

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

November 2020 No 251



Editorial Comment

Over the years, Prison Service Journal has often shone a light on the needs and experiences of particular groups within the prison system. This is in part intended to promote the sensitizing of practice to meet the sometimes overlooked challenges faced by particular people in prison. This edition of PSJ focusses on three particular groups: people convicted of sexual offences; transgender people in prison, and; people who have neurodevelopmental disorders.

Three articles give attention to people convicted of sexual offences. In the first, Alice levins of the Prisons Research Centre at University of Cambridge, draws upon a comparative study of the prison systems in Norway and England and Wales. A formal, institutional separation that takes place in England and Wales where people convicted of sexual offenders are held separately in vulnerable prisoner units or specialist prisons. In contrast, such separation is not practiced in Norway. Although some social stigma and distancing takes place in Norwegian prisons, the culture and context are very different. levins argues that this reflects profoundly different penal and philosophical attitudes towards shame and integration. Dr Lynn Saunders, long-serving and distinguished governor of HMP Whatton, a prison specialising in working with people convicted of sexual offences, contributes an article based upon her research on the experiences of people being released from prison. The article is a fascinating example of insider research, but is also a challenging dissection of the difficulties of life after prison. Dr. Saunders concludes that 'the solutions to reduce sexual reoffending and successfully resettle people convicted of sexual offences in the community rests, unpopular and unpalatable as this may seem, not solely with the individual convicted of a sexual offence but with the institutions of the state, practitioners in the criminal justice system, employers, and the wider community'. An example of effective, reintegrative resettlement work is that of Circles of Support and Accountability. Circles are run by a number of charitable organisations who train and support those taking part. Each circle works with a person convicted of a sexual offences (the 'core member') and has around 4-6 people, who spend time with the core member and offer a supportive social network that also requires the core member to take responsibility for his/her ongoing risk management. It is an approach that has reported success in reducing reoffending. Dr. Geraldine Akerman and Caitlin Brown's article considers the challenges of people who were released into the

community and re-offended. The authors consider the process and whether Circles of Support may have provided a more effective mechanism to help those individuals and protect the public. Together, these three articles draw important questions not only about the techniques, policies and practices of working with men convicted of sexual offences, but they also raise challenging questions about shame, stigma and emotion in public policy and public attitudes. The articles pose fundamental questions about criminal justice philosophy and values.

Dr. Matt Maycock contributes an article considering the experience of transgender people in Scottish prisons. Specifically, Maycock considers the response of those people to the opening of a separate unit for transgender people in HMP Downview in England and whether they would want such a unit available to them. The public debate about gender identity and transgender issues has become, at times, polarised, ideological and even febrile. Maycock's work is particularly valuable as it focusses on the experience of people directly affected and shows the diversity of perspectives. His empirical approach is measured but does not shy away from the complexity of the issues and the fluid, evolving social and policy context. The other specific group addressed in this edition is people with neurodevelopmental disorders. Professor Amanda Kirby and colleagues in a detailed study, expose that many such disorders are either missed or misdiagnosed. The real prevalence and significant of this issue, the authors argue, raises questions about criminal justice responses and indeed wider social support for people with neurodevelopmental disorders.

This edition of PSJ also includes Dr Alicia King and Dr Caroline Oliver's article on vicarious trauma experienced by prison officers. Those who work in the prison system are asked to undertake a complex and demanding role often with people who have complex needs. As the authors reveal, many people who work in prisons can be deeply affected by this. An effective service pays close attention to the needs of those who deliver that service as well as those that receive it.

Prison Service Journal is committed to offering research that asks challenging, sometimes uncomfortable questions about penal practice. It does so in an attempt to promote discussion, debate and improvement. It is offered in the knowledge that there are many people who welcome such an approach and are engaged in a struggle to make a positive difference.