

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2015 No 221



Special Edition
Reducing Prison Violence

Preventing and Reducing Prison Bullying

Dr Kate Gooch and Dr James Treadwell University of Birmingham, and Russ Trent Governor, HMP Brinsford.

'[Bullying] happens in every jail. You are never going to be able to cut it out completely but you can try and make it as little as possible, minimum amount.'

(Peter, prisoner)

Bullying is often said to be endemic in young offender institutions. Indeed, a series of recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons reports note high levels of violence and bullying across the YOI estate.¹ The true scale of prison bullying is, however, difficult to accurately assess, partly because of its subtlety and complexity, but also because prisoners may not recognise certain behaviour as 'bullying' or, if they do, may be unwilling to disclose concerns to staff. This, coupled with the young age of prisoners, their physical and emotional immaturity, and the use of new psychoactive substances, can render the task of reducing prison bullying particularly challenging. However, as the quote above suggests, both the prevalence and severity of prison bullying can be reduced, even in establishments holding high numbers of young prisoners. Drawing on our shared knowledge of prison bullying amongst young men – as a Governing Governor (Russ Trent) and as academic researchers (Kate Gooch and James Treadwell) – this article discusses the dynamics of prison bullying and explores the ways in which both the prevalence and severity of bullying can be prevented and reduced. We argue that strong staff-prisoner relationships are central to, and ultimately underpin, a whole prison approach to prison bullying. In establishing these relationships, it is the small details that make a big difference.

The Dynamics of Prison Bullying

Whilst it is largely assumed that bullying is common in YOIs, teasing out specific incidents of 'bullying' is fraught with difficulty. First, incidents of 'bullying' bleed into a wider range of inter-connected incidents that include verbal abuse, threats, cell theft, robbery, extortion, physical assault and sexual assault. Second, prisoners and staff do not always have a shared

understanding of what 'bullying' is. Third, and linked to both points, 'bullying' is a conceptually ambiguous and subjective term, far harder to record, evidence and define than 'violent' incidents. Physical violence represents only one facet of prison bullying and can (and more often does) occur independently of a bullying relationship and for reasons such as grudges, personal vendettas, family feuds and 'beef' from 'on road.'² Against this backdrop, we found that prison bullying typically took one of several forms, to include: exploitation and extortion; theft and robbery; verbal abuse; threats and intimidation; physical assault; and, coercion to assault others.

Bullying is often inextricably linked to the possession, supply and exchange of permitted and contraband items. Almost everything in prison has currency – paper, clothes, toiletries, mobile telephones, drugs, tobacco, and, as we discovered, even religious texts such as bibles. Prisoners particularly prize property such as tobacco ('burn'), 'exclusive shower gels', clothes, chains and trainers, and are keen to line their cells with a plentiful supply of material possessions in a manner that mimics the flashy, visually garish displays of consumer success that young criminals are known for.² The desire to visibly accrue large amounts of material goods is such that some prisoners find themselves being threatened to hand over property to another prisoner or order 'canteen'³ for them. Charging 'double bubble' when lending canteen or tobacco to other prisoners is also common practice amongst young prisoners. The phrase 'double bubble' is used to describe the practice of lending items, such as tobacco, but requiring twice as much in return. When debts are not repaid by the due date, the debt is doubled again. Not only can prisoners incur debts that quickly became impossible to repay, but the failure to pay often leads to physical violence, intimidation and threats.

The link between prison bullying and the *sub rosa* economy is such that the typical ways of categorising prisoners' involvement in bullying have proved insufficient. Ireland, for example, suggests that there

1. See, for example, the most recent HM Inspectorate reports for Feltham, Brinsford, Glen Parva, Hindley, Werrington and Wetherby.
2. S Hall, S Winlow and C Ancrum, *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture: Crime Exclusion and the Culture of Narcissism* (Willan, 2008).
3. Canteen refers to the range of goods that can be ordered by prisoners from a selected list and using money either earned in prison or given by family members and friends. A range of items can be ordered, including food, soft drinks, tobacco and writing equipment.

are four types of prisoner: 'bully'; 'bully-victim'; 'victim'; 'not involved'.⁴ These terms did not adequately capture the range of behaviour demonstrated in our research, even within specific categories, which was often far more nuanced than this typology would suggest. Furthermore, the typology fails to adequately grapple with the challenges and difficulties that arise when seeking to care for young prisoners and maintain safety, security and decency. There is also a degree of fluidity between the various groups depending on the dynamics of prison life. Those prisoners who were 'not involved' and appeared to be 'doing their time' could, just as easily, be assaulted, assault, exploit or fight with others. We, therefore, propose a new way of thinking about prisoner roles and involvement in bullying but also victimisation more generally.⁵

Since bullying represented only one form of victimisation, we prefer the term 'perpetrator' as an overarching term to describe those who initiated violence, bullying and victimisation. Within this group, prisoners may perform the role of a 'Basic Bully,' the 'King of the Wing,' the 'Wheeler Dealer,' 'Debt Collectors and Enforcers' and 'Individual players.'

Whilst the 'Basic Bully' is a predatory individual who exploits and bullies vulnerable prisoners, the 'King of the Wing' (a term used by prisoners themselves) acts from a position of power and control, running and co-ordinating nefarious trade activities, controlling certain activities on the wing and, in some cases, orchestrating assaults on other prisoners. Conversely, the 'Wheeler Dealer' had far less status but was active in the sub rosa economy, trading and exchanging desired items across landings, wings and residential units. These individuals were not always overtly bullying or victimising others, but often carefully and deviously 'playing the game.' The 'Debt Collectors and Enforcers' often acted at the behest of the 'Basic Bullies' and 'King of the Wing,' threatening, assaulting and intimidating others to repay debts, assault others or hand over desired items. They tended to be co-conspirators in violent incidents but did not have the power or status to orchestrate prohibited activities, whether that be the supply of contraband or a planned assault on another prisoner. 'Individual players' were those involved individuals who do not necessarily neatly fit into the categories above. Their latent violent

potential and reputation meant that they would not necessarily permanently occupy a core perpetrator role or status, but were primarily self-interested as they navigated the sometimes turbulent waters of the wing. They were just as likely to assault others and extort others but also have the social dexterity to maintain convivial relationships with other known perpetrators and could form convenient alliances and act in cahoots with others when necessary.

The role of 'perpetrator-victim' could be subdivided further still, to include those who assault others but are equally vulnerable to retaliation, those victims who became a perpetrator, and those who assault others under duress. Whilst in the first two cases, the changing roles reflected something of the unpredictable, risk-laden and fluid dynamics of prison life, in the latter, the very act of coercion was in and of itself a form of

victimisation and firmly entrenched a social hierarchy based on power and control. By compelling others to do their 'dirty work,' more powerful and controlling prisoners could achieve certain goals — such as sending a signal to disliked prisoners, punishing non-payment of debt or 'putting someone back in line' — without the risk of detection and the sanctions that this might invite.

Those who might be characterised as 'not involved' in victimisation may not always present as compliant in other ways. It was certainly true that there were a core group of prisoners who were simply 'doing their time' and a further group of prisoners who were making the most of the available privileges and opportunities to progress, earned Enhanced status and occupying positions of trust and responsibility within the prison. However, other prisoners who were not necessarily involved in directly victimising others, could be highly disruptive in other ways or perform the role of the 'bandit,' holding contraband items (and also bearing the risk of seizure and discipline charges) either for themselves, or more likely, the key players and perpetrators on the wing.

Whilst Ireland identified only one group of 'victims,' we found that the experiences and behaviours of victims varied significantly, ranging from those who were victimised but highly disruptive, those who were victimised but violated prison rules, those who were assaulted but could navigate the prisoner society with

We, therefore,
propose a new way
of thinking about
prisoner roles and
involvement in
bullying but also
victimisation more
generally.

4. Ireland, J. (2001) 'Distinguishing the perpetrators and victims of bullying behaviour in a prison environment: a study of male and female adult prisoners,' *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 6(2): 229-246; Ireland, J. (2002) *Bullying among Prisoners: Evidence, Research and Intervention Strategies*. Hove: Brunner – Routledge.
5. For further detail, see Gooch, K. and Treadwell, J. (2015) *Prison Bullying*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

ease, and those who could be described as 'pure victims.' Whilst it was the vulnerability and poor adaptation of the 'pure victim' that generated concerns regarding the possibility of significant emotional distress, anxiety and self-harm, those victims who were both highly disruptive or posed disciplinary problems could prove very difficult to manage. 'Pure victims' were more likely to withdraw from social interaction and disengage from the prison regime. Such prisoners often needed considerable care and support to help them develop the kind of resilience and social skills that would enable them to adjust more effectively to prison life as well as address underlying vulnerabilities and needs. Victims who were highly disruptive could prove challenging for staff and required or demanded large amounts of staff time and attention. In such cases, it was important to discern why such prisoners were being disruptive since such behaviour was, in some cases, a manifestation of their fear and distress and a way of alerting staff to their concerns. Thus, a better understanding of the diverse ways in which prisoners demonstrate and manifest their concerns about the existential problems of prison life and ontological insecurity allows for a more nuanced response by staff.

Responding to Prison Bullying

The importance of staff-prisoner relationships in creating and sustaining a safe, secure and decent prison cannot be underestimated nor overstated. In seeking to reduce the prevalence of bullying, situational controls, robust and proportionate security measures, effective systems of reward and punishment, a decent environment and good governance are all crucial. However, without good quality staff-prisoner relationships, the effectiveness and utility of these 'tools' can be easily undermined. When a prison 'feels' unsafe or incidents of assaults against staff and prisoners are high, (understandably) the tendency can be for staff to withdraw from social interaction with prisoners and focus on increasing security and control. Paradoxically, what is actually most needed to restore safety and reduce bullying is an investment in relational capital rather than 'ratcheting up' security and control. For example, at a time when violence and bullying was still high, several gates were removed along a corridor that spanned the width of an establishment to allow prisoners to move easily between the residential units

and other areas of the prison. These gates had served to disrupt the movement of young prisoners along the corridor and, for some, offered a sense of physical and existential security since prisoners could be quickly segregated into different areas of the corridor by locking gates should an incident arise. Removing physical controls and barriers may have appeared counter-intuitive but it ensured that officers were not reliant on such measures to maintain order. In addition, it also enabled prisoners to move far more easily to work, education and other appointments, the environment felt less oppressive and there was less confrontation, both between prisoners and between staff and prisoners, whilst prisoners were moving around the establishment.

Tightening 'operational grip' in response to specific concerns or incidents can be a prudent strategy for addressing immediate threats to prison safety and security, but is largely counter-productive as a long term strategy. This is not to say that there aren't times when such a response is necessary. For example, tensions between different groups of prisoners on two different landings of a particular residential unit escalated to the extent that several fights occurred almost simultaneously. It was quickly clear that these fights had not resolved the dispute and further

violent incidents were likely to occur should the normal regime continue. Intelligence also suggested that prisoners were in possession of improvised weapons. In response, cells were searched, CCTV images examined and reports investigated. The normal regime was suspended for a short period so staff, managers and prisoners could work together to gather intelligence, ultimately ensuring that the subsequent response was proportionate. Whilst this meant a temporary reduction in time out of cell, ultimately, this course of action ensured that both staff and prisoners remained safe. But, such strategies can only be employed for short periods and cannot work in isolation, and, ultimately, must be underpinned by strong staff-prisoner relationships. Not only does the quality of these relationships affect the extent to which prison bullying is allowed to occur, but also directly impacts the likelihood of detection, the willingness of prisoners to seek support, the efficacy of responses to perpetrators and the level and quality of support given to victims.

Crewe *et al* (see also this issue) have observed that staff-prisoner relationships exist on a continuum

The importance of staff-prisoner relationships in creating and sustaining a safe, secure and decent prison cannot be underestimated nor overstated.

between being 'heavy' and 'light,' as well as 'absent' or 'present.'⁶ 'Absence' refers to the physical and interpersonal availability and visibility of prison officers.⁷ In the context of prison bullying, this absence can provide the fertile conditions for bullying to go unchecked. If officers retreat to wing offices or otherwise avoid social interaction with prisoners, the little details are often missed — but these details matter. Simply knowing who prisoners are, where they are located and whether or not they were engaging with the regime matters in small but tangible ways. Generally, the signs and symptoms of bullying, and the key 'flash points' are obvious if you are looking closely enough. Even if victims feel unable to report bullying, they often behave in ways that indicate their despair and fear, such as not collecting their meals, refusing to attend work or education, avoiding social interaction, avoiding association and failing to shower or use the telephone. Officers who are an active and observant presence on the wings and landings can quickly identify such issues and respond effectively, ultimately improving prisoner safety and reducing the likelihood of incident.

Knowing who prisoners are also means that the dynamics of social interaction between prisoners and the flow of power can be observed, with the effect that prisoners who are known perpetrators can be located away from known victims. Since perpetrators are often in cahoots with others, an awareness of the relationships between prisoners means that peers who are affiliated with each other can be separated and not located in the same cell or on the same landing or wing. Whilst this does not permanently prevent such people from interacting, it does disrupt activity and the ease with which groups of prisoners are able to exert a negative influence on others. It also avoids victims forming the impression that they are surrounded by those who would seek to harm or exploit them, which could easily prove overwhelming. Knowing who prisoners are also means that prisoners who were active in the sub rosa economy and regularly extorting others are not promoted to positions such as peer mentor or wing cleaner, since it is in these positions that more manipulative prisoners could exploit others, exchange contraband and enforce debts. Taken together, an

awareness of who prisoners are, how they interact and where they are located serves to prevent or reduce opportunities for perpetrators to victimise others.

It is often assumed that prisoners will not approach staff to disclose concerns about bullying for fear of being seen as a 'grass'. Whilst this remains true for a sizeable majority of the prisoner population, it is possible to foster an environment where more prisoners will come forward to report bullying, but they will only do so if they believe they can trust officers to take their concerns seriously. Officers who are willing to offer practical assistance and 'get things done' — that is those who are 'present,' 'active' and 'engaged' — instill a faith and confidence in prisoners. For example:

You pick out certain officers that are genuine and are good and everything. You basically stick with them. You build your trust and bonds with them and then if you have any problems or issues you go to them. They will help you.

Prisoners are only prepared to risk disclosing concerns if they feel confident that officers will act intelligently to protect them.

Prisoners are only prepared to risk disclosing concerns if they feel confident that officers will act intelligently to protect them. Thus, fostering the kind of social environment where prisoners turn to staff for help and support requires officers to be proactive in a range of very practical and seemingly unrelated ways, such

as responding to requests for toilet roll.

The most effective way we've observed of building strong staff-prisoner relationships is when staff make 'every contact matter' and use each small interaction as an intervention. Essentially, this means that the seemingly routine, normal and everyday conversations and interactions between staff and prisoners are reframed as opportunities for rehabilitative interventions. In so doing, staff seek to: offer hope and opportunity; help 'turn a negative into a positive;' build trust; reinforce reward; assist problem solving; and, demonstrate care and kindness. This involves skills such as Socratic questioning, active listening, verbal reinforcement and motivational interviewing. When staff have been trained to do so, outcomes can be stronger. The outcomes for staff include a greater propensity for praise and encouragement, enhanced empathy, greater practical and emotional support and

6. Crewe, B., Liebling, A., and Hullely, S. (2014) 'Heavy-light, absent-present: revisiting the weight of imprisonment' *British Journal of Sociology* 65(3): 387-410.

7. Ibid 397.

increased job satisfaction. Prisoners are more likely to feel that someone cares, that their concerns are taken seriously, that someone has listened, possess greater hope in their ability to change, engage in self-reflection and engage in behavioural change. Overall, relationships are stronger, more likely to be based on respect and more likely to be seen as positive by both staff and prisoners. When staff are minded to make 'every contact matter', they are also more likely to see opportunities to intervene before incidents escalate, ultimately reducing the likelihood of harmful behaviour to themselves and others.

Prison staff are not only significant in terms of enabling victims to raise concerns, but they are fundamental to the success of initiatives designed to support victims. Typically, anti-bullying and violence reduction strategies focus on challenging, managing and disciplining perpetrators. Whilst this is certainly necessary, the importance of victim identification and support can be easily overlooked. The ACCT process seeks to offer support to those prisoners at risk of self-harm and suicide, but support for victims of violence and bullying who are not necessarily demonstrating such behaviour can be limited. Often there is no formal support mechanism for victims who are not attempting self-harm or suicide but still require higher levels of care and assistance. The 'Supported living Unit' (SLU) is a specialised unit seeking to do just that. The initial idea was developed from innovation at HMP Bullingdon and, in the first instance, the SLU offers respite and sanctuary to prisoners who are struggling to adapt to prison life and/or who are being victimised by others. In seeking to provide high levels of care and support, a dedicated team of competent, skilled and motivated staff is essential. In addition, a small number of carefully selected and trained peer mentors provide support and advice to prisoners located on the SLU. The peer mentors also reside on the SLU and, as prisoners also serving time, they are able to relate to the experiences of prisoners on the SLU. Moving a prisoner from normal location to the SLU effectively severs contact between

perpetrators and victims, eliminating the risk of sustained victimisation. By creating a place of safety, levels of fear, distress and anxiety can be alleviated, which in turn reduces the propensity towards self-harm, cell fires and cell damage. It also allows prisoners to regain confidence and begin re-engaging with the regime. Thus, the availability of a dedicated SLU has served to prevent and reduce bullying, provide high levels of care to those who need it most, and ensure that the most vulnerable prisoners feel safe.

Conclusion

High levels of prison bullying are not inevitable. Whilst bullying may not ever be eliminated entirely, its incidence and severity can be significantly reduced. The reduction of prison bullying requires a whole prison approach, and central to that approach is good quality staff-prisoner relationships. Such relationships underpin the success of strategies to prevent and respond to bullying and violence. In establishing such relationships, every contact matters so that even brief interactions present opportunities to strengthen these relationships. When the relational approach is 'right,' not only is it possible to prevent bullying, but when bullying occurs, the response is swift and appropriate, victims are supported and the behaviour of perpetrators is addressed in constructive ways. Moreover, in order to adequately address bullying, prisoners need to be located in the right places, whether that be on normal location or in a unit with a specialist function — such as healthcare, segregation or a supported living unit. In those locations, staff competence, skill, expertise and ideological approach matters, as does the quality of engagement between staff and prisoners. Preventing and reducing bullying is not a numbers game. Sufficient numbers of staff are essential but, crucially, it is quality of the relationships and the willingness of staff to be active, present, caring and engaged that makes the difference.