intensive week at each site and included observations of — and conversations with — roughly 250-300 individuals in each prison, across chapels, religious spaces, wings, outdoor spaces, and personal cells. During these periods, the researcher joined daily routines in chaplaincy areas, attended religious services, and shadowed chaplains on wing visits. This immersive approach is well-suited to capturing subtle dynamics within prison environments.[19] Convenience sampling was used, whereby anyone present and willing to participate (chaplains, prisoners, officers, external visitors) was included.[20] Given the constraints inherent to prison regimes (for example, unpredictable timetables, security protocols, frequent lock-downs, etc.) this flexible sampling strategy maximised opportunities for data collection in both establishments.

Semi-structured interviews were also arranged for chaplaincy staff who were absent during the observation weeks. The interviews followed a loose guide to allow participants to delve into issues arising from field notes. Recording devices were avoided due to concerns that they might inhibit open dialogue or create distrust in a high-security context. Instead, handwritten field notes were taken and expanded at the end of each day.

Data were analysed through a blend of deductive and inductive coding. Three thematic Third Space categories (physical, imagined, and relational) were identified in advance to reflect key elements of a Third Space perspective. However, additional codes and themes were analysed outside of that framework and emerged organically from research, ensuring findings were not narrowly confined.[21] This integrative approach aligns with established thematic analysis techniques, where the researcher acknowledges both anticipated and unexpected patterns in the data.[22] Field notes were entered into NVivo for consistent organisation and ease of retrieval.

Limitations were encountered in design and research. First, each site visit lasted only one week, restricting prolonged immersion and relationship-building. Second, different architectural layouts and security procedures (especially the older structure at Wormwood Scrubs) sometimes limited the researcher's freedom to move spontaneously. Third, convenience

18. Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). Comparative case studies: An innovative approach. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education, 1*(1), 5–17.
19. Jacobs, J. B. (1974). Participant observation in prison. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 3*(2), 221–240.
20. Abbott, P., DiGiacomo, M., Magin, P., & Hu, W. (2018). A scoping review of qualitative research methods used with people in prison. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 17*(1), 1-15.
21. Naeem, M., & Ozuem, W. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22*, 1-18.
22. Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 8*(3), 3351-3365.

sampling may produce selection bias, favouring participants who already engage in chaplaincy or religious spaces. Finally, the researcher's dual identity (a Ministry of Justice employee and an independent academic) necessitated careful boundary management to avoid inadvertently influencing participants or overstating institutional authority.[23] This was achieved through rigorous socialisation of participant information sheets, verbal explanations to chaplains, orderlies, and people in prison of the exact researcher remit, and discussions with the managing chaplain about expectations and research parameters.

Findings

HMP Berwyn's chaplaincy is in a modern, centralised area comprising two multi-faith rooms. One room focuses on Christian, Buddhist, and Pagan practices and paraphernalia. The other room emphasises Islamic, Sikh, and Hindu worship, with prayer mats facing a *minbar* and a separate Sikh shrine shielded by curtains, next to a small Hindu *mandir.* Both rooms are near the chaplaincy office and separated only by short corridors, reflecting Berwyn's rehabilitative ethos and modern design.[24]

Wormwood Scrubs has a large Victorian chapel at the prison's centre, complemented by a World Faith Centre and prayer hall located elsewhere. The Grade-II listed chapel, akin to a small cathedral, is a traditionally Christian space featuring an altar, pulpit, and arches. Paintings of saints line the walls, creating a solemn, if imposing, atmosphere. The World Faith Centre is a multi-faith room that contains separate cabinets for several religions, though it remains relatively plain and unadorned unless opened for a specific service. The adjoining prayer hall serves primarily for Islamic worship, with posters dedicated to Islamic teaching and a partitioned area for female staff. Compared to Berwyn, the chaplaincy architecture of Wormwood Scrubs is more dispersed, and prisoner movement is constrained by older infrastructure, security measures, and gang-related restrictions. This distributed layout can hinder easy access to religious activities, reinforcing a sense that sacred spaces exist at multiple, often distant, points in the institution. Taken together, these physical contrasts illustrate how architectural design, location, and the arrangement of religious symbols may shape how sacredness is perceived and practiced.

The physical

The 'physical' theme contained codes including quietness, aesthetic distinctiveness, and a sense of sanctuary. Chaplaincy areas in both prisons offered perceptible calm, contrasting starkly with loud and often chaotic wing environments. Participants repeatedly emphasised silence as a core component of sacredness, with some describing it as the only time they could 'hear themselves think.'[25] Services were often held in quiet or with minimal noise, prompting reflections that time felt shorter and more precious during religious gatherings than on the wings.

Many respondents viewed chaplaincy as a place of safety and respite.

Silence also emerged as a sign of group respect.[26] Although most participants welcomed this, some resisted it, particularly during Friday Prayers in HMP Berwyn. Observers noted occasional talking or confrontational behaviour until the recitation of the Quran, at which point the congregation collectively enforced silence. This illustrates how theological perspectives can imbue certain moments with heightened sacredness, since breaking silence during scriptural reading was seen to undermine spiritual benefits.[27]

Conversely, Rastafarian and Buddhist ceremonies at Wormwood Scrubs featured drumming and chanting.[28] Participants likened these rhythms to a meditative state, mirroring the effect of silence in Christian or Quaker services. Whether silent or musical, these rituals offered a break from everyday stresses—akin to Durkheim's 'collective effervescence.'

Finally, many respondents viewed chaplaincy as a place of safety and respite. Drug use and violence were said to be minimal inside these spaces, making them feel physically protective. Vulnerable prisoners,[29] for

23. Liebling, A. (2014). Postscript: Integrity and emotion in prisons research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(481), 387–543.
24. Bennett, T. P. (2017). *HMP Berwyn.* https://tpbennett.com/work/justice/hmp-berwyn/
25. Picard, M. (1948). *The world of silence.* Eight Day Press.
26. Turner, V. (1966). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure.* Cornell University Press.
27. Vlăduțescu, Ș. (2014). Communication of silence at Martin Heidegger: Sygetics—Logics of thinking silence. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences, 17,* 49–54.
28. Mabbett, I. W. (1993). Buddhism and music. *Asian Music, 25,* 9–28; Murrell, N. S., Spencer, W. D., & McFarlane, A. A. (1988). *Chanting down Babylon: The Rastafari reader.* Temple University Press.
29. 'Vulnerable prisoners' are those considered to be at an elevated risk of harm or exploitation, such as those incarcerated for sexual offences.

instance, appreciated chaplaincy time as a chance to escape social isolation. Yet, conflicts still occasionally arose when wing tensions or perceived dangers carried into sacred environments.

In sum, the physical theme underscores how chaplaincy spaces, through quietness or purposeful sound, aesthetic distinction, and relative safety, are set apart from the ordinary prison experience.

The imagined

Participants reported feelings of sacredness, sanctuary, and a sense of ownership/purpose in chaplaincy spaces. Their accounts reinforced the idea that sacred space is set apart, whether understood as overtly religious or as offering a secular kind of sanctuary.

Many people in prison described these places as sacred in a theological sense, aligning with Christian teachings that God is 'present' when believers gather.[30] Others emphasised cultural reasons: Irish Travellers, for instance, felt communion rites, rosary beads, and chaplain blessings crucially sustained their faith and identity,[31] echoing research showing chaplaincy is especially trusted by this group. A Christian chaplain at Berwyn offered - as a soft challenge - the view that people are inherently sacred, highlighting a theological view that the 'divine spark' surpasses architecture. Some non-religious people in prison preferred the term 'sanctuary' over 'sacred', suggesting the space allowed mental respite without necessarily invoking the divine.

'If prison wasn't this bad, the chapel wouldn't feel so safe'.

A sense of ownership or purpose was also significant. Chaplains often took active steps to 'activate' multi-faith rooms, using symbols or temporary partitions to respect different religious needs.[32] Berwyn's so-called 'Third Way',' keeping most faith symbols visible at once, contrasted with the neutral World Faith Centre of Wormwood Scrubs, which stored items in cupboards, to be revealed only during specific worship. Neither approach clearly dominated in promoting sacredness; rather, participants appreciated the intention and respect shown in both models.

Beyond formal chapels or multi-faith rooms, chaplains helped sanctify personal cells, at times blessing them after distressing events. In one case at Wormwood Scrubs, a prisoner upset about occupying a cell where a friend had died requested a ritual cleansing. This highlights the broader chaplaincy role in addressing spiritual, cultural, and emotional needs, illustrating how sacredness extends beyond designated faith areas.[33]

Finally, partial participation by the researcher underscored how easily such spaces become shared stories. During a Buddhist service at Wormwood Scrubs, the researcher was invited to meditate alongside people in prison, a moment that bridged observer and participant roles. While this raised ethical questions, it fostered rapport and exemplified how these spaces are co-constructed.[34] It was through discussion with the chaplain present, that these concerns could be quickly rationalised, and the participation adapted accordingly to allow for a more active yet safe participation in the meditation. This relational and dynamic approach allowed for a more immersive and flexible research approach.

The relational

Three relational codes emerged strongly: food and drink, chaplaincy managerialism, and pro-social religious identity building. Food and drink were especially notable at Berwyn, where post-service coffee and biscuits allowed up to 15 minutes of relaxed conversation with fellow prisoners and public visitors. This small ritual fostered intense normalcy, offering a brief respite from incarceration. One orderly remarked that, during this time, prisoners and visitors became indistinguishable, reflecting the heightened social value of shared refreshments in restrictive carceral settings.[35] At Wormwood Scrubs security protocols curtailed such gatherings, shifting communal bonding to wing visits or corridor chats while escorting prisoners to services.

Chaplaincy managerialism also played a significant role. Chaplains in both prisons were perceived as trusted intermediaries, providing pastoral care relatively free from punitive aims.[36] They 'activated' religious spaces through sermons, blessings, and one-on-one support, balancing urgent crisis response with long-term spiritual or emotional development.[37] Managing

30. Lewis, C. S. (1940). *The problem of pain.* Zondervan.
31. MacGabhann, C. (2011). *Voices unheard: A study of Irish Travellers in prison.* Irish Chaplaincy in Britain.
32. Tipton, L. (2011). *The role and contribution of a multi-faith prison chaplaincy to the contemporary prison service.* Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies.
33. Bermudez, J. (2020). Emplacing spiritual practices through architecture. *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality Forum, 25*(45).
34. See footnote 23: Jacobs (1974).
35. Brumberg-Kraus, J. (2024). *Food and religious rituals. In Oxford research encyclopedia of food studies.* Oxford University Press.
36. Becci, I. (2011). Religion's multiple locations in prisons. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions, 153,* 65–84.
37. Cooke, B., & Macy, G. (2005). *Christian symbol and ritual: An introduction.* Oxford University Press.

chaplains oversaw multiple faith services, distributed space fairly, and resolved inter-faith tensions. Their efforts helped maintain a collaborative atmosphere, reinforcing the impression that chaplaincy exists partly outside the usual prison hierarchy.[38]

The pro-social religious identity building code was most salient among people in prison seeking personal transformation. Many Christian participants spoke of being 'born again' and saw prison as a chance to reconnect with faith. Rastafarian adherents stressed historical and political dimensions of their religion, while Irish Travellers emphasised the comfort of sacraments and cultural rites. Across these faith traditions, communal worship inside prison heightened both belonging and moral reflection, illustrating how collective rituals can engender a renewed sense of self.

However, the project revealed that issues beyond Third Space, particularly regime constraints, could thwart attempts at cultivating sacred experiences. Participants in both prisons noted frequent lockdowns, staff shortages, and ongoing post-COVID restrictions that prevented them from attending services.[39] Missing baptisms or routine worship sessions after 'waiting all week' led to frustration and feelings of neglect, with many people in prison blaming prison officers for failing to escort them.[40] This inconsistency not only undermined morale, but also fostered mistrust in an institution that is, for many, already isolating.

Conclusion

This research indicates that sacred spaces do indeed exist in HMP Berwyn and HMP Wormwood Scrubs, confirmed by observations and testimonies from chaplains, orderlies, and prisoners. Their existence points toward a broader pattern in English and Welsh prisons, where sacred spaces function simultaneously as sites of transformation, spiritual development, respite, and, paradoxically, as reminders of the prison regime. They are set apart from daily life by distinct physical layouts, religious symbols, communal rituals, and relational dynamics.

Participants consistently described these spaces as creating opportunities for temporary 'outsideness' or normalcy within an otherwise stressful, highly regulated setting. The threefold Soja-inspired framework—physical, imagined, and relational—applied well to analyses of chapels and multi-faith rooms. Quietness, communal food and drink, faith leadership, and the pursuit of collective effervescence were all viewed as critical to producing moments of sacredness. Yet, prison regimes can obstruct deeper engagement; staff shortages, restricted movement, and post-COVID protocols frequently prevented access to services or truncated them, leading to frustration and disappointment.

Future research should include women's prisons, as religious experiences have been shown to have gendered dimensions or international systems that lack a Christian-centric chaplaincy model.[41] [42]

Ultimately, whether prisoners view these spaces as genuinely sacred depends on theological perspectives, personal contexts, and social functions. Many participants said they felt closer to the divine or to a deeper sense of self, perceiving chaplaincy areas as rare places where personal dignity and meaningful connection still flourish. In these fleeting moments, a prisoner may rediscover a sense of normalcy, hope, or personal growth otherwise scarce in the carceral world.

For practitioners and policymakers, this work may help to quantify the positive impact that faith delivery continues to have on the lives of people in prison. While faith is often politicised, and its benefits deemed hard to evidence, we ought to remember that faith brings an opportunity for order, transcendent experience, and pro-social identity formation that can transform lives and improve the carceral experience. Qualitative studies such as the one presented here (albeit limited), point to an evidence base for understanding the role of faith services in rehabilitation and enrichment. With the post-COVID prison regime posing issues for access to education and faith services, we ought to reflect on the importance of religious spaces and services in the lives of people in prison, be they religious or not; and how we can use that to instil change.

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38. See footnote 36: Tipton (2011).
39. Coomber, A. (2022). *The prison system after Covid-19.* Howard League for Penal Reform.
40. Liebling, A. (2015). A new "ecology of cruelty"? The changing shape of maximum-security custody in England and Wales. In K. Reiter & A. Koenig (Eds.), *Extreme punishment: Comparative studies in detention, incarceration and solitary confinement* (pp. 91–144). Palgrave Macmillan.
41. Relke, J. (2002). Women's religious experience in prehistoric and small scale societies. *Australian Religion Studies Review, 15*(2), 69–81; Ellis, R. (2023). *In this place called prison: Women's religious life in the shadow of punishment.* University of California Press.
42. Lyons, A. J. (2021). Karma and punishment: *Prison chaplaincy in Japan.* Harvard University Press.

Reflecting on HMP Risley's discovery wing model pilot delivery: Co-producing a positive social climate on a mainstream prison wing

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This article showcases an example of an innovative wing model pilot which included seconded custodial staff as part of a delivery team partnership. The HMPPS Creating Future Opportunities (CFO) wing delivery model is designed to empower both staff and residents to co-produce a welcome atmosphere and community feel on a mainstream prison wing. The HMPPS, CFO and Achieve Career Connect[1] delivery team at Risley designed and delivered an enrichment activity programme, facilitated peer mentor capacity building roles and drew on external partnership support. Using qualitative evaluation data collected in Risley as a CFO wing model pilot site, this article identifies core practice factors which staff reflected on as contributing to the successful delivery of this pilot. Originating in findings generated during a delivery staff team workshop and supplemented by interviews undertaken with strategic prison managers, external partners and residents on the Discovery wing, four best practice learning points are identified.

Innovations in wing delivery

The term 'social climate' refers to the general character of the social environment where people live.[1] Innovations in wing delivery models delivered to specialised prison resident profiles, such as Therapeutic Communities[2] and Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPE)[3] are not new to the sector. Importantly however these established wing delivery models are identified as achieving a more harmonious prison experience.[4] It has been argued these more community generating models have the potential, if delivered as a prison-wide organisational change process, of contributing to Enabling Environment standards in custody. [5 6]

Bennet and Shuker identified four best practice principals underpinning the establishment of a positive social climate on a prison wing:[7] 1. Voluntary nature of participation; 2. Empowered staff who can work collaboratively with residents; 3. Management teams recognising value of including staff and residents in decision making, and meaningful opportunities for participation; 4. Senior managerial and policy maker support and advocacy of a revised regime and therapeutic infrastructural support. However, the potential benefits of applying these delivery practice model approaches to more mainstream prison wing provision remains an omission. Compared to other sectors like health care, the notion of co-production in mainstream Criminal Justice System (CJS) delivery is not as well an established approach.[8] However, a greater emphasis on engaging, involving, and empowering

1. Achieve Career Connect Careers Information, Advice and Guidance in prisons: https://careerconnect.org.uk/services/criminal-justice-achieve/
2. Bennett, J., & Shuker, R. (2018). Hope, harmony and humanity: creating a positive social climate in a democratic therapeutic community prison and the implications for penal practice. *Journal of Criminal Psychology, 8*(1), 44–57.
3. Haigh, R., Harrison, T., Johnson, R., Paget, S., & Williams, S. (2012). Psychologically informed environments and the "Enabling Environments" initiative. *Housing, Care and Support, 15*(1), 34–42.
4. Turner, K., & Bolger, L. (2015). The provision of PIPEs–psychologically informed planned environments. *Prison Service Journal, 218*, 41–46.
5. Davies, J., Pitt, C., & O'Meara, A. (2019). Learning lessons from implementing enabling environments within prison and probation: separating standards from process. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 63*(2), 218-231.
6. Liebling, A., Laws, B., Lieber, E., Auty, K., Schmidt, B. E., Crewe, B., ... & Morey, M. (2019). Are hope and possibility achievable in prison? *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 58*(1), 104-126.
7. See footnote 2: Bennett & Shuker (2018).
8. Freeman, L. R., Waldman, M., Storey, J., Williams, M., Griffiths, C., Hopkins, K., Beer, E., Bidmead, L., & Davies, J. (2016). Working towards co-production in rehabilitation and recovery services. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and practice, 11,*197207.

whole communities in shaping and influencing criminal justice provision is taking place across the CJS. [9] [10] This mirrors the aspiration of a more rehabilitative or transformative culture being developed in custody, which has generated a small but growing evidence-base over recent years.[11]

Evidence-based background to the wing pilot initiative

In 2021 HMPPS Creating Future Opportunities (CFO) piloted Activity Hub programmes in the community to assist those on a licence or community order to abstain from criminal behaviour by supporting them to become community assets.[12] Evaluated as successful in fostering an encouraging and motivating environment, a 6-month follow-up showed that those engaging were less likely to reoffend than a non-intervention comparator group.[13] [14] In 2022, CFO piloted the creation of similarly dedicated spaces in mainstream custodial contexts, requiring a single dedicated wing or house block, to be identified that would be both funded and run by CFO. Securing wing model pilot site status drew down costs for three HMPPS staff secondments, and three third sector Prime provider-sourced Case Manager roles. These mixed sector partnership delivery teams were tasked to deliver a community building programme and facilitate peer involvement role opportunities that would support the aims of affecting a welcome, safe, supportive and rehabilitative community culture on a mainstream prison wing. These community-capacity building activities are facilitated alongside the initiative providing resourcing for a more conducive wing environment.[15] One of the four CFO pilot sites were hosted at an Adult Female and YOI training and resettlement prison and three at Adult Male, Category C training and resettlement prisons, of which HMP Risley was one.

> A greater emphasis on engaging, involving, and empowering whole communities in shaping and influencing criminal justice provision is taking place.

HMP Risley's discovery wing model pilot

Risley is in Cheshire and hosts 1100 men. The Discovery wing at the time of this study contained 200 beds split across People Convicted of Sexual Offences (PCoSO) and Mains (non-sexual index offences) resident profiles. Core delivery of the Discovery wing model's activity programme were supported by the prison's Physical Education Department and Education providers, and resident profile relevant external charity partnerships. The three phases of the Discovery wing model pilot were: Phase 1— Induction and release preparation course focussing on all elements of resettlement, delivered by Prime provider staff, and complimented by team building activity work delivered by wider prison departments; Phase 2 — Vocational experience, residents then worked full time in the prison's bike workshop, providing residents with real work experience; and Phase 3 — Community projects — involving residents conducting prison environment improvement tasks, under the supervision of the Discovery wings Prison Officers.

Both of the Mains and PCoSO resident profile groups participating were recruited to contain four veterans,[16] who were subsequently NCFE[17] Level 2 Mentor trained. Peer mentors provided support to the eight sub-group participants in each group activity cohort. All CFO Discovery wing engagers met regularly with a Community Case Worker before release to establish contact with CFO's community-Activity hub initiative, to assist their transition onto a community order.

9. Weaver, B. (2018). Coproduction, governance and practice: The dynamics and effects of User Voice Prison Councils. Social Policy Admin, 53, 249-264.
10. Cunningham, N., & Wakeling, H. (2022) Engagement and Co-Production with People with Lived Experience of Prison and Probation: A synthesis of the evidence base. Prison Service Journal 262, 3–11.
11. Mann, R., Fitzalan Howard, F., & Tew, J. (2018). What is a rehabilitative prison culture? Prison Service Journal, 235, 3-9.
12. For more details see: https://www.creatingfutureopportunities.gov.uk/history-of-cfo/
13. Darby, J. (2022). CFO Interim evaluation https://www.creatingfutureopportunities.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/HMPPS-CFO-Activity-Hub-Interim-Evaluation-2022.pdf Accessed 04/02/2023.
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15. CFO provide funding for wing redecoration, furniture, pictures, plants, kitchen equipment, and t-shirts for staff and residents in peer support and peer mentoring roles.
16. As an identifiable cohort from which resident peer supporters could be considered for recruitment.
17. NCFE is an Accreditation and Employer Service: https://www.ncfe.org.uk/accreditation-and-employer-services

The Case Managers delivered phase 1, over 8 weeks, as a bespoke course, featuring meaningful content for the sub-profiled targeted residents serving a short-sentenced, with care experience and/or limited family ties. The Discovery wing delivery team prioritise a welcoming environment built on strong rehabilitative and partnership working principles. Discovery wing residents volunteered to join the CFO phased activity programme combining self-development and reflection activities, practical support, and access to networks upon release. During each course cohort recruitment stage, the mixed sector staff team identified 24 residents, 12 each from the Mains and PCoSO landings. Each cohort of 12 progressed through the 8-week course together. As a half-day course sessions were delivered twice daily to separate PCoSO and Mains sub-groups, either in the morning or afternoon in domestic/association time, which was rotated bi-weekly.

External evaluation details

A Prime provider involved in CFO's wing model delivery commissioned a discreet evaluation of the peer involvement role element of the initiative. The study received ethical approval from the National Research Committee (Ref. 2023-012 and 2023-238) and Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethics Committee (Ref. ER49795291). The research team adopted an integrated, social capital building-sensitive data collection strategy.[18] The research team conducted interviews, both focus group and 1:1, with Strategic HMPPS and Prime Provider staff, wing residents and the delivery staff team. At each site a workshop with the host prison's Prisoner Council was conducted. For the commissioned evaluation reporting outputs, a pragmatic deductive analysis directed by the questions outlined in the evaluation brief was conducted on the generated data. The evaluation reporting did not focus on the wing model, but the peer involvement role element of the initiative only. All data points were inserted into pre-populated pseudonymised[19] prison-site-specific sample profiled excel worksheets, and 5 evaluation reports generated.[20] However, for staff and resident beneficiaries alike, reflections on the holistic wing model pilot initiative were generated during these peer involvement role focussed evaluation activities.

The research team spent 10 days conducting data collection activities at Risley between February and May 2023. In total, three hundred and nineteen Discovery wing residents engaged voluntarily in the data collection activities described above (8 from the Prisoner Council; 198 in Ethnographic Observation; 78 in workshops and focus group interviews; and 35 in 1:1 Interviews). The research team conducted a total of 23 1:1 interviews with staff, which included delivery staff, Senior staff from HMPPS, Prime provider and external partners.

> These community-capacity building activities are facilitated alongside the initiative providing resourcing for a more conducive wing environment.

Identifying delivery practice success factors

For the purposes of this co-authored piece the focus is to reflect on the most useful practise experience lessons from staff having delivered the Discovery wing pilot at Risley. Focussing on the qualitative Risley data set described above, one of the authors conducted a secondary analysis directed by the Risley delivery staff team's aspiration to share their lived experience of successful delivery with other staff in the sector. The questions directing this article's reflective content was directed by the question: What are the key delivery success factors others in the mainstream custodial sector can learn from Risley's experience? Four key delivery success factors were identified: 1. Investment for innovation; 2. The strength-based approach to both staff and residents as wing community assets; 3. Co-location as enhancing a discreet wing community atmosphere; and 4. Drawing on relevant external partnership networks. There are obvious similarities between Risley's list of success factors and Bennet and Shulker's four best practice principals of initiating a more positive social climate.[21] The remainder of this article presents Risley's four delivery success factors supported by illustrative data, aimed at informing prison service practitioners and commissioners with aspirations to affect improvements in the social climate in prison.

18. Albertson, K., Phillips, J., Fowler, A., & Collinson, B. (2022). Who owns desistance? A triad of agency enabling social structures in the desistance process. *Theoretical Criminology, 26*(1), 153-172.
19. A data management and de-identification procedure by which personally identifiable information fields within a data record are replaced by artificial identifiers, names are changed and pseudonyms used.
20. Albertson, K. (2024a-e). *Peer roles in prison study series.* Available at: https://www.creatingfutureopportunities.gov.uk/publications/
21. Ibid.

Investment for innovation

The first key success factor identified as supporting the co-production of a welcome atmosphere and community feel on the Discovery wing was meaningful investment in the prison service:

> '…it's a real positive thing to have some investment.…Staff can see that. Prisoners can see that. It's also unusual in that it includes prison staff development. I've been involved in quite a lot of projects over the years, and it can often feel like someone is doing something to you. The fact that this investment is for custodial staff, so there is that buy in and it's joint ownership of delivery …. this is an opportunity to be more creative and think through professional development.' (Senior Management Team member, interview)

It is established that enacting improvements in the relational capacity of custodial wings relies on regimes bringing together residents who voluntarily want to participate is key for community-based growth.1 On the Discovery wing, residents demonstrated they were also aware of the benefits of being on a novel regime which included purposeful activities, which they reflected had resulted in an environment they also wanted to invest their time and energy in (and protect):

> 'On this wing it's more chilled out than others in here… We all live on here, so we don't want it full of dickheads who don't want to be engaging with the good stuff we got going on in here.' (Owen, Wider wing resident, interview)

Adaptions in regime practice, such as affecting the in-take criteria on specific wings with a discreet identity were supported at senior team level at Risley:

> '…having some direction or identity for a wing, for the staff and for the prisoners, means they identify with the wing, this is what we are trying to do. This is what our purpose is and that's how we start when bringing people on there. There's no problem having slightly different regimes as part of managing that innovative living environment because they won't be able to take ownership of that environment otherwise' (Senior Management Team member, interview)

As illuminated above, investment for innovation on the Discovery wing mirrors Bennett and Shuker's1 principals of initiating a more positive social climate by enabling staff to work more collaboratively with residents that want to engage which relies on having senior management team support for revised regimes.

The strength-based approach

Strengths-based approaches are defined as 'enabling people to find the best solutions for themselves'.[22] Residents on the Discovery wing highlighted adopting a strength-based model in the custodial environment can also play an important role in how residents, alongside staff respond to change:

> 'The officers they weren't looking down on you and in prison you don't get that very often.' (Aasif, Discovery wing resident, interview)

> 'The veterans are used as assets on here really well…There's a calm respect for them especially from some of the younger more chaotic lads in here- I see it day-to-day, from just being on the wing.' (Liam, Discovery Wing resident not participating in the programme, interview)

Providing strength-based opportunities for residents, not based on their offending history, but on their skills, passions and interests, ultimately facilitated a more mutually supportive relationships between Discovery wing residents:

> '…you know I am the one's telling the lads to line up, at the servery to make sure everyone got the right food, and no-one was pushing and that.' (Mark, Peer mentor, interview)

What are the key delivery success factors others in the mainstream custodial sector can learn from Risley's experience?

22. Department of Health and Social Care. (2019). *Strengths-based approach: Practice Framework and Practice Handbook.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778134/stengths-based-approach-practice-framework-and-handbook.pdf (accessed 16 February 2025).

The Discovery wing pilot site opted for the peer mentor role, which included selected wing residents completing an externally accredited L2 Mentoring qualification, which again was appreciated as a distinct opportunity in the custodial context by residents:

> 'So being able to have some responsibility…is a big, big thing when you are in prison.' (Tony, Peer mentor, Discovery wing interview)

Staff also felt invested in:

> '…my Custody Manager at the time…it still took me a while to make the decision to apply…you know: Have I been in the job long enough? Have I learnt enough? The one thing that did sway it for me was — it is completely different, and you get interesting training which stretches you — you know.' (Oliver, Discovery wing Support Officer)

As illustrated above, adopting a strength-based approach to both staff and residents as community assets at the Discovery wing pilot further echoes Bennett and Shuker's principals of exporting positive social climate good practice. In this case in terms of empowering staff to work collaboratively with residents and providing meaningful opportunities for participation and therapeutic infrastructural support.

Co-location as enhancing a discreet wing community atmosphere

The colocation of a range of services is seen as good practice in criminal justice delivery models adopting a hub model approach.[23] The Discovery wing model pilot delivery was acknowledged as very different from residents' usual experience of prison life, based around everyone being a member of the wing community and working together:

> '…people love this wing, people on here want to stop on here…I look forward to getting up every day now.' (Ben, Wing resident, interview)

> '…it's like a different dynamics, cos we are all doing something together.' (Philip, Peer mentor, interview)

There are lessons here for delivering meaningful activities with a co-located mixed sector staff team on the wing as discreet communities in their own right, which conveys a more positive message of recognising the strengths regardless of offending status.[24]

> 'Couldn't ask for a better staff team — we just gel together. You can bounce off them and have a laugh.' (Ryan, Discovery wing resident, interview)

The opportunity to engage in peer mentor roles was also acknowledged as operating to generate a more trusting environment for those residing in custody:

> '…prisoners need time to develop their own opinions and learn to make good decisions on their own…. trust and building that trust is the most important thing really. So, it's like doing it in the classroom- it's about building trust in there for later, then they come to me on the wing the next time they get stuck with anything as trust, well- it's earned.' (James, Discovery wing Peer mentor, interview)

This approach to co-production of custodial environments by involving service users was also highlighted as a distinct developmental approach adopted by Risley's senior management team:

> 'The aim is for the Prisoner Council to be the voice of the prisoners, so we are also looking to get Custodial Managers to have Prisoner Council forums on each wing eventually.' (Senior management team member, interview)

Co-location was identified as key to enhancing a discreet wing community atmosphere during Discovery wing pilot delivery.

Drawing on relevant external partnership network support

While many of the external partners working with the Discovery wing were veteran-specific, each of the charities who were interviewed were very clear that they saw their role as supporting all the Discovery wing residents, not just the veterans. This was highlighted in the collaborative rather than competitive view of their engagement with this custody-based initiative:

'It's not about competition. It's about collaboration. It's about working with people who are passionate about what they're doing. Rehabilitation is not just about getting them employment or education.

23. Phillips, J., Albertson, K., Collinson, B., & Fowler, A. (2020). Delivering desistance-focused probation in community hubs: Five key ingredients. *Probation Journal, 67*(3), 264–282.
24. Ward, T., & Brown, M. (2004). The good lives model and conceptual issues in offender rehabilitation. *Psychology, crime & law, 10*(3), 243-257.

It's about empowering them. It's about getting them involved in a project that's going to help their self-esteem. It's a project that's going to raise their confidence…. it's about improving them as a person. It's not just about skills, it's whatever — the activity could be around anything- reading poetry, whatever works for that cohort, you've got to let them be the driving force…It's about using them as a resource, as an asset.' (External partner 1, interview)

> '…we've found, more now that I think governors are now becoming more aware of the fact that you know they need to identify the veterans and to use them…when we go in, we're not just here for the veterans mind.' (External partner 2, interview)

This sense of working together with agencies both inside and outside of the prison was reflected as newly arrived wing residents, who had not even begun to engage in the CFO programme, who were aware of these collaborative efforts to assist them, first and foremost, as a member of the Discovery wing community:

> 'I feel relaxed and welcome here. They have all taken me under their wing…the peer mentors are literally on here all the time, and [Custody Managers] door is always open… And all them charities come in here and meet with us. So, I feel they have all got my back.' (Liam, Wider wing resident, Interview)

> '…we get charities in at least once a week to make sure that they're getting consistent support. And it's not just a charity coming in once making all these promises and then never seeing them again.' (Phillipa, Case manager)

Drawing in external resident profile partners was identified as key to the successful delivery experience of the Discovery wing model pilot.

This article contains a reflection on the delivery of an innovative wing model pilot at HMP Risley, substantiated by a secondary analysis of qualitative evaluation data. Four key delivery success factors are highlighted as underpinning this innovative example of changing the social climate of a prison wing, which others who are considering implementing such a different way of working need to consider. These are the necessities of: Investment for innovation; Adopting a strength-based approach to empower both staff and wing residents to become wing community assets; Thinking through the co-location of partnership delivery staff teams on the wing as a discreet community; and generating effective working relationships with external partners.

There are limitations to this study. Outcomes have not been presented, and it may be that reoffending rates (and other intermediate outcomes) are higher or lower for residents accessing this initiative in custody. A quantitative evaluation is however being carried out by CFO's Evaluation team. That said, there is value in considering the experience of a custodial sentence in a way in which people — both staff, residents and external partners perceive as more positive — even if it does not result in reduced reoffending, but a more positive experience of custodial life for all. Additional funding have allowed the successes of the Discovery Wing to continue into the future as well as extending commissioning for similar therapeutic wings to ten additional prisons throughout England in 2024.[25]

This reflection on the delivery of the Discovery wing model pilot mirror Bennet and Shuker's best practice principals underpinning the establishment of a positive social climate on a prison wing.[26] Co-produced innovations in delivering mainstream custodial models, such as the Discovery wing pilot initiative described, represent a real opportunity for those in the sector to contribute to meeting the HMPPS Business Strategy commitments to Enabling people to be their best, Delivering an open learning culture, Motivating cultural transformation through partnerships and Modernising the estate.[27]

Drawing from this reflection prison service leaders could make greater use of a tried and tested wing-as-community hub delivery model in the mainstream prison custodial context, as the benefits to those subject to a custodial sentence, and those working in prison co-producing a wing-based community means the potential benefits of this wing model are manifold.

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25. For further details or enquiries, please contact cfo-servicedesk@justice.gov.uk
26. See footnote 2: Bennett & Shuker (2018).
27. HMPPS. (2019). HMPPS Business Strategy: Shaping our future. HMPPS. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/864681/HMPPS_Business_Strategy_Shaping_Our_Future.pdf (accessed 12 March 2025).

Perrie lecture: Making proper use of proper prisons?

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This article is a transcript of a presentation given at The Perrie Lectures in 2025. The Perrie Lectures is an annual event which has the purpose of stimulating dialogue between criminal justice organisations, the voluntary sector, and all those with an academic, legal, or practical interest in people in prison and their families. The theme of the 2025 event was 'The Future of Imprisonment'.

My title today takes its inspiration from a phrase I heard again and again in a recent research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and undertaken with Matt Houlbrook (University of Birmingham), Yvonne Jewkes (University of Bath) and Jennifer Turner (Universität Trier), with Andy Aitchison as project photographer.[1]

I'm going to try to tell the complex story of how nineteenth-century institutions have not only survived into the twenty-first century but continue to shape the daily realities of imprisonment in a profound and often surprising manner, and to think through what the future might hold for these establishments in a reforming prison system.

Let's start with some basic but striking facts. If we include Dartmoor for now, there are 32 prisons with Victorian accommodation in operation across England and Wales. Almost all of these prisons hold people in cells built between 1837 and 1901. Collectively, they house between a fifth and a quarter of the prison population. Many of these are local prisons, housing people awaiting trial or sentencing. So, very few incarcerated men haven't at some point passed through one.

The press has long described this as a scandal. Politicians and reformers have called for these prisons to be closed. A century ago, it was argued that: 'The only reform to which the buildings can be usefully subjected is dynamite',[2] and 60 years ago, they were regarded as a 'handicap' to reform.[3]

But here we are. Despite repeated promises to close these so-called relics, they remain as arguably the backbone of the estate.

This longevity has often been framed as scandalous — evidence of neglect, inefficiency, or institutional inertia. And yet, these prisons have not merely survived — they have been actively adapted, repurposed, and re-justified. Calls to close them compete with logistical, economic, and even cultural reasons for keeping them open. Our research aimed to understand this tension.

Our work centred on two detailed case studies of HMP Lincoln and HMP Liverpool. We interviewed dozens of current and former staff, prisoners, contractors, and others with long-term ties to these and other institutions. Many retired officers had worked alongside colleagues whose careers spanned the era of executions, and we heard from many people who had 'slopped out.' Most importantly—we listened to the people living and working inside these prisons now. We also accessed architectural records, archives, maintenance logs, and historical plans, giving us a layered picture of both past and present.

This approach allowed us to move beyond abstract criticism or nostalgic idealism. It helped us understand these prisons as complex environments shaped by architecture, history, policy, and human relationships.

What we found challenged many of our assumptions.

Are these places fit for purpose? On paper, often not. These buildings were never designed for the current size or complexity of the population. There were certainly those, both prisoners and staff, who told us in no uncertain terms that these prisons had had their day and should be closed.

Their views about living conditions tally with the countless HMIP reports which point to unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, damp, mould, and vermin in small, cramped cells where prisoners sleep and eat right next to their shared toilet.

There is no doubt that objectively, the living conditions in Victorian prisons compare poorly to cells

1. For a description of this project, see https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FT005483%2F1
2. Hobhouse, S., & Brockway, F. (1922). *English prisons today: being the report of the prison system enquiry committee.* Longmans, Green and Company.
3. Howard, D. L. (2023). The English prisons: *Their past and their future.* Routledge.

in the newbuild T60s,[4] and prisoners who had spent time in both knew which they preferred. But it wasn't always the newbuild. Likewise, staff who had worked in much newer prisons often favoured the Victorian estate.

Why? The phrase we heard over and over again was 'A proper prison.'

It referred in part to legality and decency — but just as much to a sense of institutional identity. A 'proper prison' was one with character, structure, and a recognisable atmosphere. But when conditions inside can be poor, what makes these prisons 'proper'?

There is an uncomfortable sense in which the conditions of the Victorian estate are perceived as being all that incarcerated people 'deserve'. Sometimes that sense has been internalised by prisoners themselves, and it definitely pervades wider opinion that the so-called 'Dickensian' conditions of the Victorian estate are appropriately punitive for those perceived as undeserving. That same opinion brands our new prisons such as HMP Five Wells and HMP Millsike too comfortable, or like 'holiday camps'.

But that's not what we're getting at here. 'Proper' meant a complex mixture of things. Some of it was about a prison that fitted the idea people already had in their heads of what prison would be like — whether gleaned from things they had heard from others, or seen on TV, where the cultural effect of Porridge was incredibly far-reaching. The Victorian estate 'looks the part'. As one man at HMP Liverpool told us:

> …when I come onto the twos, onto K Wing and I just looked up, I thought… it's very reminiscent of Porridge for me. That's the thing that sticks in my mind was the metal railings, the brickwork and stuff like that. So, yeah, it is definitely a proper jail. I thought to myself 'you've arrived here, this is big boys' jail.' It's only when you hit here and you think 'this is it.' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

There was also a sense that the Victorian estate defined prison, that as a prisoner you hadn't really served time, or as a prison officer you hadn't really 'done the job', unless you had been in a Victorian jail. Not a badge of honour, exactly, but not far off.

But 'proper' meant more than this. It was mainly about how these prisons worked, and that in turn had a lot to do with their design, and its effect.

Architecturally, many of these prisons are based on the 'separate system,' which gained favour in the 1830s. Prisons with radial, hub-and-spoke layouts were designed to isolate prisoners physically and morally — enforcing reflection, silence, and hopefully redemption. Over time, of course, they have evolved. Multiple renovations have introduced electricity, plumbing, and so on, but the core structures remain much the same.

These buildings shape movement and interaction. Long wings, central hubs, narrow cell doors—these aren't neutral design choices. They produce certain behaviours, certain hierarchies of surveillance and control. The architecture disciplines in ways that continue to matter.

And they're not just old—they're storied. These prisons have deep roots in their local areas. Many are prominent urban landmarks. They appear in local folklore, media, and collective memory. Staff and prisoners often spoke about the buildings as though they were characters in their own right — we heard the term 'My Victorian Lady'.

These prisons have deep roots in their local areas.Many are prominent urban landmarks.

Many staff were the second- or even third generation in their family. And for some prisoners, the institution had a family history too. Another man at Liverpool told us

> 'The first time I met my dad was in this jail … And then my granddad and my uncle was in here. So, my granddad and his two sons were in here.' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

There was a strong sense of continuity—even connection—across time. Many prison staff saw themselves as the current custodians of prisons handed down to them by previous generations. A member of staff at HMP Lincoln explained:

> '1872 this prison opened the door, you feel as though the ones who came here and worked here and set the place up, they handed it over to the next lot, who handed it over to the next lot, eventually it came to me. So, you feel as though you're kind of generation after generation after generation, you're walking landings.' (Staff member, HMP Lincoln)

4. The T60 is the x-shaped houseblock design that is currently being built in new and expanding prisons in England and Wales, such as HMP Millsike.

There was an affinity with 'all the people who have walked these landings before me'.

We had expected staff to feel an affection for these establishments, perhaps born of long service, or camaraderie, or a sense of their identity bound up with their profession and their workplace, and we definitely found it.

What we didn't expect to find was the same sort of attachment on the part of some — and I stress that it was by no means all — prisoners.

Many were aware of the history, were both curious about and felt connected to those who'd been there before them. Many told us they'd often thought about the people who'd sat on their bed, looked out of their window, and worn down the threshold of their cell. Many felt unease at the things the walls of the prison had seen in their time and imagined the stories they could tell. For others, there was a sense of comfort in this shared history; that they were not the first and would not be the last.

The age of the buildings, and the evidence of the passage of time, adds to this sensation. Prisoners paid close attention to their environment and had noticed where candle alcoves have been bricked-in and painted over, where there used to be doors and windows, where generations of hands and feet had worn away at brick and stone. The knowledge that others had survived these prisons without TVs, phones, and even electricity, was meaningful.

These are places that people know about, have opinions about, and feel an attachment to. In this sense they are quite different places from more modern newbuild prisons on industrial estates, blending in to a more generic form of unremarkable architecture. In the Victorian estate, incarcerated people feel as if they are somewhere, rather than experiencing the rootless dislocation of the anonymous nowhere that can characterise the modern estate and can enhance the feeling of being cast adrift. At Liverpool, one man put it like this:

> 'When I was up on the fives, people drive past beeping their horns. Like say ten cars will go past, five of them will beep their horn. It's just part of the city, isn't it? Walton, HMP Liverpool…' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

But any small degree of affection some prisoners felt for the Victorian prison struggled to survive exposure to its crowded conditions. Almost every HMIP report notes that Victorian cells were designed for single occupancy but are shared. This is not new. Within just months of opening, these prisons were full. The population pressures we see today were very familiar to the Victorian Prison Commissioners, and Governors who were already complaining, back in the 1850s, that there were two or three women or men in cells intended for one. In 1857, the Inspector of Prisons wrote of HMP Liverpool:

> 'The Governor states that the gaol was built for separate confinement, but the system has been departed from in each of the two years it has been occupied, because of it being too small for the number of prisoners confined to be treated on this principle.... The excess of prisoners has been provided for by sleeping …two, [or]... three, in a cell, in the number of cells required.' (Inspector of Prisons, 1857, p47)

The in-cell sanitation originally installed in many of these prisons was removed by the 1890s to enable cells to be shared.

Of course, the crowding of Victorian prisons is a function of the system as whole, and our research shows that across its long history we have barely ever operated the Victorian estate with the population it was intended to hold. Arguably, it has never been allowed to show what it could achieve.



Image of renovated wing at HMP Liverpool, photo credit Andy Aitchison.

We heard from prisoners and staff that 'the Victorians got the layout right'. Now, there's definitely something here about preferring what you know, but at the same time, officers and prisoners — both primarily concerned with safety — talked about sight lines along and between landings; and acoustics, to which their ears became attuned, so that they could accurately pinpoint the source of sound over a four-level galleried space.

Ironically, it was often when changes had been made to these spaces in pursuit of safety, that these sight and sound lines were disrupted. This image by Andy Aitchison shows a new steel framework fitted to support the safety netting now fixed on every landing, a new wider CandR staircase, and higher railings. The effect was much like standing in a sieve, with impeded sightlines and disrupted acoustics meaning staff felt less able to manage the space, and prisoners felt less safe. Design solutions can introduce new design problems. There's a lesson here about the value of architectural literacy in prison reform.[5]

Victorian prisons are space poor. On-wing offices for staff have to be converted from cells. Staff cannot manage the wings from inside these offices, so they are 'out' on the landings, interacting and in conversation. These are busy places, with lots of issues to deal with, and many lack in-cell tech. Staff therefore have to know how application systems work and what to do when things go wrong. The 'local' function also means they have to deal, as they told us, with 'practically everything that can happen to someone during a sentence'. Staff aren't stationed in pods or behind screens. They're out on the wings, solving problems in real time.

I hesitate to call it a fast-track development programme, but the interaction of function and design means staff can develop expertise and confidence quickly. These spaces are busy, challenging, and complex. But in that complexity, staff learn fast. It can't be a coincidence that many prisoners, such as this man at HMP Liverpool, told us that staff in Victorian jails were more competent and knew the job well, and that accordingly the prison felt safer.

> '[In newer prisons] they have two officers sitting on a console like they're sitting in Tesco serving you. Go through, swipe, that's all they're doing sitting there. They can't see what's going on. But you don't know where they are when they're on here, because obviously you've got the landings and that,… you'll have two down this end, you'll have two in the middle, or you might have two at the top. But either way, you'll have someone walking down a landing … and they know where the trouble is.' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

In short, the buildings teach people how to operate them. These skills were learned and passed on within the same walls over decades. In newer prisons, different layouts and more reliance on technology can limit human contact, increasing tension and distance.

> Across its long history we have barely ever operated the Victorian estate with the population it was intended to hold.

But there's also a hard truth, that some of these buildings are in a poor condition. Press reports like to describe the Victorian estate as 'crumbling'.[6] This term conjures an image of the prison, almost like a stale cake, falling to pieces before our eyes. The buildings do need maintenance — heating systems are outdated, ventilation is poor — these are not just inconveniences; they can become serious risks. We were able to access the bowels of these buildings (as well as their roof spaces), and saw temporary boilers and pipework intended as a short-term fix, but needing to stay in place for years. Wings take a long time to heat up in winter, and to cool down in summer. With the original plenum systems blocked up,[7] poor ventilation means that buildings cannot shed heat at night, and as for much of the estate, without effective shading, climate change will only exacerbate these problems.

Accessibility is another challenge. For elderly and disabled prisoners, steep staircases and narrow doorways are difficult to navigate, and although it's not impossible to adapt them, this work is expensive.

But the fact is that these prisons, like many Victorian buildings in our towns and cities, are very

5. Architectural literacy is the ability to understand and interpret buildings; their design, purpose, and the ideas they communicate.
6. For example: https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/21/friday-briefing-prisons-are-literally-falling-apart-and-theres-no-plan-to-save-them (accessed 1.7.2025) and https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/102/justice-committee/news/201659/justice-committee-chair-comment-on-prison-capacity/ (accessed 1.7.2025)
7. Victorian prisons often relied on a network of ducts and a "plenum" or a large, shared space to distribute fresh air into cells. These systems were designed to create a continuous airflow, with fresh air entering and stale air exiting through grilles in cell walls, and dedicated ventilation shafts resembling chimneys. Modernisation of these prisons has seen many of the ventilation grilles and blocked up, and the chimney-like shafts removed.

much still standing. It is their very robustness, the sheer quality of the build, the thickness of the walls, their stubborn sturdiness, that brings us to the quandary that we find ourselves in today.

We only have the question 'What do we do with the Victorian estate?' to answer because the Victorian estate is still here. It's still here training new cohorts of prison staff. It's still here acclimatising newly incarcerated people to the system. It's still here shaping what the public think the prison system 'ought' to be like.

The continued operation of Victorian prisons has significant effects beyond their own walls. The prison workforce is deeply familiar with their design, to the extent that arguably our staffing and management practices have developed in and for these buildings — such that we tend towards building new establishments in similar forms.

And even if we had the headroom to close establishments, Victorian prisons are still here in a way that is very difficult to replace.

Maybe we should ask what we would lose if we did close them. Victorian prisons were originally on the outskirts of towns, but urban expansion swallowed them up and many now sit right in the heart of densely populated communities. That limits their potential to expand, but it also places them in close proximity to the communities they're meant to serve. They are accessible to courts, services, families, and post-release support networks. Proximity matters, a lot.

If we stop and think about what we'd really lose by closing the Victorian estate, one thing stands out clearly: location. Now, packing a large number of people into a tight urban space isn't ideal, and in other work, I've shown the benefits of green space, which many of these prisons lack.[8] But even so, being close to community, to home, and to family matters deeply.

Some people told us 'Prison is prison, no matter where it is.' But countless others said they would rather serve their sentence in a Victorian prison near their family than in a newbuild hours away, without decent public transport.

Urban prisons also make sense for staffing. They're closer to large labour markets, making recruitment easier. And city locations often mean better access to housing staff can afford.

When you consider the cost of land in urban areas, it's hard to imagine ever being able to replace this capacity in the same locations. That's something we need to think about very carefully.

What else would we lose?

The continued use of the Victorian prison keeps alive a powerful cultural legacy. These buildings still define what many people think a British prison is. They shape the emotional atmosphere of the system, in ways that are both positive and problematic. Even if we were to close them tomorrow, their shadow would linger for decades. Future generations might look back in disbelief that we kept them open for so long. Yet for some, there would also be a certain nostalgia—for the so-called 'grand Victorian ladies' of the prison estate. But while these prisons remain in use, 'Porridge' isn't just a 1970's sitcom.

> These spaces are busy, challenging, and complex. But in that complexity, staff learn fast.

In many ways, the present prisons crisis is made visible in the Victorian estate. The problems caused by overcrowding are both present in and accentuated by its conditions. The nature of the accommodation and the relative shortage of opportunities for purposeful activity both stem from and are compounded by overcrowding. The robust physical infrastructure, limitations on space and high cost of renovation make these challenging sites to govern.

And yet, Victorian prisons may offer a much more significant opportunity to improve rehabilitation and reintegration than is currently being realised.

Their main practical advantage is proximity to courts and communities. The predominant Cat B local function benefits from this location, enabling transfer to in-person court hearings. However, the use of arguably the worst accommodation in the estate for people awaiting trial, whose guilt has not yet been established, is questionable.

I'd argue that it is vital to reconsider the role of the Victorian prison within the wider estate. Its most effective deployment would limit the negative impacts of poor-quality accommodation whilst maximising the

8. Moran, D., Jones, P. I., Jordaan, J. A., & Porter, A.E. (2021). Does nature contact in prison improve well-being? Mapping land cover to identify the effect of greenspace on self-harm and violence in prisons in England and Wales. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers, 111*(6), 1779-1795; Moran, D., Jones, P. I., Jordaan, J. A., & Porter, A.E., (2022). Nature contact in the carceral workplace: Greenspace and staff sickness absence in prisons in England and Wales. *Environment and Behavior, 54*(2), 276-299.

benefits of an urban location offering some of the opportunities for purposeful activity that cannot be provided within the prisons themselves.

We could reduce the harmful effects of poor living conditions by limiting the time people spend in them. One way to do this is to re-purpose some of our Victorian prisons—either in whole or in part—into Cat D open conditions. When open and closed functions are located on the same site, it's easier to prepare individuals properly, make better decisions about their suitability, and carry out necessary assessments before a recall is considered.

But the open estate is unlikely to ever need the full capacity of the Victorian estate. That means the prisons that remain as closed sites must continue to be modernised. And above all, we must finally tackle the persistent issue of overcrowding. HMIP is right when it says that these buildings were never designed to hold more than one person per cell, and it's time we honoured that original design. Single-cell occupancy should not be an ambition; it should be the standard.

Designed to enable a long-outdated idea of punishment, Victorian prisons have proven remarkably adaptable, and they may not yet have shown us everything they can do.

If we treat them as meaningful sites—historically, socially, architecturally—then we may find ways to use them well. Not as monuments to the past, but as living parts of a prison system that acknowledges continuity while striving for progress.

Victorian prisons endure not because we've failed to replace them, but because we've continually made them work. The issue isn't just whether we should close them—but what it means to keep them open. My question, about whether we can make proper use of 'proper prisons', must be answered on purpose, and with purpose.[9]

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9 . Read more about the recommendations from this project in a policy report (https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ProperUseOfProperPrisons_Amend4.pdf), and view more project photography, alongside prisoner artwork, at https://victorian-prisons.com/

Coping with prison shift work: Interpreting the effects of shift work on correctional officer work-life balance and well-being

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Working shifts, a scheduling system for employees who work various and alternating time blocks on days or nights, often outside the traditional nine-to-five office hours, can be taxing in any sector or industry.[1] In prison settings, shiftwork is necessary for correctional work because of the need for round-the-clock operations, care provision for incarcerated people, and institutional security.[2] [3] Within correctional institutions, Correctional Officers (COs) work different shifts to maintain security and order for individuals serving a sentence in custody.[4] While existing studies acknowledge the general stresses associated with prison shift work, a notable qualitative gap exists in relation to the specific effects of shift work on COs' work-life balance and well-being, as well as strategies for coping.

In the Canadian federal prison system, Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), COs work in fixed shifts (i.e., consistently working the same shift daily), rotating shifts (i.e., transitioning between day, evening, and night shifts), or on-call shifts (i.e., immediate shift activation as needed), along with other variants intended to meet the complex needs of prison institutions.[5] Shifts in these correctional institutions vary depending on the individual institution's policies and are typically organised based on shift duration (e.g., 8, 10, 12, or 16 hours) and employee seniority. For example, senior COs may be assigned fewer night shifts, if that is their preference.[6] Some COs often work 12- to 16-hour shifts to minimise the number of their workdays and increase days off between shifts.[7] However, longer shifts are physically demanding and, according to recent research, may increase the risk of COs experiencing mental health disorders or even death by suicide.[8]

The most common CO shift work pattern at CSC generally involves rotating schedules that encompass day, evening, and overnight shifts.[9] These schedules are often structured so COs work 2 or 3 days on a particular shift before rotating to another. While this scheduling system helps facilitate 24/7 coverage, this form of shiftwork can be daunting, particularly when COs transition quickly between day and night shifts with minimal adjustment time.[10] [11] [12] Scholars also highlight the biological effects of such rotations on

1. Pati, A. K., Chandrawanshi, A., & Reinberg, A. (2021). Shift work: Consequences and management. *Current Science, 81*(1), 32-52.
2. Correctional Service Canada. (2024). *Correctional Officer CX-1: Various regions—Continuous Intake.* CSC.
3. Neitzel, A. (2021). *Sleep and Health Concerns for Correctional Officers: The need for Health Programs and Policy Change in Workload and Work Hours.* University of Wisconsin-Platteville.
4. See footnote 2: Correctional Service Canada (2024).
5. See footnote 2: Correctional Service Canada (2024).
6. See footnote 2: Correctional Service Canada (2024).
7. Swenson, D. X., Waseleski, D., & Hartl, R. (2008). Shift Work and Correctional Officers: Effects and Strategies for Adjustment. *Journal of Correctional Health Care, 14*(4), 299–310.
8. Carleton, R. N., Ricciardelli, R., Taillieu, T., Stelnicki, A. M., Groll, D., & Afifi, T. O. (2022). Provincial correctional workers: Suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne, 63*(3), 366–375.
9. See footnote 2: Correctional Service Canada (2024).
10. Grant B. A. (1995). Impact of Working Rotating Shifts on the Family Life of Correctional Staff. *Forum on Corrections Research, 7*(2), 40–42.
11. Ingram, P. (1986). *Shift Rotation among Correctional Officers as a Source of Shift Rotation among Correctional Officers as a Source of Perceived Job Related Stress Perceived Job Rel.* University of North Florida.
12. Ricciardelli, R., Carleton, R. N., Gacek, J., & Groll, D. L. (2020). Understanding Needs, Breaking Down Barriers: Examining Mental Health Challenges and Well-Being of Correctional Staff in Ontario, Canada. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11,* 1036.

circadian rhythms, which often result in sleep deprivation, chronic fatigue, and mental health challenges, including heightened anxiety and stress due to reduced recovery time between shifts.[13] [14] Additionally, COs report that they rarely receive adequate rest and sleep, particularly after shifts exceeding 8 hours.[15] As a result, they work during hours intended for sleep, which can significantly affect their well-being.[16]

In addition to the physical toll that comes with working shifts, COs encounter stressful and unique workplace challenges, including but not limited to being subject to threats from incarcerated people, physical and verbal assaults, emotional strain, deteriorating prison conditions, as well as being tasked with working through scenarios involving high-pressure decision-making for the purposes of maintaining safety in diverse conditions of confinement.[17] [18] [19] [20] [21] [22] [23] These challenges may contribute to high staff turnover or intention to leave, absenteeism, and poor retention, placing additional strain on remaining staff who are often required to (sometimes involuntarily) work overtime or cover extra shifts.[24] [25] [26] Earlier research showed how extra shifts caused by absenteeism and high turnover may lead to work exhaustion, decreased team dynamics, poor attention, insecurity, poor reaction time, and risk-taking behaviour.[27] [28] Additionally, these challenges can create problematic work-life relationships, diminishing COs' social engagement capacity by altering their personality traits, disposition, and attitudes.[29] Conflicts can surface and accumulate over time, causing a growing sense of disconnection from oneself, others, and society.[30] Consequently, COs often struggle to adopt effective coping behaviour to support their work-life needs and well-being.

Although there is an extensive discussion linking the nature of CO work to compromised mental health (i.e., burnout, mental health disorder prevalence),[31] [32] [33] the contextual factors seeming to influence the personal and professional ramifications of shift work have yet to be explored in-depth qualitatively through the perspectives of COs. To fill this gap in the literature, in the current qualitative interview study, we explore how federal COs in Canada cope with shift work and how shift work affects them personally and professionally.

Methods

In the current study, we explore how federal Canadian COs (N = 48) perceive the effects of and cope with prison shift work, particularly in relation to the implications for their work-life balance and well-being (see footnote 33 for more details on protocol for the broader study). Ethics clearance was received from the Health Research Ethics Board of Memorial University of Newfoundland.

13. See footnote 8: Carleton, et al. (2020).
14. See footnote 12: Ricciardelli, et al. (2020).
15. Bezerra, G. L., Carvalho, F. M., Fernandes, R. D. C. P., & Santos, K. O. B. (2022). Sleep disorders in correctional officers: Cross-sectional study. *Sleep Science, 15*(1), 34-40.
16. See footnote 3: Neitzel (2021).
17. Armstrong, G. S., & Griffin, M. L. (2004). Does the job matter? Comparing correlates of stress among treatment and correctional staff in prisons. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 32*(6), 577–592.
18. Bierie, D. M. (2012). The Impact of Prison Conditions on Staff Well-Being. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 56*(1), 81–95.
19. Ferron, R. M. (2019). *Factors associated with job satisfaction among Canadian Correctional Officers.* University of Saskatchewan.
20. Finney, C., Stergiopoulos, E., Hensel, J., Bonato, S., & Dewa, C. S. (2013). Organizational stressors associated with job stress and burnout in correctional officers: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health, 13*(1), 82
21. Johnston, M. S., & Ricciardelli, R. (2024). Invisible ghosts of care and penalty: Exploring Canadian correctional workers' perceptions of prisoner well-being, accountability and power. *Criminology & Criminal Justice, 24*(1), 291–312.
22. Mario, B., Ricciardelli, R., Johnston, M. S., & Sibley, M. A. (2024). Examining the intersection of carceral space and well?being: Correctional officers' perspectives on old and new prison design. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes, 68*(4), 549-559.
23. Ricciardelli, R., Power, N., & Medeiros, D. S. (2018). Correctional Officers in Canada: Interpreting Workplace Violence. *Criminal Justice Review, 43*(4), 458–476.
24. Minor, K. I., Dawson-Edwards, C., Wells, J. B., Griffith, C., & Angel, E. (2009). Understanding Staff Perceptions of Turnover in Corrections. *Professional Issues in Criminal Justice, 4*(2), 43-57.
25. Ricciardelli, R., Matthews, Z., & Martin, K. (2021). Intrinsic versus extrinsic factors: An exploration of Canadian federal correctional officer recruits' motivations toward a correctional career. *Corrections, 8*(5), 446-465.
26. Schaufeli, W. B., & Peeters, M. C. W. (2000). Job Stress and Burnout among Correctional Officers: A Literature Review. *International Journal of Stress Management, 7(*1), 20-48.
27. Petralia, R. S. (2012). *Effectiveness of Wellness Programs for Correctional Officers.* Walden University.
28. See footnote 7: Swenson, et al. (2008).
29. McKendy, L., & Ricciardelli, R. (2022). "This Job has Changed Me": Work Life Conflict, Self and Social Identity in Correctional Work. *Criminal Justice Review, 48*(4), 458–473.
30. See footnote 29: McKendy & Ricciardelli (2023).
31. Fusco, N., Ricciardelli, R., Jamshidi, L., Carleton, R. N., Barnim, N., Hilton, Z., & Groll, D. (2021). When Our Work Hits Home: Trauma and Mental Disorders in Correctional Officers and Other Correctional Workers. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 11,* 1-10.
32. Johnston, M. S., Ricciardelli, R., & McKendy, L. (2022). Improving the Mental Health of Correctional Workers: Perspectives from the Field. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 49*(7), 951–970.
33. Ricciardelli, R., Andres, E., Mitchell, M. M., Quirion, B., Groll, D., Adorjan, M., […], & Carleton, N. (2021). CCWORK protocol: A longitudinal study of Canadian Correctional Workers' Well-being, Organizations, Roles and Knowledge. *BMJ Open, 11*(12), 1-17.

All participation in the longitudinal study was voluntary. Interviews averaged around an hour, ranging from approximately 40 minutes to over 90 minutes. Project researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct interviews, meaning they had a prepared list of questions in advance and then probed as needed for clarity purposes or to garner more information, always ensuring the conversational path of the interviewee was followed. Interviews took place in a private space, and a digital voice recorder was used to preserve the respondents' words for transcription in English.

After verbatim interview transcription, the transcripts were coded according to a collectively constructed codebook by the larger research team. Research assistants at the graduate level coded data and met regularly with each other and the Principal Investigator to discuss any discrepancies in coding or to grow the codebook annually, as the context of federal prison work changes and new themes emerge. The coding scheme (subject to change) included: (1) personal history and personal information; (2) education, employment, and service history; (3) experience in the correctional training programme and continued training; (4) occupational mindset; (5) occupational challenges, hazards, and stressors; and (6) components of CO work. Within these overarching themes, there are 50 fundamental codes and numerous sub-codes. The coding process for this study followed a semi-grounded iterative approach (meaning the analytical procedure was cyclical and reflexive, informing each subsequent step in the research process) facilitated by data analysis software QSR NVivo. Researchers conducted rigorous checks on previously coded material, aiming for comprehensive coverage. Quality checking remained a crucial aspect of this project's research design.

In the current article, we focus on two primary codes (i.e., nodes), broken down into 36 sub-codes (parent, child, grandchild nodes), from the coding scheme to facilitate analysis of the research question: How do COs cope with the strains of prison shift work on their wellness? We identify themes by analysing data within nodes to see inconsistencies, contradictions, and interconnections. Hence, the first primary code, shift work, includes codes related to how COs experience their work schedules and the effects of such, including preferred schedules. The second primary code, how they spend their time outside of work (broken down into personality traits), which are coping strategies to enhance the quality of work and life, includes codes related to how they feel personally towards shift work and how they apply their personality traits to overcome shiftwork challenges, as well as strive for work-life balance and overall wellness. Our analytical approach aligns with an interrogative and realist paradigm (meaning the data/perspectives are treated as a 'reality' that constitutes truth) and mobilised an 'appreciative perspective' to (empathetically) shed light on the nuances of shift work through the perspectives and lived experiences of COs.[34]

Results

Shift work in prison is crucial, yet long; rotating shifts may impact correctional officer's mental health, well-being, coping and work-life balance.

We begin the analysis by illustrating the diverse shift schedules implemented in federal correctional facilities and their consequential effects on COs' sleep patterns and well-being. While a minority of participants expressed contentment with their work schedules, we found most COs communicated how these schedules detrimentally affected their sleep and overall well-being. Those COs who expressed satisfaction highlighted their ability to selectively determine the number of days they work, often opting for longer shifts to secure additional days off and minimise the frequency of their exposure to the prison environment. We explore and discuss these themes and how COs navigate and cope with shift work to alleviate the strains linked to shift work.

Shift patterns impact sleep routine

Some COs (n = 13) reported satisfaction with their shift schedules, arguing that longer shifts can reduce their overall workdays and provide them with opportunities to avoid daily commutes to this challenging environment. Nevertheless, these participants recognised the challenges of maintaining a healthy sleep schedule and work-life balance, particularly after working consecutive longer night shifts. Officers, for instance, illustrated various shift patterns they engage in:

> 'I'm on the 12's. So how it is, you do 6 weeks of 12-hour days. Everything is 3 on, 3 off. So

34. Liebling, A., Price, D., & Elliott, C. (1999). Appreciative Inquiry and Relationships in Prison. *Punishment & Society, 1*(1), 71–98.

12-hour days. It's, actually, 12.75 so you start at 7 in the morning and you're off 7:45 in the evening. Then you do 6 weeks of midnights. So starting at 6:30 in the evening and working till 7:15 the next morning. And then you have what I'm on right now are called short shifts. So those are either an evening shift which will either start at 2 or 2:30 till 11 and then a dayshift would be from 7-4.' [P108]

'There are multiple schedules at our jail. We just went through a roster shift so we have a lot of different schedules I could possibly choose from. The schedule that I'm on is 9, 16, 9. So I work a 9 hour day shift, a 16 hour shift and then a 9 hour evening shift. The schedule is pretty alright for me.' [P157]

'It's 6 days or 6 on 4 off 6 on 5 off and 16 in the middle. I like it better I don't do overnights. Unless they're short staff so I like it that way better.' [P125]

Their words reveal the diversity in shift schedules, reflecting the complexity of managing 24/7 prison operations. P108 shows the typical pattern involved in 12-hour shifts, with variations such as six weeks of 12-hour days followed by six weeks of midnights. Although shifts of more than 12 hours can exacerbate fatigue and increase the risk of accidents among shift workers,[35] interviewees often opted for longer shifts (12 to 16 hours) to have more days off. While P157 expresses satisfaction with the schedule, stating their schedule is 'pretty all right', P125 avoids night shifts due to harm on their sleep schedule. COs, like P106, are satisfied with their current schedule, explaining, 'With the shift pattern I have got I feel good that it gives us a decent amount of time. If I was running a seven on three off type pattern, I wouldn't be nearly as satisfied as I am with the current shift pattern'. As P106 mentions, they did not prefer working seven days straight due to the implications for their sleep schedule and work life balance.

This study uses a realist and appreciative lens to understand COs shift work experiences and coping ability.

However, consistent with other research,[36 37 38] long shifts affect sleep. Most interviewees (n = 35) agreed that shift work necessarily entails irregular hours and extended workdays, resulting in compressed rest periods between consecutive work times. These participants described how long working hours disrupt their sleep patterns. As a result, they face difficulty being alert (i.e., compromising safety and the performance of other job responsibilities). P13 explains:

'I still to this day do not understand how people are expected to work 16 hours start and stay on high alert for 16 hours straight. It's negotiated I know that the max is legally 16.5 hours straight, but I just don't know in a safety sense in a position where firearms are to handle at times, and you know you're responsible for the lives, care and control of you know 650 people.'

P13's words express how staying alert for 16 hours is difficult and hardly feasible. COs emphasised how maintaining a consistent sleep schedule could help alleviate the strain caused by extended shifts and limited opportunities for rest. But, a strict shift schedule can be challenging for quality sleep and work-life balance:

'You finish your 16-hour shift and if you live in Airdrie you get home at 11:45 at night and you have to be back here at 6:45 in the morning they expect you here at 6:30. I don't come at 6:30 I come at 6:40 but by the time you walk in your house take off your uniform wash your face, brush your teeth its quarter passed 12 by the time you fall asleep its 12:30 and you got to be up 5 hours later to drive back to work so yeah sometimes there just isn't time and when there is time you know if you're trying to live a life outside of work. You got other stuff you got to do you got to go shopping, you got to fix a broken pipe or you know you got to cut the grass like you got to do stuff.' [P13]

35. Akerstedt T., & Wright, K. P. (2009). Sleep Loss and Fatigue in Shift Work and Shift Work Disorder. *Sleep Medicine Clinics, 4*(2), 257–271.
36. Goncalves, S. G., Mesas, A. E., Bravo, D. S., Birolim, M. M., Guidoni, C. M., Andrade, S. M., & Rodrigues, R. (2023). Association between sleep quality and occupational factors in Brazilian correctional officers. *Behavioral Sleep Medicine, 21*(4), 397–410.
37. See footnote 10: Grant (1995).
38. Harma, M. (2006). Workhours in relation to work stress, recovery and health. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health, 32*(6), 502–514.

P13 details the timeline between finishing a 16-hour shift and having to return for the next shift. They mentioned falling asleep at 12:30 AM and needing to be up for work 5 hours later. Their resulting sleep deficit raises concerns about the adequacy and quality of sleep COs can achieve when working 16-hour shifts repeatedly.[39] [40] Furthermore, participants, such as P2 and P22, described their strategies for adhering to strict sleep schedules to manage challenging work shifts:

> 'I try to get to bed early, get up at 5:15, so I try to get to bed by 9 or something.' [P2]

> 'I get in late or sometimes early, and then I have to go back to work sometimes really early in the morning, and so we do not get that much sleeping hours.' [P22]

Going to bed early and aligning sleep patterns with work hours reflects a conscious effort to mitigate the potential negative effects of shift work on sleep quality, though it is often challenging to achieve due to shift work. The imbalance between work and sleep often leads to added stress and fatigue, contributing to the overall strain on well-being. COs feel working longer shifts also affects their mental state. Many reported they struggle with the dullness of daily tasks in prison. The perception of 'prison work being boring' is common among COs, who experience a lack of dynamic and engaging activities in their professional roles.[41] P33 described this phenomenon:

> 'I like to work, I like to move, I like to be part of what's going on, so for me the most challenging are the static posts…for me that's the most challenging because I don't feel like I'm part of anything. I feel like I'm sitting still, I don't like to sit still, I way rather work a unit or work a floor, and work with the inmates.' [P33]

The limited interaction with incarcerated people in certain prison settings and the absence of stimulating activities contributes to boredom among COs. Officers may find themselves in idle periods with little to occupy their attention, leading to monotony during the workday. This problem can be severe during night shifts due to compromised productivity and safety,[42] which can also make staying awake on shift very difficult — or on the drive home. As such, well-being can be compromised for COs, especially for those who commute long distances to their workplace, when exhausted after a lengthy 'back' or night shift or even when awaking for an early day shift:

> 'In terms of shift work it's tough, right, you got get up at middle of the night and drive and be there for 6 AM. I personally went through an adjustment especially coming from, I'm from East Coast so coming through a different time zone too is just an adjustment in my life but you get used to it. It must be still challenging of course given shift work and the rest of it right for sure I mean sometimes but you make it work.' [P19]

Fatigue from shift work impairs CO alertness, risking harm in workplace where vigilance is essential.

To manage the demanding work schedule especially during early morning shifts combined with a long commute, COs face the challenge of getting up in the middle of the night to drive and be at work — clearly affecting their sleep by compressing the sleep time and by changing daily routines.

Work-life misalignment on shift

COs, due to the nature of their work, often have an irregular work pattern — having to stay back for mandated overtime or being called in due to staffing requirements. The consequence of the shift work with extended hours can be hard for families by making participating in events, dinners, and so forth challenging.[43] [44] Inconsistent attendance at family events can strain relationships and create a sense of distance. As P99 demonstrated:

> 'When you're at work for 16 hours a day then you go home and only have 8 hours in the

39. See footnote 37: Goncalves, et al. (2023).
40. See footnote 7: Swenson, et al. (2008).
41. Spencer, D C., Ricciardelli, R., Hepburn T. (2024). "It's king of Preventative Maintenance": Social Capital and Policing in Rural Schools. Policing: *An International Journal, 47*(3), 394-406.
42. Folkard, S. (2003). Shift work, safety and productivity. *Occupational Medicine, 53*(2), 95–101.
43. Crawley, E. (2002). Bringing It All Back Home? The Impact of Prison Officers' Work on Their Families. *Probation Journal, 49*(4), 277–286
44. See footnote 10: Grant (1995).

> rest of your 24, how are you going to do anything with your kids? While you work the 16's I can see how that takes an effect and I can understand that if you don't spend all that time with your loved ones obviously you're going to start to go for somebody that you're spending the most time with. That's why divorce happens. I don't even remember what the rate is but we have one of the highest divorce rates because you don't see your loved one all day, and you spend all day with this girl who has the same common interest as you and you're going to get to know that person better than your loved one. So I understand why that's happens.' [P99]

P99 emphasised the consequential relationship strain when only eight hours remain in the day for personal activities, including spending time with family, after a demanding 16-hour shift. P99 relates their demanding work schedule with higher divorce rates among COs, arguing the lack of quality time with spouses can contribute to emotional distance, potentially leading to relationship breakdowns.[45] [46] While some participants preferred longer shifts in exchange for extended days off to balance their work and personal life, the preference came with its own set of challenges, particularly concerning mental health and overall well-being. After completing longer shifts, COs like P313 struggled with fatigue that extends into their off days:

> 'Only having two days off my first day is a write off, I typically will not do anything that day until the afternoon because I'm tired, I'm exhausted, I have stuff to do from the last two days that I was working that I haven't been able to do and I need almost a day to recover from working.' [P313]

As P313 points out, the demanding nature of correctional work affects their physical and mental energy. Despite having more days off, the fatigue endured during longer shifts hinders their ability to engage in normal activities during their time off, which can weaken their social relationships. Relationships also struggle due to missed events and an inability to participate in social activities, possibly leading to isolation. P228 shared:

> 'Most of my friends are Monday to Friday [laughing]. My partner's a shift worker too. Last Christmas I worked because I was scheduled and, you adjust your schedule — you have to adjust your mindset too. I worked Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and I worked Boxing Day as well. I had to excuse myself because my emotions got a hold of me 'cause it was different, I wasn't used to sitting amongst a bunch of perfect strangers with these individuals who have done horrible things right so it was a 'my god I'm spending Christmas in jail' [laughing].' [P228]

P228 chose, however many are scheduled, to work holidays. P228, despite their choice, found spending the holiday in prison challenging due to separation from family. Thus, there can be an emotional toll of working during holidays.

Research must explore practical shift limits and wellness interventions.

Managing shift work

To manage the strain of shiftwork, some interviewees reported how they engaged in physical activities, such as regular gym attendance. Many participants, like P99, valued physical exercise to manage stress induced by shift work:

> 'If you don't have your own mental health strategies and things you can turn to outside of work then you're going to turn to negative things like I go to the gym. I have my own ways of dealing with my stress. I at least try and go to the gym probably like five or six times a week and it definitely keeps me in check and I can take out whatever like aggression or whatever I'm feeling and just deal with it on the mats or in the gym as opposed to some other way [P99].

P99 presented gym going as a constructive coping strategy. Apart from engaging in physical workouts,

45. See footnote 29: McKendy & Ricciardelli (2022).
46. Obidoa, C., Reeves, D., Warren, N., Reisine, S., & Cherniack, M. (2011). Depression and Work Family Conflict among Corrections Officers. Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine, 53(11), 1294–1301

other COs also reported playing sports, (P12 golfs, P17 plays baseball, and P19 plays soccer), as well as other examples (P387 likes kayaking and camps), or spending time with friends:

> 'Typically hockey, hockey is my primary one, or just visiting a friend's house, hanging out, or doing various activities.' [P10]

In addition, P154 mentioned the value of hiking and being in outdoor spaces:

> 'I love to hike and be outside, and the weather is getting better for me.' [P154]

In this excerpt, pursuing physical activities appeared to be almost therapeutic, providing an escape from the stress of work temporarily, particularly when in nature. Some participants tried to spend quality time in nature with their family and pets for health preservation:

> 'I have a small child and I have two horses and dogs and stuff so that's mostly what we do in our free time (laughter), it never stops the caretaking and the policing of bad behaviour.' [P149]

P149's words reveal the strategy of combining nature, physical activity, and social connection in their processes of coping with shiftwork. These COs actively try to meet their familial responsibilities while also finding releases for the strains and pains of shift work. Of course, COs do face challenges even when pursuing these activities in nature or ensuring their engagement in de-escalation post shift techniques (i.e., exercise) because of their irregular working hours. Thus, even best efforts can be compromised by shift work, further creating barriers for health, relationships and, arguably, completely disrupting their potential for work-life balance. For example, P125 explained how shift combined with forced overtime 'changed the way I did stuff'.

Discussion

A minority of participants expressed contentment with their shift schedules; yet the majority conveyed how shift work negatively affected their health, personal and family life, and well-being. Participants recognised how shift work disrupted their sleep quality and quantity, and how 16-hour shifts impeded them from full participation in important and mandatory activities like family events.

Our findings align with broader evidence indicating sleep deprivation is prevalent among COs internationally.[47] [48] [49] Of particular concern is how continuous sleep deprivation can lead to fatigue, diminished alertness, impaired memory, and challenges in maintaining satisfactory relationships,[50] [51] [52] [53] which resonated in these data and also raises a need to understand how such states of being can lead to harm in prisons when alertness is potentially life-saving especially for COs.

Participants disclosed how certain shifts (and posts) are less fulfilling and more monotonous, contributing to fatigue and burnout, particularly when subjected to long and/or night shifts. This sentiment is consistent with existing literature underscoring the potential for prolonged shift work to accelerate both physical (e.g., cardiovascular risk) and mental (e.g., depression) health challenges.[54] [55] [56] Respondents contended their work-life balance was also adversely affected by shift work, with social events, holiday celebrations, and daily activities being missed. The irregular working hours and frequent changes in shift schedules disrupted families by reducing the time COs can spend with their loved ones and also making their presence at home unreliable. The

47. See footnote 15: Bezerra, et al. (2022).
48. Drake, C. L., Roehrs, T., Richardson, G., Walsh, J. K., & Roth, T. (2004). Shift Work Sleep Disorder: Prevalence and Consequences Beyond that of Symptomatic Day Workers. *Sleep, 27*(8), 1453–1462.
49. Sygit-Kowalkowska, E., Piotrowski, A., & Hamzah, I. (2021). Insomnia among Prison Officers and Its Relationship with Occupational Burnout: The Role of Coping with Stress in Polish and Indonesian Samples. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(8), 4282-4306.
50. Geiger-Brown, J. M., Lee, C. J., & Trinkoff, A. M. (2012). The Role of Work Schedules in Occupational Health and Safety. In R. J. Gatchel & I. Z. Schultz (Eds.), *Handbook of Occupational Health and Wellness* (pp. 297–322). Springer.
51. Tubbs, D. C. (2016). *Overtime Work Hours, Health Behaviors and Health Outcomes for Correctional Officers: An Examination of Moderated Effects.* University of Connecticut.
52. Van Der Hulst, M., & Geurts, S. (2001). Associations between overtime and psychological health in high and low reward jobs. *Work & Stress, 15*(3), 227–240.
53. Wickwire, E. M., Geiger-Brown, J., Scharf, S. M., & Drake, C. L. (2017). Shift Work and Shift Work Sleep Disorder. *Chest, 151*(5), 1156–1172.
54. Bannai, A., & Tamakoshi, A. (2014). The association between long working hours and health: A systematic review of epidemiological evidence. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health, 40*(1), 5–18.
55. Cavallari, J. M., Garza, J. L., Ferguson, J. M., Laguerre, R. A., Decker, R. E., Suleiman, A. O., & Dugan, A. G. (2021). Working Time Characteristics and Mental Health among Corrections and Transportation Workers. *Annals of Work Exposures and Health, 65*(4), 432–445.
56. Ferdik, F. V. (2018). Correctional Officer Risk Perceptions and Professional Orientations: Examining Linkages between the Two. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 45*(2), 264–285.

unpredictability in their attendance and ability to meet their familial responsibilities has been found to strain relationships, cause emotional distance, and affect work-life balance (which appears compromised for many COs). Literature supports there are many hurdles to maintaining healthy relationships and preventing a sense of isolation among COs.[57] [58]

Participants used different strategies to cope or manage shift work and to distance themselves any experiences encountered during their shift.[59] [60] COs described exercise, nature, and social activities as strategies. However, the feasibility of participating in such activities was easily compromised by the demands of shift work and mandated overtime.

There is, of course, a need for more research and policy considerations around shift work. Shift schedules are complex — they must meet the institutional needs, those of incarcerated people, and those of COs — however meeting all needs may be an impossible problem. Therefore, more research must unpack the nuances and consequences of shift work, with serious discussion of possible restrictions on the maximum number of hours an officer can work within 24 hours period, and scholarly interrogation of the benefits and disadvantages of establishing an upper limit for hours worked per week. We further recommend sleep-information sessions, lunch and learn, and programmes targeting COs to be essential offerings to help officers manage sleep challenges, improve their sleep hygiene, and learn about countering fatigue.

Conclusion

There exists a complex interconnection between shift work and COs' work-life balance. In the current study, shift work, especially in the form of longer shifts and overtime, emerged as a significant disruptor of quality sleep, laying the groundwork for a cascade of health and personal concerns.[61] Thus, there is a need for more sleep support for COs who live in a world of shift work and overtime expectations.

The current study, however, is not with limitations. These include self-reporting biases and the lack of generalisability of qualitative findings to other provincial and territorial jurisdictions in Canada, or other correctional services internationally. Moreover, shiftwork emerged as a theme, rather than participants being directly asked about the effects of their shift work. Future research on shift work and the health consequences for COs is necessary to improve their health, wellness, and the well-being of incarcerated people.

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57. See footnote 44: Crawley (2002).
58. Williams, C. (2015, April 9). *Work-life balance of shift workers.* [EPI Briefing Paper No: 394]. Economic Policy Institute.
59. Wechsler, B. (1995). Coping and coping strategies: A behavioural view. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science, 43*(2), 123–134.
60. Wright, T. A., & Sweeney, D. (1990). Correctional institution workers' coping strategies and their effect on diastolic blood pressure. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 18*(2), 161–169.
61. Spiegel, K., Leproult, R., & Van Cauter, E. (1999). Impact of sleep debt on metabolic and endocrine function. *The Lancet, 354*(9188), 1435–1439.

Crossing professional boundaries: Which factors increase prison staff vulnerability to wrongdoing?

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Prison staff wrongdoing in England and Wales has attracted media attention and academic concern. However, it has not, until now, been the subject of any focussed research to increase the understanding of why people risk their careers and possible imprisonment to engage in wrongdoing. Given the paucity of previous research, an exploratory study was conducted to address this knowledge gap. The findings reveal a workforce which feels undervalued by managers as well as wider society. The data also identifies individual, organisational and societal factors which increase staff vulnerability to wrongdoing. One of the conclusions drawn from the findings is that staff wrongdoing cannot be understood as the actions of individual 'bad apples', instead, it requires a holistic approach which addresses wrongdoing at all levels.

Prison staff work in environments which are challenging, stressful and dangerous with a high risk of physical assault and verbal abuse from prisoners.[1] Prison staff, particularly officers, have to maintain security and order but also be caring and supportive; they are both 'turnkeys' and 'care bears'.[2] Although non-custodial staff do not have the responsibility of 'turnkeys', they face the same challenges as custodial staff in setting clear boundaries with prisoners. Indeed, McIlwain argues that maintaining professional boundaries can be more challenging for non-custodial staff as their work might involve regular private meetings with the same prisoner and a greater need to be empathetic.[3]

Daily life in prisons in England and Wales is governed by the Prison Rules 1999, described by Loucks as an 'impenetrable bureaucracy' (p.6).[4] As noted by Liebling, Price and Shefer, it would be impossible to enforce all of the Prison Rules and prison policies all of the time.[5] Prison staff therefore have to translate policy into practice and to allow flexibility around rule enforcement. However, this discretionary power can lead to uncertainty around professional boundaries, particularly when rules are enforced unfairly and/or inconsistently. Importantly, discretionary power also means there are ample incentives and opportunities for staff wrongdoing, both for staff who actively decide to engage in wrongdoing and for those who find themselves on the proverbial 'slippery slope' and believe they have no other option than to continue to continue down the slope to engage in more serious wrongdoing.

Given the paucity of research into this area, my research was necessarily exploratory in nature and focussed on three key areas: how wrongdoing is perceived by prison staff; which factors are believed to increase vulnerability and what are the perceived barriers to reporting wrongdoing. This article focusses on the factors which make staff more vulnerable to wrongdoing.

What is staff wrongdoing?

Staff wrongdoing is behaviour which violates ethical, moral and formally established rules. It is a continuum of behaviours which range from 'bending' rules, for example, letting prisoners out of their cells

1. Armstrong, G., & Griffin, M. (2004). Does doing the job matter? Comparing correlates of stress among treatment and correctional staff in prisons. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 32*(6), 577-592; Clements, A., & Kinman, G. (2021). Job demands, organisational justice and emotional exhaustion in prison officers. *Criminal Justice Studies, 34*(4), 441-458.
2. Tait, S. (2008). Care and the prison officer: Beyond 'turnkeys' and 'care bears'. *Prison Service Journal, 180,* 30-11
3. McIlwain, G. (2005). *Professional misconduct between non-custodial staff and inmates: a study of Queensland's correctional centres* [PhD Thesis]. Griffith University, Queensland.
4. Loucks, N. (2000). *Prison rules: a working guide.* Prison Reform Trust.

for showers during lock-up, through to the illegal such as theft of prisoner property and the trafficking of contraband. In England and Wales, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) defines wrongdoing as:

> 'Any behaviour that falls short of the professional standards of staff. Wrongdoing is a broad category and can be intentional or unintentional. It can encompass staff behaviours such as inadvertently overstepping professional boundaries with prisoners … bullying and harassment, and the inappropriate use of force as well as corruption.' (p. 6)[6]

HMPPS's Counter Corruption Policy highlights how serious wrongdoing, in particular the trafficking of mobile phones and drugs, can fuel violence, debt and the illicit economy. However, even low level staff wrongdoing can contribute to a culture of unprofessional behaviour, destroy trust between staff and prisoners and erode public trust in the legitimacy of prisons and prison staff.[7]

Staff wrongdoing is behaviour which violates ethical, moral and formally established rules.

Close working proximity between staff and prisoners can lead to over familiarity with prisoners. This can, in turn, be associated with an increased risk of grooming and conditioning of staff. In their book *Games Criminals Play,* Allen and Bosta identified the steps which prisoners use to 'set-up' a member of staff for corruption through first blurring professional boundaries, then violating them.[8] The first step is for prisoners to observe staff, listen to staff conversations and watch which staff exercise their discretion to violate minor rules. Prisoners then test staff through offering food or initiating physical contact with staff such as a pat on the back. If the staff member fails to object, the prisoner can groom and manipulate them further, building up to a request to engage in serious wrongdoing. Once the staff member has violated professional boundaries, they are then vulnerable to prisoner threats to report the wrongdoing behaviour to the prison managers. These 'games criminals play' can therefore start off in a small way but may trigger a descent down the slippery slope towards more serious corruption.

The case of ex-prison officer Lee Davies illustrates how a failure to maintain professional boundaries can lead to corruption. As an inexperienced officer, Lee Davies was put in charge of a cleaning group. He became friendly with the group and began to agree to their requests to be let out for showers during lock up. Although some other officers pointed out he should not do this, no one explained how favouritism could become problematic. When one of the cleaners was upset, Lee again breached prison policy and went alone into the cell to console him. The prisoner told Lee his father was dying and asked Lee to bring in a phone so he could speak to his father. Lee agreed. Once he had committed this crime, Lee was 'asked' to continue to bring in contraband. Although Lee now says he knew what he was doing was wrong, he felt trapped. After a year of bringing in phones and drugs, Lee was caught and given a custodial sentence.[9]

The training mantra of being 'friendly but not friends' is very difficult to put into practice, especially for new recruits who have only received limited training and find themselves on a wing with other inexperienced staff. Two of the scenarios in my research survey included situations which could lead to inappropriate relationships. One scenario portrayed a female member of staff who was observed spending a lot of time with a male prisoner and was seen smiling at the prisoner when he touched her on the arm. The other scenario was where an officer confided personal problems to a

5. Liebling, A., Price, D., & Shefer, G. (2012). *The prison officer.* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
6. His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. (2022). *Counter Corruption and Reporting Wrongdoing Policy Framework.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-corruption-and-reporting-wrongdoing.
7. Ross, J. (2013). Deconstructing correctional officer deviance: Toward typologies of actions and controls. *Criminal Justice Review, 38*(1), 10-126; Worley, R., & Worley, V. (2013). Games guards play: A self-report study of institutional deviance within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. *Criminal Justice Studies, 26*(1), 115-132; Worley, R., & Worley, V. (2016.) The economics of crossing over: Examining the link between correctional officer pay and guard-inmate boundary violations. *Deviant Behaviour, 37*(1),16–29.
8. Allen, B., & Bosta, D. (1981). Games criminals play: *How you can profit by knowing them.* Rae John Publishers.
9. Evolving Prisons podcast (2024 17 March). Available at: https://www.evolvingprisons.com/podcast/episode/301b2f1f/imprisoned-for-being-a-corrupt-prison-officer

sympathetic prisoner. Both scenarios represent breaches of the Prison Rules and should be recognised as professional boundary violations. However, despite a constant stream of media reports on prison staff being prosecuted after engaging in an inappropriate relationship with prisoners, neither of the scenarios were recognised as 'very serious' by the majority of survey respondents.

At present there is insufficient understanding as to why this low level wrongdoing is not perceived to be a boundary violation. It may be that prison staff only consider inappropriate relationships to be serious if they become sexual, or that the scenarios portrayed behaviours which occur so frequently they were not considered as types of wrongdoing. Whatever the reasons, there appears to be a lack of understanding that nearly all inappropriate relationships begin with a blurring of professional boundaries and can often be the starting point for various forms of prison staff corruption.[10] There is, therefore, an urgent need for focussed research on inappropriate relationships to address this ongoing problem.

As wrongdoing involves the violation of professional boundaries, it is essential that prison staff know where the boundaries lie. However, the boundaries are not clear cut and can vary according to the prisoner and the member of staff.[11] As one research participant noted:

> 'It's really easy for the boundaries to become blurred … I think it's just human nature where people are working and living together in close proximity for periods of time. And it can be quite innocent, with no malice or intent, that over time those boundaries become eroded.'

The question therefore arises as to what are the 'right reasons' for prison staff to exercise their discretion and blur or cross professional boundaries through bending the rules. Liebling, Price and Shefer conclude that decisions are informed by individual interpretation, knowledge, values, experience and relationships.[12] Unfortunately, many prison staff in today's prisons in England and Wales, lack experience and sufficient training so their ability to recognise the 'right reasons' to exercise their discretion to 'bend' the rules may be lacking.

The majority of prison staff do not decide to work in prisons with the intention of engaging in corruption. However, there is increasing evidence that some staff join, or soon after joining, actively pursue money making opportunities.

The study

In 2011, Jewkes noted that Category B male local prisons are generally regarded as least fit for purpose.[13] This situation has not improved. The ongoing problems faced by local prisons is reflected by the number of Urgent Notifications (UNs) issued by the Chief Inspector of Prisons. Since the UN process was introduced in 2018, UNs have been issued to 16 establishments, of which nine were to Category B male local prisons.[14] The prisons were identified by the Inspectorate of Prisons as having high levels of violence, particularly against staff, high levels of recorded self-harm, poor living conditions, and major drug problems. These issues mean staff are more likely to suffer from higher levels of stress which have been linked with increased wrongdoing.[15] I therefore

10. Marquart, J., Barnhill, M., & Balshaw-Biddle, K. (2001). Fatal attraction: An analysis of employee boundary violations in a southern prison system 1995–1998. *Justice Quarterly, 18*(4), 877–910; Cheeseman, K., & Worley, R. (2006). Women on the wing: inmate perceptions about female correction officer job competency in a Southern prison system. Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice, 3(2), 86-106; Goldsmith, A., & Halsey, M. (2018). *Literature review: correctional corruption.* Centre for Crime and Policy Research, Flinders University.
11. Liebling, A., Arnold, H., & Straub, C. (2011). *An exploration of staff-prisoner relationships at HMP Whitemoor:* 12 years on. *Revised final report.* Cambridge Institute of Criminology.
12. See footnote 5: Liebling, A., Price, D., & Shefer, G. (2012).
13. Jewkes, Y. (2011). Local prisons. In Jewkes, Y. and Bennett, J. (Eds), *Dictionary of prisons and punishment.* (pp. 156-157). Routledge.
14. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2025). https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/our-reports/?listing_search=urgent+notifications&publication_typeyear=0&detention_type=0&report_themes=0.
15. Mahfood, V., Pollock, W., & Longmire, D. (2013). Leave it at the gate: job stress and satisfaction in correctional staff. *Criminal Justice Studies, 26*(3), 308-325; Worley, R., Worley, V., & Hsu, H. (2018). Can I trust my co-worker? Examining correction officers' perceptions of staff-inmate inappropriate relationships within a southern penitentiary system. *Deviant Behaviour, 39*(3), 332-346

decided to collect survey and interview data from two Category B male local prisons. One is a large prison in a major city while the other is a small prison in a provincial city. This permitted comparisons between the two prisons, while excluding variations such as prison category and prisoner gender. The surveys included 17 scenario questions which portrayed different situations prison officers may find themselves in. Respondents were asked to rate the scenarios in terms of perceived seriousness. The survey also asked for opinions on vulnerability factors. All respondents were asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed. If they did not want to be interviewed, they were asked to expand on their answers in a text box. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants across both prisons. It is appreciated that the findings lack generalisability due to the relatively small sample size, however, the vulnerability factors identified through this research shed some light on why prison staff engage in wrongdoing.

Crossing professional boundaries: Victims or villains?

The majority of prison staff do not decide to work in prisons with the intention of engaging in corruption. However, there is increasing evidence that some staff join, or soon after joining, actively pursue money making opportunities. Nick Hardwick (former Chief Inspector of Prisons), Charlie Taylor (current Chief Inspector of Prisons), the Prison Officers Association and researchers have all expressed their belief that Organised Criminal Gangs (OCGs) recruit or 'encourage' individuals to work in prisons with the sole aim of conveying contraband into the prison.[16] Some of these staff, might, indeed be 'villains' but others might feel they have no choice if they or their family are threatened with dire consequences if they do not agree to the OCG instruction. Hence, even this type of wrongdoer might have mitigating reasons for engaging in corruption.

Although some 'villains' decide to engage in corrupt activities to make money as a one off, they might not realise they could then be blackmailed into regular wrongdoing. Research participants explained how being paid to engage in corrupt behaviour as a single opportunity to boost income was not an option for staff who 'crossed the line':

> 'It won't just be once because people will know you've done it and they'll get their hooks into you and intimidate you into doing more, or you're doing it for emotional, relationship reasons … that's not going to stop with just one pass but so invariably people do multiple passes and get embroiled in a long term affair.'

Counter Corruption training in England and Wales recognises how relationship and financial difficulties increase individual vulnerability to corruption, as do drug and alcohol problems.

Whilst it is not contested that some staff are 'villains', the majority of staff have no initial intention of engaging in serious wrongdoing. It is therefore necessary to understand the factors which leads these staff to engage in wrongdoing. These factors can be described as individual, organisational and societal.

Individual vulnerability factors

Counter Corruption training in England and Wales recognises how relationship and financial difficulties increase individual vulnerability to corruption, as do drug and alcohol problems. Staff who feel isolated at work or who are involved in one:one working with prisoners are also at greater risk of over-familiarity. The Counter Corruption training videos (based on real life examples) describe how some of these factors could lead to inappropriate relationships. One of the videos focusses on how a female member of staff who suffered a marriage breakdown started to drink heavily and, due to these problems, formed an inappropriate relationship with two prisoners before smuggling in contraband for the prisoners. A second video describes how a different female member of

16. Pidd, H., & Syal, R. (2023). Criminal gangs in UK sending recruits in to train as prison officers, union warns. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/27/organised-crime-gangs-uk-sending-recruits-to-train-as-prison-officers-union-warns; Sylvester, R. (2024, April 23). Gangs 'infiltrating prison workforce to help distribute drugs'. *The Times;* Tingle, R. (2024). How gangs are planting prison officers in jails: cartels are getting 'clean' members to work behind bars as 'sleeper agents' so they can pump drugs across Britain's prisons. *Mailonline;* Treadwell, J., Gooch, K., & Barkham Perry, G. (2019). *Crime in prison: what now and where next?* Available at: https://www.warwickshire-pcc.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PCCs-present-plan-to-government-to-tackle-organised-crime-in-prisons.pdf?x94727https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13339705/Prison-drugs-sssstory.html

staff also experienced a marriage breakdown and formed an inappropriate relationship with a prisoner who started to blackmail her. However, the current training does not warn staff as to how easily prisoners are able to observe staff and identify those who are experiencing personal problems or who seem isolated from other staff. Nor does the training highlight how grooming by prisoners can begin with seemingly innocuous behaviour such as providing a sympathetic ear and listening to the staff member's personal difficulties.

In her in-depth study of why four experienced American female staff entered into relationships with male prisoners, Jones identified several common themes.[17] These included personal vulnerability factors but also a lack of knowledge of appropriate boundaries and the prison culture which staff believed prevented them from seeking help. These conclusions were in line with my research findings. It was striking how many of my research participants recognised that lack of knowledge and fear of seeking guidance increased vulnerability to wrongdoing. Several people used the term 'naivety' to describe staff who were not experiencing personal difficulties but who were vulnerable due to their lack of training and experience. Not only are these staff more vulnerable to unintentionally crossing professional boundaries but their lack of knowledge can also influence subsequent decision making. If a prisoner then threatens to report the staff member for the boundary violation, the prison culture, particularly the fear of being disciplined might mean it is easier for them to engage in more serious wrongdoing than seek help from their manager.

If staff do not believe that managers are fair and supportive, their perception of organisational justice can be undermined.

Organisational factors

Research participants expressed concern about how their job had become more challenging and how they faced increasing levels of violence towards staff. These perceptions are confirmed by HMPPS's own statistics. From 2010-2022 prisoner assaults on staff increased by over 250 per cent.[18] During the duration of this research protesting behaviour such as barricading/hostage taking, concerted indiscipline and incidents at height increased in the 12 months to March 2023.[19] Although my research did not directly address job stress, participants referred to factors which could increase job stress. These factors included inadequate staffing, inexperienced staff, the lack of resources, prisoner violence and the high numbers of prisoners with complex mental health problems. Furthermore, as previous research has shown, high levels of job stress is associated with job dissatisfaction, boundary violations, inappropriate relationships with prisoners, high turnover, absenteeism, low staff morale, lower organisational commitment and staff corruption.[20]

The lack of adequate staff training, chronic prisoner overcrowding, the prevalence of drugs and mobile phones were additional problems which participants highlighted as daily challenges. This was particularly the case in the larger prison in which this research was conducted. These ongoing issues have been identified by external monitoring bodies including the Prison Inspectorate, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture as well as academics including Kate Gooch and James Treadwell.[21] In addition to these problems, my

17. Jones, S. (2013). *A portrait of boundary violations: former female employees of corrections who have established a relationship with an inmate.* PhD Thesis, University of Colorado.
18. In 2010 there were 2,848 assaults on prison staff of which 302 were classified as serious. In the 12 months prior to September 2022, there were 7,356 assaults on staff of which 721 were serious (HMPPS Jan 2023).
19. HMPPS. (2023). *Annual Digest.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/651d3a76bef21800156ded1a/HMPPS-annual-digest-2022-23_FINAL1_RevisedSept23.pdf
20. See footnote 1: Armstrong, G.& Griffin, M. (2004).; Lambert, E., Hogan N., & Tucker, K. (2009). Problems at work: exploring the correlates of role stress among correctional staff. *The Prison Journal, 89*(4), 460-481; see footnote 8: Mahfood, V., Pollock, W., & Longmire, D. (2013).
21. Gooch, K., & Treadwell, J. (2024). The Prison Firm: the 'transportation' of organised crime, the evolution of criminal markets and contemporary prisoner society. *Criminology and Criminal Justice. Special issue: New geographies of organised crime, 1*-20.

research identified two further organisational factors which contribute towards a struggling workforce: the gulf between management and staff as well as the pressure and lack of support experienced by management themselves.

Distrust between governors and staff is not new. In 2009 the House of Commons Justice Committee reported on the role of prison officers, noting that 'historically, the relationship between the uniformed prison officer and management has been assessed as poor' (p.36).[22] This situation appears not to have improved. Officer participants in my research described management as being like politicians who care more about appearances:

> 'All they [managers] care about is delivering the regime, they don't care about staff safety, they just care about looking good on paper.'

The belief that management would not support staff has many ramifications. One officer in my research described how she was more worried about the paperwork and possible punishment for drawing her baton to break up a fight between prisoners, while another officer admitted he chose to flush cannabis found in a prisoner's cell down the lavatory instead of completing the paperwork on the basis the charge would get 'thrown out' by a governor. This level of distrust between management and staff is an ongoing problem for the Prison Service. If staff do not believe that managers are fair and supportive, their perception of organisational justice can be undermined.

Distrust between management and staff is an ongoing problem for the Prison Service. If staff do not believe that managers are fair and supportive, their perception of organisational justice can be undermined.

It is not just officers who feel unsupported in their work, research focussed on the wellbeing of management has found that managers also feel overworked and undervalued.[23] The development of managerialism from the 1980s and the endless target setting and monitoring by Prison HQ has intensified control whilst simultaneously eroding the professional discretion of prison governors.[24] Governing governors are told by HQ what their budgets will be and how their resources should be used but they are also held to account for the performance of their prison. Despite their lack of control, governing governors are often criticised in areas over which they have limited authority including recruitment which increases their sense of frustration and resentment towards Prison HQ. [25]

Many of the manager participants in this study referred to the rules, policies and regulations imposed on them by Prison HQ. One issue in particular raised by participants, was that of recruitment and vetting and how it is controlled by Prison HQ. Although HMPPS describes vetting as 'the first line of defence against corruption' (p.12), participants in my study echoed the findings of Gooch and Treadwell that recruitment and vetting for prison officers is *'notoriously weak'* (p.17).[26] This frustration was expressed very clearly by participants who believed that the 'wrong sort' of people are recruited as prison officers. Participants described how inadequate recruitment, vetting and training meant that many new recruits were 'wannabe' social workers who were completely unprepared for the realities of working in prisons. These officers were soon overwhelmed by the challenges of working in large prisons and resigned with their vacancies being filled by more young, inexperienced staff.

Societal factors

Historically prison staff have seen themselves as under-valued, under-resourced, neglected and

22. Justice Committee. (2009). *Role of the prison officer. Twelfth report of session 2008-09.* Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/102/justice-committee/publications/reports-responses/?
23. Harrison, K., & Nichols, H. (2023). The health and wellbeing of prison governors in England and Wales. *Prison Service Journal, 268,* 4-10.
24. Bennett, J. (2015). Managing prisons in an age of austerity. *Prison Service Journal, 222,* 15-24.
25. Taylor, C. (2023). The importance of culture where it comes from, where it goes wrong and how it can be sustained and improved. *Prison Service Journal, 269,* 8- 11.
26. See footnote 4: HMPPS (2022); see footnote 17: Gooch, K., & Treadwell, J. (2024).

misunderstood by wider society.[27] These feelings of being unappreciated have been exacerbated by the post 2010 austerity cuts which resulted in a decrease of officer numbers by 26 per cent.[28] As the greatest number of staff losses occurred among the most experienced officers, there was a collective loss of not just 'boots on the wing' but also jailcraft knowledge. The impact of the staffing cuts in my research was recognised by all long serving participants. Although the Government in 2016, realising the disastrous effects on prisons, committed to recruit additional staff, the huge loss of experienced staff has had ongoing effects.

The feeling of isolation and being misunderstood by society has persisted. Participants in my study described how they felt society regarded them as 'thugs' and referred to the prison service as the 'forgotten service'. This feeling of being overlooked was often expressed alongside complaints about salaries when compared to those of the police force or border staff. Although starting salaries have increased since the data collection in my research, the findings are consistent with those of a larger survey distributed to all prison officers in England and Wales by the Justice Committee in 2023. The responses to the Justice Committee survey revealed that the longer staff spent in the prison service the less satisfied they were with their salary package, while 51 per cent felt their salary was not in line with other similar public sector jobs.[29]

It was not just the failure of prison staff salaries keeping pace with other public sector services which made respondents feel forgotten, it was also Government failure to provide sufficient funding to run the prisons. As one participant noted:

> 'There are staffing shortages, not enough money, not enough programmes, not enough vocational kind of opportunities.'

Despite the overall negative findings, my research revealed that participants in the smaller prison were far more positive than those in the large prison. These staff reported higher morale, believed there was little corruption in their prison and had greater faith in management's ability to control corruption. This prison had lower levels of violence, with most prisoners engaged in work or education. It also had positive inspection reports. Unsurprisingly, the staff sample in the smaller prison was older and more experienced. This difference is consistent with earlier research which concluded that prison staff in smaller prisons tend to have a more positive relationships with management and colleagues and express a higher level of trust in management.[30] However, despite this research, the Government is committed to building four new prisons, each with a capacity of over 1,500 instead of building smaller prisons which might provide more positive environments for prisoners and staff.[31]

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Discussion

The challenges of reducing staff wrongdoing in prisons are considerable. Suedfeld and Steel describe

27. Crawley, E. (2004). *Doing prison work: the public and private lives of prison officers.* Willan Publishing; Crawley, E. & Crawley, P. (2008). Understanding prison officers' culture, cohesion and conflicts. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe, & A. Wahidin (Eds.), *Understanding prison staff* (pp.34-150). Willan Publishing; Howard League for Penal Reform. (2009). *Turnkeys or professionals: A vision for the 21st century prison officer.* Availabel at: https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Turnkeys-or-professionals-print-final.pdf; Howard League for Penal Reform. (2017). The role of the prison officer. Avaialable at: https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-role-of-the-prison-officer.pdf
28. Prison Reform Trust (2023). *Bromley Briefings.* Available at: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-january-2023/
29. Justice Committee. (2023). *Prison operational workforce survey results.* Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/122073/default/.
30. Johnsen, B., Granhime, P., & Helgesen, J. (2011). Exceptional prison conditions and the quality of prison life: prison size and prison culture in Norwegian closed prisons. *European Journal of Criminology, 8*(6), 515-529.
31. Ministry of Justice (2024). *10 Year Prison Capacity Strategy.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67586f828a1ef8f66413b9c2/24.231_MOJ_10-Year_Capacity_Strat_Pub_v10.1_WEB.pdf

prisons as a 'capsule environment' — isolated and confined.[32] This is the working world of prison staff. As discussed above, prison staff need to govern by cooperation and reciprocity while maintaining professional boundaries. Treading the line between 'friendly and friends', and between 'turnkey' and 'carebear' are difficult skills to acquire. It requires more initial training than is currently provided, more ongoing training and sufficient time in the job to gain 'jailcraft'. In the absence of these skills the close working proximity between staff and prisoners is more likely to lead to boundaries becoming blurred, a situation which some prisoners are willing to exploit.

The vulnerability factors identified in this study have been categorised as individual, organisational and societal , all or some of which can influence an individual's propensity to corruption. Any approach to reduce staff wrongdoing needs to take into consideration that these factors influence individuals in various ways. It is a great deal easier for policy makers to focus on trying to prevent trafficking of contraband by individual 'villains' who can be caught and punished. However, this approach is over-simplistic, instead, staff wrongdoing needs to be understood as a muti-faceted problem which is influenced by different motivational factors.

It is not argued that the problem of prison staff wrongdoing began with the decrease in staffing numbers between 2010-16. However, it is clear that working in prisons has become increasingly challenging for a number of reasons. The downward spiral in experienced prison staff, particularly officers, needs to be stopped. This can only be done by addressing the organisational and societal factors identified by this research. Targeted interventions addressing all types of wrongdoing as part of a holistic approach is likely to be more successful than simply trying to deter or punish individuals 'villains'.

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32. Suedfeld, P., & Steel, D. (2000). The environmental psychology of capsule habitats. *Annual Review of Psychology, 51*(1), 227-253.

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