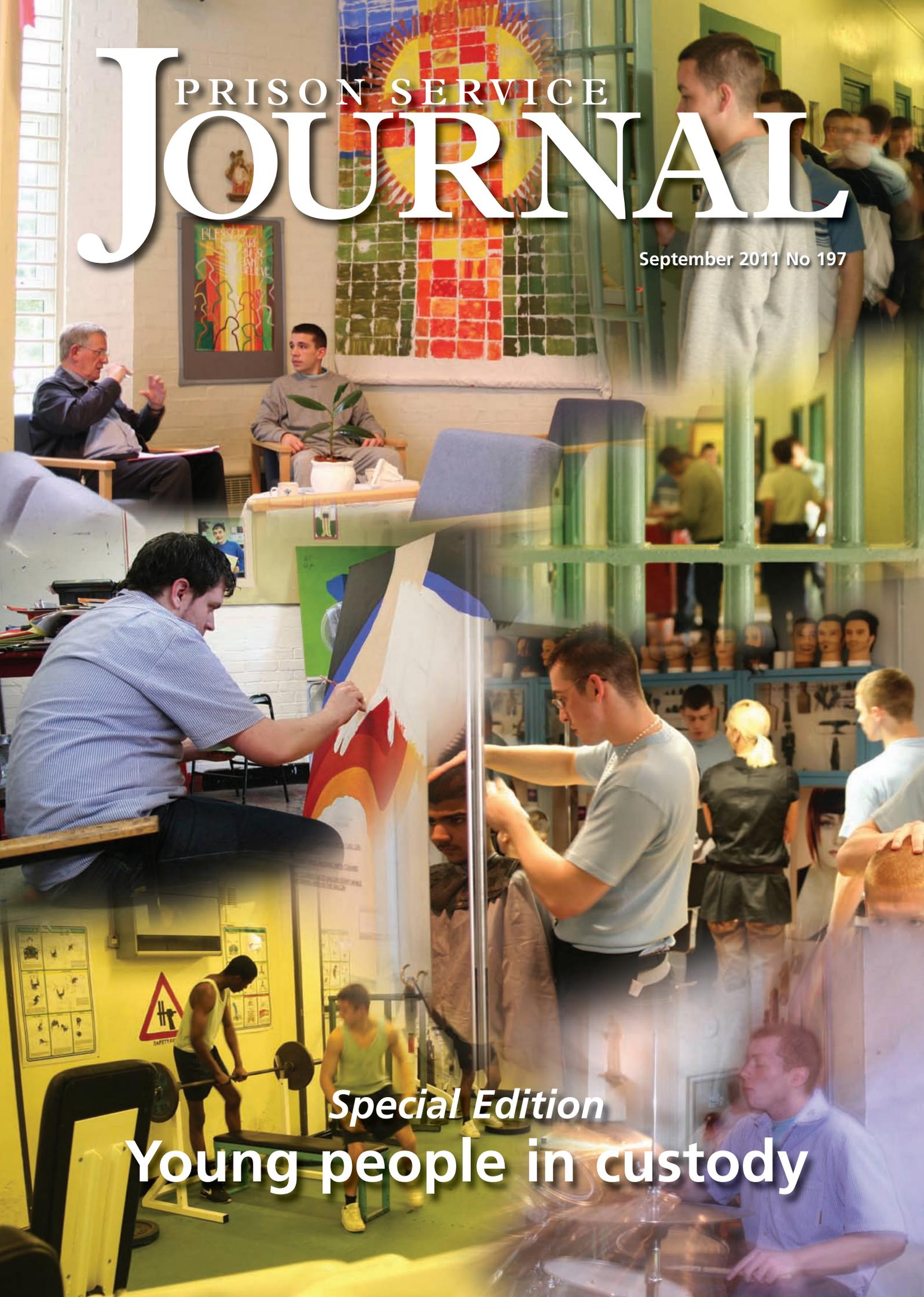


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Special Edition
Young people in custody

The Pains of Custody:

Young men's experiences of pre-prison custodial settings

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It is important to view [custody] as a process beginning with arrest, appearance at court, arrival at prison, reception, induction and progression to the ordinary regime.¹

In an attempt to prevent suicide and self-harm within prison, extensive research has explored the experiences of young male prisoners demonstrating that the psychological pains of modern imprisonment can be just as painful as the physical torture they replaced.² However, these studies have largely overlooked police cells, court cells and escort vehicles;³ little is known of the psychological impact that these pre-prison custodial settings may have on individuals. Furthermore, research suggests if young people find these locations distressing they will import their fears and anxieties into prison.⁴

This article is based on research undertaken by the author⁵ that explores young male offenders' experiences of the whole criminal justice system, focusing on a Young Offenders Institution (YOI) and four police stations and three courts that feed into it. Whilst quantitative research was undertaken at the police custody suites, qualitative research was undertaken at the court custody suites and YOI. During a three-month period 27 prisoners were interviewed and in one month 10 detainees within the court custody suites were interviewed. The research does not claim to be representative of all individuals held in the criminal justice system but aims to provide a detailed and in-depth insight into the experiences of young males in particular pre-prison custodial settings.

The research took as its focal point Sykes'⁶ study of a maximum-security prison in New Jersey (USA) in which he identifies five pains or deprivations of imprisonment including the deprivation of; liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security. The author's research interrogates these pains and makes them more relevant to the modern day custodial process,

establishing that whilst all are relevant to today's young male prisoners some also extend to the pre-prison custodial setting; thus it is more appropriate to refer to them as 'pains of custody'. Moreover it is possible to identify a further thirteen pains which enrich our understanding of how the modern day criminal justice system impacts on young men. This article provides a unique insight into the pains that are felt more acutely within police cells, court cells and escort vehicles; in doing so it enables an understanding to be gained about the complex feelings that young men bring with them into the prison environment.

Sykes' Pains of Imprisonment

The deprivation of goods and services permeates through every stage of the criminal justice system; prisoners not only want or need the 'necessities of life' but also amenities such as cigarettes, alcohol and individual clothing. However, this pain may be felt more acutely in pre-prison custodial settings where individuals are denied all personal possessions and in some cases personal clothing. Detainees repeatedly spoke of the poor quality and quantity of food provided for them. Within police stations there were a number of complaints about the quality. For example, Simon⁷ stated 'the food's disgusting... you wouldn't give your dog that... you can't eat it coz it's disgusting'.

Criticisms were also made regarding the quality of bedding and furnishings especially within police cells; 'I was sweating like anything — the mattress coz it was plastic stuck to me... I didn't have a pillow if I wanted to go to sleep' (Mark) and 'what they give you to sleep in — those quilts — are horrible — make you itch' (Danny). Similar criticisms were made of the benches in court cells, although these were not used for sleeping overnight; 'the court cells are totally shit... you ain't even got a mattress — it's just a wooden bench' (Alan).

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1. HM Prison Service (2001) *Prevention of Suicide and Self-harm in the Prison Service*, London: HM Prison Service p.20.
 2. Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
 3. HM Magistrates' Courts Service Inspectorate and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2005) *The Joint Inspection of Prisoner Escort and Court Custody in England and Wales* [Online]. Available: www.hmica.gov.uk/files/Custody_and_enforcement_draft_5.pdf [Accessed 24 June 2006].
 4. Howard League (2001) *Suicide and Self-harm Prevention: Court cells and prison vans*, London: Howard League for Penal Reform.
 5. Jones, H. (2007) *The Pains of Custody: How young men cope through the criminal justice system*, Ph.D. University of Hull.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of interviewees.

Whilst smoking is permitted in prison it has been prohibited in police stations, courts and escort vehicles. Consequently, a number of interviewees commented that they had been deprived of cigarettes; 'it's nasty, all police stations are nasty... you've not even got a fag to smoke' (Jack) and 'I got quite annoyed as you're not allowed to smoke anymore' (Alex). Adam explained in more depth about his frustrations:

If you're addicted to heroin or crack you can get medication. [At a police station] you get nothing if addicted to cigarettes... it would stop people getting angry... especially after you've been interviewed... you start to get wound up... get stressed... worse now as can't smoke at magistrates.

On entering prison some young men's negative feelings may be fuelled by their pent-up anger and frustration of having been given poor food and bedding and having been denied cigarettes. These frustrations may also result from the deprivation of autonomy which includes the lack of control a detainee has over their situation. Like prison, the regime found in police cells and court cells can remove any remaining dignity an offender has left; detainees were observed having to make requests via an intercom or buzzer for food, drinks, blankets, magazines and to use the toilet / get toilet paper. Furthermore, staff were able to exercise the utmost control by turning intercoms or buzzers off; 'they don't even come and tell you [what's happening] — they've turned the buzzers off' (Nathan), which also has the effect of exacerbating fears and anxieties.

The final pain of imprisonment that Sykes identifies and which transfers to the pre-prison custodial setting is the deprivation of security; whilst it largely relates to fears of violence and aggression from fellow prisoners, a small minority of detainees fear violence and intimidation from police officers. In particular, Mohammed had transferred his fear of Iraqi police officers to the British police, fearing they might kill him. Consequently, for the increasing number of foreign nationals that are ending up in prison, the earlier stages of the criminal justice system can be particularly distressing and worrying.

The Pains of Custody

In expanding Sykes' work, further pains of custody can now be identified; these are based on Toch's⁸ analysis of prison demands which include overload (where the prison demands more than the individual can deliver) and underload (where the prison demands insufficiently challenge the individual's interests and capacities).

Entry shock

Entry shock is the turmoil individuals face during their initial period of incarceration when they enter the criminal justice system and are cut off from the outside world. It is particularly evident within the initial stages of confinement, that is police cells, because the detainee has made a transition from liberty to incarceration, which is usually more sudden than a transition within incarceration. The following narratives provide an insight into entry shock and articulate the acute fear and worry that some detainees feel, particularly those entering for the first time.

When discussing their detention in a police cell interviewees described how they had felt distressed during their first visit; 'I shit myself the first time I was in there... thinking I wasn't going to come back out' (Alex), '[I felt] worried then — I remember thinking I don't want to go back to the cells again... I

was only young' (Kieran) and 'I remember walking in and sitting down thinking oh my god... loads of different things were going through my head really... I thought I ain't gonna get out... I was getting a bit worried, I was getting more and more upset' (Mark).

On entering the court custody suites detainees' fears and worries predominately centred on the decisions made there; 'first time I were getting sentenced, coz of the nature of the burglary, I was shitting my pants... I get times when I sit in court cells I think you stupid dick... I put myself in this situation again, I'll miss my family, they're gonna miss me' (Shaun) and 'I was shaking like a leaf — the thought of getting sent down' (Gary). Other detainees commented on the shame they felt appearing in court; 'I [felt] ashamed when I went in court... being charged for murder... It's not easy for me... I'm not from this country, I don't have family' (Mohammed). This

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8. Toch, H. (1982) 'Studying and reducing stress' in R. Johnson and H. Toch (eds.) *The Pains of Imprisonment*, California: SAGE, pp. 25-44.

shame was felt by Danny when being transported in an escort vehicle:

Because when you're driving past you can see out... people can see in... people looking up from their cars... I just feel embarrassed being in a Group 4... embarrassed... I was ashamed really that I'd got myself in this situation and in one of them.

For those entering the criminal justice system for the first time these fears and anxieties are repetitive in nature and arise again within the prison reception; Danny explained how he feared 'if police cells are like this, are the prison cells going to be the same'. However, entry shock is largely associated with a 'fear of the unknown' and therefore with the appropriate support and information it could be allayed.

Fear of the unknown

A fear of the unknown stems from the lack of information that individuals are given and is particularly evident during the initial stages of the criminal justice system. For example, within police cells interviewees commented; 'I didn't know what was going to happen — where they were going to take me' (Gareth) and 'I was crying for my first time — most people do for their first time... coz I never knew what [the police station] was like' (Sam). Part of this fear arises from the fact detainees are often 'kept in the dark':

When your solicitor comes you find out what's happening... police don't tell you nothing... it does your head in... you sit there thinking about it and when you're thinking about it time drags — if they told you, you could just go sleep (Gareth).

Accounts from other interviewees included; 'it's not knowing what's going to happen to you... they don't tell you, you just wait' (Tom) and 'I was always on my bell asking what was going on — they didn't know' (Danny). Similarly, whilst being held in a court cell Craig stated 'I kept ringing on my bell 'when will it be?'... I didn't know what to expect'. On entering prison some

of these uncertainties are overcome through information imparted on the induction unit however for some prisoners these fears are exacerbated by weeks or months spent on remand or as convicted unsentenced, not knowing how long they have to serve.

Withdrawing from drugs and alcohol

Also related to entry shock are the physical and psychological effects of withdrawing from certain drugs or alcohol. This pain has been relatively overlooked as research has focused on the availability and use of drugs within prison, even though the psychological effects of withdrawing from drugs can lead to a heightened risk of suicide and self-harm.⁹

A number of interviewees referred to the acute physical effects of withdrawing from drugs in police cells:

[You feel] down, you can't sleep, your belly aches, you just want to go home... you want to take some drugs to make you feel better... heroin, it's a bad drug... it's a nice drug, but once you start taking it, after a couple of weeks you have to take it... it just takes over your body (Simon).

You just feel ill... you ache like fuck... it's just the no sleep — worst thing about it... you start hallucinating... you're anxious more than anything... I just sit there and keep moving — I just can't stop doing it... I jam my legs under the table to stop them moving (Robert).

I was feeling ill all the time... feeling sick and dizzy, I kept falling asleep coz I hadn't been to sleep for ages... you ain't got a window you can open... when I was on my come down it was horrible — just sweating... it makes you feel horrible (Alex).

Detainees also spoke of the psychological effects; whilst in police custody, Robert stated 'you get angry... that's like more frustration than anything else... frustration coz you want it but you can't get it' and James described how he 'went mad... I beat the crap out of the police cell'. Jonathan spoke about withdrawing from alcohol; 'it don't really bother me

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9. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2000) *Unjust Deserts: A Thematic Review by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons of the treatment and conditions for Unsentenced Prisoners in England and Wales* [Online]. Available: <http://inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprisons/thematic-reports1/unjust.pdf?view=Binary> [Accessed 29 October 2006].

now but the first couple of weeks it bothered me'. These narratives illustrate how on arrival in prison some individuals have spent a number of hours suffering from the physical and psychological pains of drug / alcohol withdrawal; their need for both medical attention and support is acute. Furthermore, these young men have lost a coping strategy that is frequently employed on the outside to forget about problems, help them calm down, allow them to block everything out and reduce stress.

Loss of stimulation

Whilst previous research¹⁰ acknowledges that prisoners need constructive activity the loss of stimulation found in the earlier stages of the criminal justice system has not been recognised, despite it being one of the most pervasive pains. Jack explained how he found the loss of stimulation difficult to contend with:

Sitting in a police cell is harder than being in a prison cell... everything goes through your head — it's hard to keep calm... when you've got nothing to do in your cell... it's hard, police stations are hard... I'd rather do 1 week in a prison cell than 3 days in a police cell.

In a society where young people are almost constantly stimulated by mobile phones, mp3 players and computer games, this loss of stimulation leads many to boredom. Within the police cell detainees commented; 'I was very bored... I didn't have anything to do' (Mark), '[I felt] proper [bored]... it's a killer in there... it's shit' (Tom) and 'it's alright but it's not alright — it's a bit boring you know' (Sam). These same sentiments were found in court cells; 'it don't bother me what [the Judge is] going to say... I just want to get out of there... it's real boring' (Luke) and '[court's] just really boring' (Peter).

Waiting game

Throughout the criminal justice system individuals are forced to play the 'waiting game', largely because they have lost autonomy and control. When in the police cell and court cell, this waiting game can be

intensified by boredom, a fear of the unknown and because individuals are awaiting a decision or result. The wait within a police cell can be an anxious and worrying period that is exacerbated by detainees only being able to communicate by means of the cell buzzer or the intercom; 'last night I was ringing the buzzer and I waited 10 — 15 minutes to come to the door, I was sick and everything' (Sam) and 'in [X police station] you press it and it takes 20 minutes, even ½ hour for them to answer' (Kieran).

Even when cell buzzers or intercoms are answered interviewees feel staff within police cells and court cells make them wait; 'they don't do what you ask them to do... you ask for a coffee and they say fuck off and wait 2 hours... you ask for a light and they say fuck off' (Andrew), 'they say they're gonna do something and they don't... you ask them if I can have a phone call and they say ½ hour and you lie there waiting for a couple of hours' (Richard), 'it was a bit hard to wait... I didn't know what was going to happen' (Joe) and 'it does take too long to get to court — just waiting to get in there... wasting your day' (Peter). By acknowledging how frustrated young men can feel after being forced to wait within police cells and court cells it is perhaps easier to understand why these frustrations can sometimes be transferred into the prison reception where prisoners again wait to be processed.

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Physical environment

The final pain of custody to be discussed is the negative physical environment that many young detainees find. When interviewees were asked about their experiences of police cells, a number mentioned how dirty they were; 'dirty... just everything — the walls and everything — there's all spit everywhere... peoples' dinner down the walls and door' (Robert), 'trampy... not clean, muck up the wall, stains on them' (Nathan) and 'it's a shit hole... sometimes it's dirty' (Richard). Interviewees commented on the poor ventilation of police cells and how cramped they found them, which had a negative impact on their psychological well-being; 'it made me angry though being in that cell — it was dead claustrophobic' (Danny)

10. Howard League (1999) *Desperate Measures: Prison suicides and their prevention*, London: Howard League for Penal Reform.

and 'it's fucking horrible... just the cells themselves... I can't stand them... they're claustrophobic... it's just too claustrophobic... thick windows and you can't even open them' (Gary). Similarly, Tom stated:

[I felt] pissed off... coz I'm mad at myself for letting myself get caught... when you get locked behind that door it pisses you off... I'm not an animal — no one wants to be caged... but it's my fault I'm here.

While only a minority of interviewees cited negative conditions in police cells, the majority of interviewees spoke about negative conditions in escort vehicles. The familiar nickname for escort vehicles is 'sweat box' and a number of interviewees referred to this; '[it was] really hot in there' (Mark) and '[it was] too hot and sweaty... it's horrible' (Sam). A number of criticisms were made about the dirt and damage; 'they're horrible, dirty, people spit on the floor, graffiti everywhere, fag burns everywhere' (Paul), 'the windows were scratched... it smells of piss... dirty' (Dean), 'it was a right mess... [I could] barely see out the window, people had been scratching, the floor was all sticky — you could see where people had been spitting' (Luke), 'it had all on the sides peoples' names scratched in' (Danny) and 'you couldn't really see out the window — it was all scratched' (Mark).

In addition to the poor conditions, a large number of criticisms centred on the cramped and uncomfortable conditions of escort vehicles. In particular, 'the seats [are] plastic and hard... it's like a box' (Paul), '[the seats are] hard... you can't really get comfortable... it's cramped' (Dean), and 'it's like you're sitting on a toilet seat all the way here' (Richard). A couple of interviewees also commented on safety aspects:

There's hardly any space at all — you've got no space to stretch at all... the only thing that scares me is when you're going down motorways it wobbles from side to side... it gets uncomfortable after a while (Gareth).

They could change the seats — make it a bit safer — put a seat belt in them... they could have buggy seats (Danny).

Poor conditions were found in court cells, albeit to a lesser degree; 'it was grimy, graffitied all over' (John), 'it had all spit and food all on the floor' (Adrian), 'disgusting... the walls are all tatty, graffiti everywhere — no fresh air coming in' (Peter) and 'they're dirty — spit all up the walls, toilet rolls stuck to the ceiling — they're disgusting... police ones are better' (Andrew).

The above narratives illustrate how angered some young men feel by the poor conditions in which they have been held; again, this aids our appreciation of their state of mind on entering prison.

Coping with the Pains of Custody

Whilst the research identified that the pains of custody press more heavily on some individuals than others, many do cope with these pains. Within the pre-prison custodial setting detainees are severely limited in using coping strategies that require external stimuli therefore sleep becomes central; this helps detainees cope with a loss of stimulation, boredom and the passing of time. Others focus on memories or fantasies to avoid thinking of the stressful situation whilst some are able to seek alternative means of stimulation by reading or listening to a radio. Consequently, the mundane minutiae of everyday activities or behaviour are employed to help individuals cope with their negative environment or situation.

Individuals may also seek support from fellow detainees and staff. Within court cells and escort vehicles fellow detainees can help to alleviate boredom, provide companionship and a source of information, helping to overcome a fear of the unknown. Furthermore, informational and practical support is gained from staff working within the police cells, court cells and escort vehicles. This is particularly crucial where individuals are entering court for the first time or have problems understanding the technical terminology used there.

However, for a few young men self-harm is, somewhat paradoxically, used as a way of coping, allowing them to deal with difficult feelings and problems. Due in part to the relatively short periods of time that detainees are held within police cells, court cells and escort vehicles and also due to the lack of opportunity and resources, rates of self-harm are lower here than within prison. Nevertheless, self-harm serves

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a similar purpose; to calm individuals down, allow them to release a build-up of frustration and anger, prevent them from thinking about their problems and help them cope with boredom.

Although some of the above coping strategies transfer into prison (including sleep, reading, listening to music and the use of social support), prisoners have access to more external stimuli, hence one of the most widely used coping strategies is watching television. Other coping strategies include employment, education / courses and participating in sport.

In terms of the support needs of young male detainees and prisoners it was evident that whilst a great deal of support is offered to prisoners, relatively little is provided to those in police cells or court cells, partly because individuals are detained here for short periods. Consequently, individuals had a need for more informational support, particularly those individuals who had not been through the criminal justice system before and those at-risk of suicide or self-harm. It is envisaged that if these support needs within the earlier stages can be met then the pains of custody can be lessened; not only might this reduce self-harm within the pre-prison custodial settings but those entering prison would hopefully be less fearful, anxious and distressed. In turn this could improve the number of incidents of suicide and self-harm amongst remand and newly-sentenced prisoners (see also the Howard League¹¹).

Conclusion

The study on which this article is based is one of the first to explore the experiences of young men across the criminal justice system and to challenge Sykes' pains of imprisonment. By adopting a holistic approach it has furthered our knowledge of the pains facing young men in the pre-prison custodial setting; the first-hand accounts aid our understanding of how young men feel on entering prison and how these feelings may be a reflection of the experiences individuals have encountered within police cells, court cells or escort vehicles. The research highlights how it is now more appropriate to refer to 'pains of custody' and how these leave many young men feeling angry, frustrated, anxious, helpless and embarrassed. The despair and desperation that some young men feel when confronted by these pains are evident in interviewee's accounts of self-harm. However, many young men do survive these pains, employing a variety of coping strategies including, somewhat paradoxically, self-harm. Staff working within the criminal justice system face unique problems when addressing suicidal and self-harm behaviour but without policy and practice that encompass all stages only limited improvements can be made in preventing suicide and self-harm.



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11. Ibid.