

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2015 No 221



*Special Edition*  
**Reducing Prison Violence**

# Editorial Comment

*Dr Ruth Mann is Head of Evidence and Jeannine Hendrick is Head of Violence Reduction, National Offender Management Service.*

**Reducing prison violence is a priority issue for the National Offender Management Service. Although violence in prisons has increased recently, we are determined that violence is not going to be the new norm. This Special Issue of the Prison Service Journal represents our commitment to using evaluation and research in order to understand what causes prison violence, what works in reducing prison violence, and equally importantly, what doesn't work. It also represents our commitment to sharing and spreading best practice, working collaboratively, and talking openly about the challenges we face.**

It is clear from the contributions to this Special Issue that there is no single cause of prison violence. It is too simplistic to say that prison violence is 'caused by' drugs or bullying or debt or imported vulnerabilities or poor relationships with staff. As the articles in this Special Issue show, all of these things are part of the complex interplay of people, places, cultural norms and relationships that can result in prison violence.

When there are multiple causes to a problem, it is unlikely that a single solution will solve the problem, and we believe this is true of prison violence. However, running through many of the articles is a strong theme of staff prisoner relationships and prison culture. As Ben Crewe and Alison Liebling explain, safe and decent prisons are characterised by staff who blend two important qualities: they treat others with respect and they have legitimate authority. Respect without authority leaves prisoners feeling unsafe; authority without respect leaves prisoners feeling aggrieved. The recent escalation in prison violence that Philip Dent and colleagues describe has accelerated existing plans to develop more rehabilitative cultures in prison; the article by Jenny Tew and colleagues explains what this term means, and how culture change is being implemented within the High Security Estate in England and Wales. Making our prisons more rehabilitative involves recognising the positive power potential of all those working in prisons, especially in terms of modelling appropriate behaviour, such as encouragement, understanding, empathy, honesty, and integrity. Through these behaviours, and by making every contact matter, staff can create transformational relationships. To quote from the article by Gooch, Trent and Treadwell, while it is necessary to have the right

quantity of staff for a prison to be safe, 'it is the quality of the relationships and the willingness of staff to be active, present, caring and engaged that makes the difference'.

Staff can also play a transformative role by helping prisoners better manage the inevitable volatility that arises when large numbers of people live together in enforced proximity. As Kimmett Edgar explains, based on a large-scale study of prisoner conflict and violence, respect is a precious commodity in prison. When respect is felt to be missing, the escalation of conflict follows a fairly predictable script, which tends to end in violence. The number of violent incidents linked to 'recreation' in Philip Dent's article is testament to this pattern of poor conflict management between peers in prison. However, this kind of violence is not usually instant, and so there are opportunities to change the script and find a different method for settling the conflict and restoring mutual respect. This has led us to decide, within the violence reduction project, to pilot and evaluate some approaches to training prisoners and staff in conflict resolution skills.

Some of the apparent causes of violence that most tax prison staff and managers are drugs (especially the new synthetic drugs), gangs, debt and bullying. While these issues are closely linked, we wanted to address them in different articles in order to bring out some important points. For instance, Michael Wheatley explains the psychopharmacology of New Psychoactive Substances and how, for some people who take NPS, agitation can easily escalate into aggression, making it vital that we respond quickly and calmly to those in need of urgent medical help. Alan Hammill and Rebecca Newby point out the relevance of research into debt in society more generally. People who get into debt share certain psychological characteristics and helping them overcome these tendencies is as important in targeting prison debt as closing down on the lenders. Similarly, Kate Gooch and colleagues suggest that we can reduce bullying not just by targeting the bullies (although this is unarguably important) but also by enabling those who are victimised by others to discover confidence and resilience. For gang members too, gaining confidence and pleasure in a new pro-social identity, such as the identity of a husband, father or successful employee, is a prerequisite to being able to separate oneself from

the protection of a gang, as explained by Chris Dean and colleagues in their article on gang membership and violence in prisons. High levels of drug use, bullying, extortion and gang membership are as much symptoms as causes of an unsafe prison. It seems that the solutions to all of these problems may lie in providing opportunities for prisoners to try out new identities, have a voice, help others, work collaboratively with the staff, and develop self-respect and hope based on achievements other than the physical domination of others.

This *PSJ* Issue also contains a group of articles describing individual tools that can be part of a holistic violence reduction strategy. A healthy self-assessment of each prison's patterns of violence, and its strategies for violence management, should be the starting point for a systematic approach to tackling violence. We have a long tradition of providing high-quality cognitive skills programmes in England and Wales, and Fiona Williams' article reports the good news that these programmes should impact on prison violence as much as they do on reoffending. Mindfulness is another component in the suite of psychological interventions to improve emotional regulation, and Steven Gillespie's interesting article explains the neuropsychological benefits of mindfulness training for people with a propensity to violence.

In the last article, David Scott, a criminologist and prison abolitionist, sets out the abolitionist view that imprisonment is inherently dehumanising and damaging. We included this article, even though it does not present solutions to prison violence in the same way that the other articles do, because we found it a thought-provoking read that led to valuable discussion between the two of us. We believe it is important not to shy away from the inherent problems of imprisonment but to understand them and work to

mitigate their effects as much as we possibly can. David's graphic descriptions of the indignities that can occur during imprisonment are an important reminder that prisons are places of pain.

Prisons are places of pain. They contain large numbers of troubled individuals, living together in close proximity, who lack autonomy over the smallest things in their lives, like replacing a toilet roll. All the people who live and work in prisons are concerned about violence. Indeed, this fact is one of our greatest opportunities: everyone who has a stake in prisons wants them to be places that are calm and safe. Not places of luxury but places of decency, where prisoners have the opportunity and the headspace to learn new skills, reflect on their futures, and develop new identities, without having to live in fear or feeling they have to resort to physical attack to gain respect or get themselves heard. So we don't believe that prisons must always and only be places of pain. We believe that prisons can also be places of reflection, hope and opportunity, even transformation.

We are extremely grateful to all the contributors to this special issue for their willingness to share their knowledge, reflect on the evidence, and suggest actions that should reduce prison violence. If there is one over-arching message, it is how essential it is to treat everyone who lives and works in prisons as individuals, in the whole, always believing in their potential to change, not writing people off, even if they are prolific offenders continually circling in and out through the revolving door. And we must finish by emphasising that prison violence is not a prison-centric issue. What happens in prison doesn't stay in prison, but is an issue for society.

We hope you find this Special Issue useful and thought-provoking.