

A Personal Experience of Tagging

Francoise Richardson.

Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed — no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull.

(George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*)

Early in February this year the Home Secretary announced plans for the increased use of tagging. What will these people experience? On 1 December 1999, electronic monitoring (tagging) was accepted as a community sentence in England and Wales and on 28 January 2000 the Home Detention Curfew (HDC) was instituted for the early release of short-term prisoners.

Early in the preliminary trial, towards the end of November 1995, the Responsible Officer for the Reading Pilot scheme asked if I would be willing to wear a Personal Identifier Device (PID or tag) for a short period as a training exercise for his staff. I agreed and although I realise that my experience cannot be said to be identical with that of a 'real' offender, I nevertheless felt I could associate with some types of reaction. The Securicor staff were not aware of my status as an 'experimental monitree' and therefore did not treat me as a special case. Wearing a tag gave me the chance to understand what it felt like to be tagged, and to see how a monitree was treated by the monitoring staff. This personal experience is a unique record and a testimony of TAGGING. As Mair and Nee wrote in *Electronic Monitoring: The Trials and their Results* (1990:52), the views of the recipients of punishment must be considered:

There appears to be a certain unspoken agreement that having been sentenced to a disposal, or bailed with certain conditions, or remanded in custody, the views of the individual so dealt with are irrelevant ... But the views of those who, in a sense, constitute the raw material of the criminal justice system should not be ignored and are just as relevant as those of any other.

The equipment for Electronic Monitoring comprises: a tag (the PID), a receiver (the Home Monitoring Unit — HMU) and a central computer. The tag transmits a continuous radio signal to the

receiver, which in turn carries the signals via a telephone line to a central computer.

Living with the Tag

On the 4 December at 20.00 hours, two employees from Securicor from the area contractor (a male and a female), after having identified themselves, asked permission to come in. They checked my identity and stated the reasons of their presence in my home. They were polite and informative and subjected me to the same induction procedure and identification as any other offender. My 'shoplifting offence' was the reason of my tagging. I was given a small leaflet entitled *Guidelines for Persons Subject to a Curfew; Agreement Form*, which covered what I had to know as a taggee (information on identification, equipment, warnings for breach, and a 24 hour free telephone number for advice). I was also handed my own *curfew schedule*. My house was to be my place of curfew and the tag was to be fitted on my ankle as per Home Office recommendations (Securicor could only fit anklets). I 'chose my leg' and the tag was fitted on my left ankle by the female employee.

My curfew order spread over two weeks, totalling 116 hours (the minimum could have been two hours and the absolute maximum 2,190 hours — 12 hours per day for six months). I was made aware of the consequences I would have to face for violating my order (*The Home Office 1994 Guidelines for Contractors* gave guidelines on actions to be taken and enforcement rules to be followed in such cases). A violation could result in a personal visit from the contractor within a set time limit (approximately one and half hours for Reading). Three levels of violation were recognised in accordance with their degree of seriousness, and covered acts such as absences from curfew periods, assault on staff, damage to equipment and withdrawal of consent to comply with the order (1994, para. 5.4).

At that time, Securicor and Geografix (later Premier-Geografix) had different set-ups for monitoring offenders. Securicor employed one set of staff to act as co-ordinators at the monitoring centre in Manchester and two other sets who operated as field staff in Greater Manchester and Berkshire to carry out installations, equipment check-ups and follow up violations. In Norfolk, Geografix's staff took on a combined role working in the monitoring centre and

out in the field (Mair and Mortimer 1996:7-8).

The tag resembled a light black plastic box, the size of a small travelling alarm clock with a trapezoidal protuberance in its centre. It had a black plastic-coated strap covering a metal band embedded inside used to detect tampering (Geografix, the other contractor, used an optic fibre running the whole length of the strap). The tag emits a low frequency radio signal to the receiver, which is then relayed and stored in the contractor's central computer (situated in Manchester for Securicor). The receiver stores a minimum of 12 hours monitoring data in case of disruption to the power supply and/or the telephone line. In the trial, all the offenders were continuously monitored during their period of curfew (the 'active system') and also received calls from the contractors (the 'passive system') as back-ups in the event of problems occurring, or for the purpose identifying the offender.

This monitoring system only indicates if an offender is 'within range' of the receiver, a range which can be altered to suit the court's decision: it is not therefore a 'tracking system'. The tag remains in place until the sentence is terminated or the order quashed. It is worn at all times ('in curfew' and 'out of curfew') and it can only be removed intact by the monitoring staff (new equipment with a smaller and lighter tag was used from 1 October 1997).

When the Court curfews an offender to a specified place (sometimes places), it is the contractor's responsibility to set the range of the equipment and to ensure that the offender has access to all or virtually all of the property, without giving any significant access beyond that. The range is also adjusted to eliminate the possibility of 'dead spots' (Geografix have occasionally installed an extension aerial to allow access to the whole of a property, for example, an attic or garden) for large or irregularly shaped houses.

My telephone was removed and replaced by the receiver, a bigger unit than the average telephone, more like the size of a fax machine with a handset at each end, plugged into a standard power socket and linked to the telephone line. The left handset worked as a 'normal' telephone where outside calls could be made and received; the right handset used to 'verify presence', a process involving inserting the tag into a matching depression in the right handset. Offenders without telephones were provided with a free phone line 24 hours a day 'for enquiries and requests to and from the liaison staff exclusively' and removed at the end of the curfew order; private calls could not be made or received on these phones as their number was not disclosed.

I violated my order on the second day when I left home during a curfew period. Within seconds of my return, the telephone rang and I was given my first verbal warning. I was asked to 'verify presence' for the purpose of an identity check. That day I was asked to 'verify' four times within half an hour! However this 'overkill' only happened once. I did not find 'verifying'

very easy as it entailed holding two handsets at once while trying to reach and fit the asymmetrical trapezoidal raised central part of the tag with the top of the central depression of the right handset facing downwards. The left handset is used for answering calls from the contractor.

Trousers were a convenient item of clothing for hiding tags from public attention, but not that ideal to 'verify presence'. Although I was subsequently told that verification need not entail holding two hand-sets at once, it possibly reflected the lack of clear instructions for this particular process, and/or the inexperience of new staff at fitting, given the small numbers in Berkshire at the time. The phone rang with each suspected violation as a check to confirm that the equipment was properly working and that the curfew order was obeyed during the imposed curfew periods. My normal irregular work schedule forced me sometimes to be absent during curfew times. The response time by the contractors in such instances was surprisingly rapid. Thus, if I was leaving the house during the curfew I usually heard the telephone ring from outside the front door. Although I ignored it, those still in the house had to choose either to ignore it or to answer it explain my absence. As my order was often breached, those left behind became a little tired of the regular contractor's call, and of me. I soon found myself under pressure to comply: 'Cannot you wait a little longer and not breach your curfew?' 'You know they will ring ... who do you think will answer the phone?' 'Are not you supposed to stay until 11 o'clock today?'

The phone rang again on my return when I was 'within range', and this time I had to reply. On several occasions, I was still fumbling with the key in the lock, when I heard the phone. I was amazed at the speed of checking. It was as if the contractors were watching and knew exactly my whereabouts — quite an unnerving experience. I was usually asked where I had been, being reminded I was in breach of my court order, and given another official warning. The monitoring staff were always polite and friendly enough, although on some occasions I did notice a little impatience with my 'disobedience', especially with an older gruff, paternalistic voice who 'told me off', explaining that I was a bit 'silly, punishing myself in the end'.

What I felt

It might sound silly, but I found it reassuring to hear a human voice amid invisible and impersonal surveillance. To be told that I was the loser if I did not comply made me think of the consequences and my personal responsibility. If I choose to fool around, society (in the form of the monitoring contractor) was not playing my game: I was tightly and efficiently controlled, there were no two ways about it. Having tried, I knew I could not defeat the system. It was like growing up and being asked to be responsible for my

actions. No lies, no excuses for absences were accepted, 'they' seemed to know all, being recorded in their computers (at the time of writing, the computer printout has not been challenged in a court of law).

I realised that I was knocking my head against a brick wall and I was the one who was going to suffer through my own fault. It was better, albeit really annoying, in this case to follow the system (there was nothing else I could do) to avoid further sanctions (prison?) to be free of them. I did appreciate the almost personal interest by the 'older voice': was there some glimmer of humanity at the end of this sophisticated inhuman monitoring system?

I had, following newspaper hysteria, assumed that a tag would be noticed but it was not. I very quickly became accustomed to wearing it and after a couple of days I was almost unaware of it (except when running, when the rubbing on my ankle was quite painful). I solved this problem by wearing socks and trousers which conveniently hid the tag (a local paper had reported a violent incident involving a taggee mistakenly identified as a paedophile). The slight problem for women was that the tag made a normally simple task like wearing tights difficult (the whole pair of tights had to be thread through the small space between ankle and tag; the other way round was impossible). Boots were almost impossible to wear, being too narrow to accommodate a tagged ankle. Other painful times included inadvertently kicking oneself or one's partner in bed as the hardness of a tag could inflict quite a blow.

On my last 'tagging' day, I went to town by bus wearing a skirt to expose the tag. Although visible, it raised no eyebrows. In fact I had to point out the 'small black box' attached to my ankle a friend who, not being versed in the use of tags, accepted my silly explanation of a new leg-pacemaker!

However, my real punishment as a taggee was the restriction of freedom it imposed on me and the unease — a mixture of fear and suspicion — it brought. Although I knew nothing about my invisible 'controllers', they appeared to know an awful lot about me (did I imagine it?). I felt their invisible presence right into my home, almost like ghosts, observing and reporting on me. It was as if I had lost the privacy of my thoughts, as if they could see through me too. It was as though my invisible self was becoming visible to outsiders. I felt transparent, naked. Not knowing for certain what they knew or did not know, was pretty unsettling. Although I did not mind deceiving them because of their impersonality and non-existence in my eyes, I soon realised that there was no point in me deceiving myself.

It was like being behind a one-way mirror: my movements were recorded by them, but I could not see what they had recorded of my life. I had to admit that they were right about my absences. I realised they threatened my own future having the power to return me to court, but because of their anonymity, I had no

hold against them. I was forced to accept that their superiority, and therefore if I liked it or not, made to comply or face the consequences of my breaches a my choice in the end. There was no one to blame, no excuse to give. My life was in my own hands. I had to be responsible for myself.

My experience of tagging was very informative. For example, stigma was not an issue: the tag was never noticed (though this might change with its increased use, but it could always be easily concealed, and tags may be smaller in size, as time passes). A possible problem is that could be exploited by young offenders by becoming a badge of honour, but again, with advances in technology, it might also become so small as to facilitate its implantation under the skin.

John Patten once said, referring to community orders, that the punishment was in 'the degree to which the order restricts the offender's liberty and his freedom of choice' (Home Office 1992:29). The tag was certainly both, it also forced me to plan ahead, at least to make sure that I was home on time for my curfew, as lateness (even minutes!) meant warnings and warnings meant a return to court and possibly prison. I appreciated being punished 'part-time', being free to work, be with my family and do what I liked the rest of the time. Afterwards, it was therefore easy to readjust to society, as I had never left it. I saw tagging as advantageous to the offender and society in both the shorter and longer terms. It seemed ideal for non-violent offenders. It is relatively low cost compared to prison, and needs no period of rehabilitation for a return to society, but it is, of course, not as secure as prison for violent and dangerous offenders.

Tagging cannot prevent offending; offences like stealing (burglary, shoplifting, or mugging) drug-taking or drug-dealing, violence (sex-offences) can be committed during the out of curfew period, and some can indeed be committed during curfew periods (drug-taking, drug-dealing, domestic violence, sex-offences, etc). Tagging punishes through restriction of freedom of movement outside a given area for a given period of time; it does not restrict freedom of action or thoughts; monitorees are free to move as they wish in their places of curfew (whether 'in' or 'out' of curfew), and do what they like (watching TV, phoning people, using computers, or nothing). They can receive visits. They are not free to leave their places of curfew during the curfew. Although tagging is not as safe for the protection of the public as prison, it cannot be called a 'school for crime', reducing the likelihood of the prison influences.

With tagging, an offender can:

- take responsibility, and contribute to lesser disruption to family life;
- be seen as a useful member of society though work and responsibility;
- keep contact with the society s/he will return to;
- be independent and not become institutionalised;

- be warned that society does not tolerate their misbehaviour;
- avoid custody and its stigmatising and traumatic effects; and,
- prevent the difficulties experienced by the family of the imprisoned offender.

Tagging is more humane than prison. Being treated with respect and dignity may encourage an offender to act in this way than being in overcrowded prison. Home, despite being controversial as a place of punishment, is a convenient, safe and cheap place of curfew. It was also be advantageous psychologically. The downside was the feeling of being observed and of transparency. There is no doubt that those living with a taggee were involved in it too: disturbances from phone-calls, pressure to comply, frustration, anger and impatience towards an irresponsible breacher. However, most important, they provided moral support.

Telephone checking had been awkward, but this could be minimised by full compliance with the curfew. I was surprised at the lack of stigma associated with tagging. I found it unobtrusive by being easily concealed by conventional clothing. My artificially induced monitoring did not allow me to experience any concurrent counselling or after-care, which could be

advantageous in many instances. I presume that this would be in the hands of the probation service. I was impressed by the efficiency of the equipment and the flexibility which a limited curfew allows; the curfew could permit the continuation of everyday life, with little impact on the family, the restriction mostly affecting social/recreational time (or offending time in the case of some offenders). This I considered a fair punishment for certain crimes, as well as an opportunity for reflection by the offender while deterring the offender from re-offending.

The equipment appeared to work well. Two errors occurred during the two weeks of monitoring. I was (wrongly) reported as absent for ten minutes when I was actually at home. Bedding, closed doors, or distance between transmitter and receiver might have interfered with the radio signal from the tag to the receiver. On that particular occasion, being also out of curfew made me resent what I saw as an interfering call, and a breach of my right to privacy. However, it also proved the usefulness of the passive system of tagging: a technical fault could be corrected through verification by allowing the contractor to update their records. Continuous radio signalling raised ethical issues if monitoring could not have a fool-proof guarantee to be restricted curfew periods.

Book Reviews

The Prisons Handbook 2002

by Mark Leech and Deborah Cheney (Eds). Waterside Press. April 2002. ISBN 1872870163. £57.50 (£44.50 to prisoners and their families)

Almost ten years to the day since the first private prison in the UK accepted its first prisoners, the 2002 edition of *The Prisons Handbook* was launched. It is appropriate, though perhaps by accident, that the cover photograph this year is of Parc, the Securicor-owned prison in south Wales.

A friend recently commented that he was bored with *The Prisons Handbook*. Each year it appears, slightly bigger than the year before, and a touch more expensive than previous editions, and yet it appears to try to appeal to too many audiences. Fair comment perhaps but *The Prisons Handbook* remains an essential and indispensable resource to those of us working in the penal sector, either from the inside or the out.

The 2002 edition is bigger than ever before, running to over seven hundred

pages. An interesting addition this year is the inclusion of 'Governor Profiles', giving background to the career of those governing governors who provided the information. The difficulty in such a publication is in keeping it up to date, and apart from a few recent changes, the editors have again managed to provide current information.

The launch of the Handbook, in the grand setting of the Chapel at Wormwood Scrubs, was attended by Martin Narey (Director General of HM Prison Service) and representatives of other prisons, reform groups, academics, and contributors — myself included. For the first time, the Handbook this year includes a chapter on gay and bisexual prisoners, and the launch of 'GALIPS' (Gays and Lesbians in the Prison Service) featured heavily in the speeches at the launch. GALIPS were provided with a free advert in the Handbook.

Perhaps the most significant addition to this edition is a new chapter by Shane Bryans and Rachel Jones on 'Prison Officers and Prison Governors'. It provides a clear explanation of the development and roles of prison officer

and governor, and includes interesting information on, for example, the breakdown of governor grades in the Service. The Editor's Award for this year was presented to Bryans and Jones.

Last year's edition was dedicated to HMP Grendon, to mark that institution's fortieth anniversary. Sir David Ramsbotham is the recipient of this year's dedication, with a touching tribute to his efforts whilst Chief Inspector provided by Mark Leech.

'For and Against' is the chapter of real debate, this year considering the issue of a prisoners' union, with the 'for' argument being presented by John Hirst of the Association of Prisoners, and the 'against' coming from Joan Aitken, the Scottish Prisons Complaints Commissioner. It is an interesting debate, but one that Hirst wins. Mark Leech offers a view on in-cell confessions, interesting in the wake of the Damilola Taylor murder trial, and that of Michael Stone. 'Something to Say' this year is provided by Sir David Ramsbotham, on 'The Conduct of Imprisonment'. Together, these three sections make an interesting read in a publication so often seen as being devoted