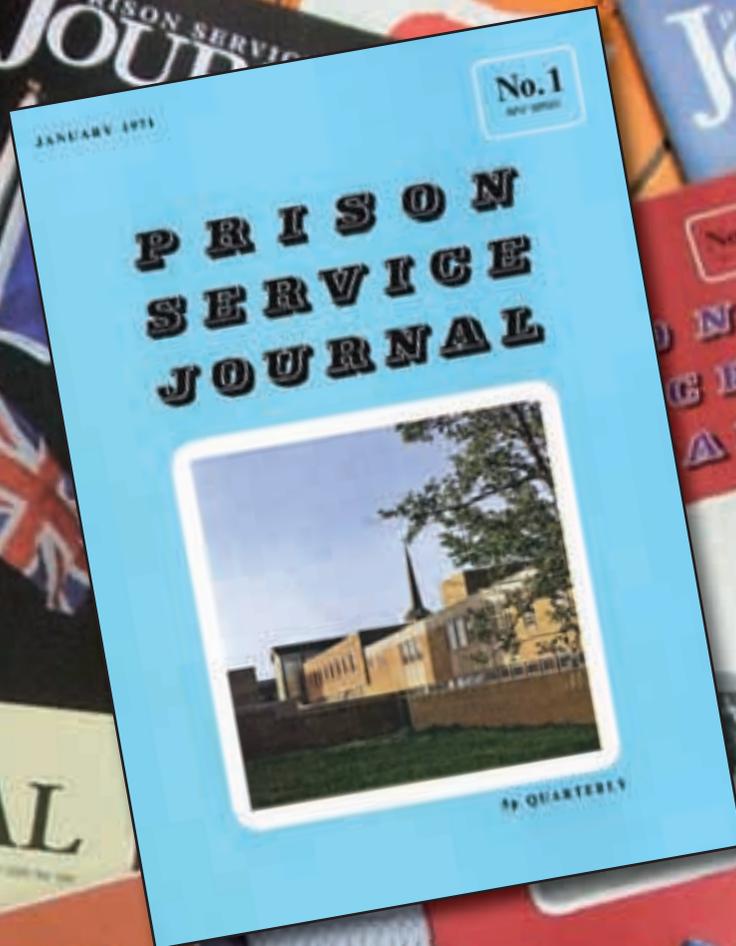


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# Reviews

## Book Review

### ***The Prison Officer*** (Second Edition)

By Alison Liebling, David Price and Guy Shefer

Publisher: Willan Publishing in association with *Prison Service Journal* (2011)

ISBN: 978 1 84392 269 8 (paperback) 978 1 84392 270 4 (hardback)

Price: £18.99 (paperback) £50.00 (hardback)

The original publication of *The Prison Officer* in 2000 was greeted with wide acclaim throughout the Prison Service. Its 'appreciative inquiry' approach, focussing on the best examples of prison officer work revealed a sophistication and skill that had largely been overlooked in previous research and the sympathetic and detailed description of prison work presented was also welcomed as being in contrast to glib media stereotypes. In the wake of this publication, Liebling has carved a creative working partnership with the Prison Service, yielding most importantly, the Measuring the Quality of Life (MQPL) survey<sup>1</sup>.

The second edition comes over a decade later, a period in which a range of issues have come to have an altered, intensified or different significance in prison work, including; the prison population, decency, reducing reoffending, diversity, competition, and efficiency. In the introduction and conclusion, the authors acknowledge that changing times and context have raised a new series of questions and have highlighted different pressures on the working lives of prison officers, which would justify an entirely new study.

However, time has also allowed the fundamental nature of important parts of the original study to become more apparent, including the role model characteristics of prison

officers, their use of power, and the importance of relationships. The original research powerfully explored the nature of prison officer work, revealing it with all of its diversity and complexity. For example, the authors excavated role model characteristics including: having known and consistent boundaries; 'moral fibre'; awareness of the effects of their own power, understanding of the painfulness of prison; 'professional orientation'; and optimistic but realistic outlook. Those characteristics have a timeless and essential quality to them. There are other aspects of prison work that are revealed in this work, including how prison officers use their power. Although often depicted in the media as brutal and over zealous, here the authors reveal the craft-like way in which prison staff use and under-use their power so as to create a sense of legitimacy and secure compliance from those in their charge. This skilful use of professional discretion is central to understanding prison work. The role of staff-prisoner relationships are also explored, illustrating how they are the 'oil' that helps make the day run smoothly. They are a means through which the prison is made to work as a logistical and bureaucratic operation, but also a means through which the prison is humanised and is sensitive to the experience of those in custody. Together, the use of power and the nature of relationships are the processes through which prison officers realise their 'peacekeeping' function of maintaining safety and order.

The work is particularly distinguished by its ability to bring the emotional texture of prison work into the light. Prison officers are shown to be thinking feeling agents, who experience joy, sadness, dejection, satisfaction, fear and excitement. This rounded and humane portrait has

been too rarely part of academic or popular representations. The affective nature of the work is also illuminated, showing how relationships, sensitivity and human interaction are all central. It is this connection with people and the intimacy of their lived experience where this book comes most vibrantly to life.

The decade between the first and second edition of this book has helped to place this work into context. Inevitably, some aspects feel to be of their time and new questions have emerged that were not originally addressed. However, that time has also placed into clear relief those fundamental aspects of prison work that the original work revealed. It is on the basis of these insights that this book deserves to be considered a timeless classic.

**Jamie Bennett** is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

## Book Review

### ***A Community-Based Approach to the Reduction of Sexual Offending. Circles of Support and Accountability***

By Stephen Hanvey, Terry Philpot and Chris Wilson

Publisher: Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2011)

ISBN: 978 1 84905 198 9 (paperback)

Price: £19.99 (paperback)

Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA), while originating in Canada in 1994, have existed in England since 2001. As stated in the Introduction to this book, there were 32 Circles running in 2007, 48 in 2008, 60 in 2009 and by the end of January 2011, 64. Bearing in mind that Circles end, it is

1. Liebling, A. assisted by Arnold, H. (2004) *Prisons & Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

thought that since the first Circle in Guildford in 2001 there have been over 160 Circles in existence (p. 13). For the uninitiated a Circle is a community-based approach to working with sex offenders, often those who have recently been released from prison and who are finding the isolation of community living especially hard to deal with. This (ex)offender is known as the 'Core Member' and as the name suggests he/she is encircled by support and importantly accountability from both an inner circle of 4-6 volunteers and an outer circle of professionals such as probation staff, the police and Circle co-ordinators. Volunteers come from all walks of life including students and new graduates, retired people and everyone else in between, including myself. The main aim of the initiative is to reduce reoffending and as the strap-line of Circles UK states ensure that there are 'no more victims'.

This book is written by three authors perfectly placed to comment on this important contribution to the risk management of sex offenders: Stephen Harvey (Chief Executive of Circles UK), Terry Philpot (a journalist and writer) and Chris Wilson (the National Development Manager of Circles UK). It is based on interviews with both volunteers and core members and is written not as an academic piece but as a resource for criminal justice professionals, other professionals whose work may bring them into contact with sex offenders and all other lay people who have an interest in this area. The book is divided into seven chapters with the first concentrating on the history and development of COSA in England. This is then followed by an interesting chapter by Philpot which describes the heterogeneous nature of sex offenders; the fact that they are all ages, come from a variety of backgrounds, work in a number of different jobs and professions and may be gay or straight, married or single. The chapter attempts to

explain why men (and the book only deals with men) offend in this way and looks at the effectiveness of some of the treatment options currently available in England and Wales. Whilst the seasoned academic or practitioner may not learn very much from this chapter, it is written in a readable way and would be of interest to those who may not know that much about sex offenders or who are considering becoming involved either with Circles or with some other interaction with this group of offenders.

Wilson, in chapter 3, then looks at working with those people who have been convicted of sexual offences. This, like chapter 1, is quite historical and developmental in that it traces a number of legislative changes and strategies which have been put in place over the last two decades to deal with those who sexually offend. This includes the use of multi-agency working and community based sex offender treatment programmes. This is then followed by more in depth information about Circles, including the theory behind the model, how volunteers are recruited and trained and how Circles work in practice.

For me, the most interesting part of the book starts with chapter 5 which details the results of the interviews conducted with both core members and volunteers. Whilst the preceding chapters provide context and information for those who have little knowledge about the management of sex offenders, it is this chapter which truly sets this book apart. Chapter 5 is also by far the largest, being 69 pages, whilst the other chapters in the book range from 13-16 pages. The chapter is divided into two sections: The Men's Stories and The Volunteers Stories, with each consisting of data from four interviews. Whilst it is impossible to summarise this chapter, suffice to say it is extremely interesting and offers great insight into the core member's life stories, why they offended and how Circles have

helped them. The only criticism I have of this section of the book is that three out of the four core members present themselves as having been sexually abused as children. This is disappointing in the sense that it perhaps leads to the assumption that the vast majority of offenders were abused themselves, that is that the cycle of abuse argument is valid. When we know that the vast majority of abusers are men and the vast majority of victims are female, this cycle cannot therefore be true. When the book is aimed at those who may not have a great knowledge of sex offenders, it is a shame that these interviews have the potential to substantiate this myth. The interviews with the volunteers however are very interesting. Not only do they give an insight into what Circles are and how they work on a practical basis, some of the interviews also cover how the volunteers deal with working with sex offenders and also their personal motivations for doing so.

The final two chapters of the book deal with the question of whether Circles work and the affect of the media on sex offenders living within communities. As with the earlier chapters both offer the layman interesting information on effectiveness studies, internal evaluation, naming and shaming and the affect the media have had on public attitudes towards sexual abusers. Both are written in a readable style and offer a good summary of these issues.

Overall I think this is a good book, although as stated by the authors it is not an academic book and probably better served as a resource for those who either know very little about sex offenders or who particularly want to know more about Circles. Certainly, if you are pondering whether or not to become a Circles volunteer then this should be core reading.

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