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# Professionalising Prison Security:

## Developing a Model and Agenda Rooted in Research to Enhance the Delivery of Security in Prisons

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### Introduction

**Security is one of the fundamental needs in society for both individuals and organisations.<sup>1</sup> Delivering security and consequences of those modes have stimulated some significant academic debates and research.<sup>2</sup> However, applied security, particularly the performance of security tools and effectiveness of security systems, in comparison to other disciplines, has been under-researched.<sup>3</sup> An engineer, a medical doctor, a human resources specialist would have a substantial body of knowledge to consult when examining the different 'tools' of their trade and the merits of their use vis-a-vis a security manager. Given the importance of security in prisons one might expect this might be an exception in the broader field of security studies; but here again there is a sparse base of scholarship. There is a body of research that investigates the culture of the prison, which considers the nature of security, exemplified by Sykes<sup>4</sup> seminal work. Some of the sparse research which exists, is listed next to some important security issues:**

- ❑ Categorisation of prison inmates for various purposes;<sup>5</sup>
- ❑ The effectiveness of prison security staff;<sup>6</sup>
- ❑ Prison escapes;<sup>7</sup> and
- ❑ Perimeter security.<sup>8</sup>

Considering prison escapes have been the subject of numerous dramas and movies from *The Great*

*Escape*, *Escape from Alcatraz* to the *Shawshank Redemption* it is interesting to juxtapose the interest of creative writers with their academic equivalents. Although prison escapes do often result in official enquiries, which will be an issue this paper will return to later.

The brief potpourri of research identified above does not identify the totality of prison security related research and it is not the intention of this article to identify all of the extant literature. Rather this article intends to consider the issue of prison security from a security scholar perspective. It will begin by exploring the importance of security in prisons. The paper will then move on to consider the importance of professional security managers, before setting out some of the issues of research which should be developed further by security and prison researchers.

### The importance of security in prisons

Security in prisons is a very important issue for a variety of obvious reasons. First and foremost many prisoners are dangerous or high risk of committing further crimes and it is important to keep them from society to prevent further incidents, which requires security to keep them there. Even if they are not a risk, offenders are sent to prison as a penalty and it is important they remain there to maintain the integrity of the punishment. Second prisoners are also potentially offenders within prison and it is also essential to have

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1. Zedner, L. (2003). Too much security?. *International journal of the sociology of law*, 31(3), 155-184.
  2. See for example Loader, I., & Walker, N. (2007). *Civilizing security*. Cambridge University Press.
  3. Button, M. (2008) *Doing Security*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
  4. Sykes, G. M. (2007). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton University Press.
  5. Cunningham, M. D., Sorensen, J. R., & Reidy, T. J. (2005). An actuarial model for assessment of prison violence risk among maximum security inmates. *Assessment*, 12(1), 40-49; and Gaes, G. G., & Camp, S. D. (2009). Unintended consequences: Experimental evidence for the criminogenic effect of prison security level placement on post-release recidivism. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 5(2), 139-162.
  6. Shamir, B., & Drory, A. (1982). Occupational tedium among prison officers. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 9(1), 79-99; and Roy, S., & Avdija, A. (2012). The Effect of Prison Security Level on Job Satisfaction and Job Burnout among Prison Staff in the USA: An Assessment. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 7(2).
  7. Culp, R. F. (2005). Frequency and characteristics of prison escapes in the United States: An analysis of national data. *The Prison Journal*, 85(3), 270-291; Culp, R. F., & Bracco, E. (2005). Examining prison escapes and the routine activities theory. *Corrections Compendium*, 30(3), 1-5; and Peterson, B. E., Fera, A., & Mellow, J. (2016). Escapes from correctional custody: A new examination of an old phenomenon. *The Prison Journal*, 96(4), 511-533.
  8. Camp, G. M., Camp, C. G. (1987). Stopping escapes: Perimeter security. US Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice; Dessent, G. H. (1987). Prison perimeter cost-effectiveness. *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 38(10), 975-980.

effective security to protect staff, other prisoners and visitors. Third the nature of the population and the strict rules within them regarding consumption of alcohol, drugs and access to items such as mobile phones means it is important to prevent such items from been smuggled in. For all these reasons maximising the effectiveness of security in prisons is a very important issue. Highly effective security therefore look like in prisons:

- ❑ Very low risk of prisoners escaping;
- ❑ Very low levels of further offending within prisons; and
- ❑ No contraband getting to prisoners.

But these must also be delivered by a security system that does not disrupt the wider core aims of prisons, such as provide a regime that also rehabilitates offenders, among many others. Thus the challenge of achieving these aims cuts to one of the central dilemmas of security in any context. A retailer could easily enhance security to prevent shoplifting, by for instance, placing security staff checking all those who enter and leave, but this might be at the cost of less customers coming to the store - undermining the purpose of the retailer. For a prison the dilemma is balancing a reasonable prison regime for inmates against an appropriate level of security. In addition to this is the issue of cost. Politicians and taxpayers do not generally like paying taxes for prisons and in most cases higher security equals higher costs. High walls, fences, CCTV, drones, security staff etc all cost money. Prison managers therefore face the following challenge of balancing:

### **High Security versus Reasonable Prison Regime for inmates versus Cost**

This is a very difficult balancing act and it highlights where research can play an important role. The scarce resources of prison managers need to be deployed to their maximum and research can help them to make

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smart decisions. However, this assumes decision-makers focused upon security have a professional approach, built upon research based decision-making and that there is a body of knowledge to consult. As the next section will show, general security management until recently was not generally wedded to such a methodology.

### **Professional security managers**

The professionalisation of security managers in general has been undergoing a significant transformation over the last 30 years. From a role traditionally associated as a second career for ex-police and military staff, with no specialist qualifications where what was considered 'relevant' experience was central to recruitment, there has been a move to a much more professional approach.<sup>9</sup> Degrees, Masters and other professional qualifications in security are now much more central to recruitment - although the new recruits to security management are still dominated by the ex-police and military they do at least generally come with higher relevant qualifications too.<sup>10</sup> Security management, however, still differs from other ancillary professions such as Human Resources, Health and Safety etc where choosing a career in it on leaving university is common. The core requirements of a 'profession' are still not completely there. There are still gaps in the traits associated with a profession such as a clear body of knowledge, clear entry standards to the profession, a code of ethics all work to to name some.<sup>11</sup> And perhaps one of the most significant identifiers of a profession in the UK - receiving Chartered Status from the Privy Council - is still lacking in the security industry.

The gaps in the UK security professional infrastructure have probably in part propelled the UK Government to create its own security profession from scratch built upon physical security, personnel security, cyber security and technical security, which was launched in February 2020.<sup>12</sup> This profession is built

9. See Hearnden, K. (1995). Multi-tasking in British businesses: A comparative study of security and safety managers. *Security Journal*, 2(6), 123-132; Nalla, M. and Morash, M. (2002) Assessing the Scope of Corporate Security: Common Practices and Relationships with other Business Functions. *Security Journal*, 15(1), 7-19; and Gill, M., Burns-Howell, T., Keats, G., & Taylor, E. (2007). Demonstrating the value of security. Tunbridge Wells: Perpetuity.

10. See Button, M. (2019) *Private Policing*. 2nd Edition. Abingdon: Routledge; and Petersen, K. L. (2013). The Corporate Security Professional: A Hybrid Agent Between Corporate and National Security. *Security Journal*, 26(3), 222-235.

11. Button, (2008) op. cit.

12. HM Government (2020) *Introducing Government Security*. Retrieved from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/864750/Introducing\\_government\\_security.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/864750/Introducing_government_security.pdf)

upon extensive standards that go from entry to high level managerial positions. These and the wider industry developments to a more professional infra-structure are welcome and likely to lead to better security within government. They are also likely to lead to increased demands for knowledge on security drawn from the highest quality research.

It is here where there is a gap, we have already referred to. Medical doctors, engineers and human resource management specialists can point to dozens if not hundreds of journals in some cases publishing research on issues which may be very useful in the decision-making of appropriate tools to deliver. In the security world there are only two specialist journals: *Security Journal* and the *Journal of Applied Security Research* and only a handful of articles on prison security can be found. Wider criminological journals also contain a few. These illustrate the small and dispersed body of knowledge dedicated to the security effectiveness of tools and systems in prisons. There is an extensive body of generic crime prevention based research and some of this will be useful, but it is not necessarily transferable to prison contexts or easily discovered.<sup>13</sup>

Policing has in recent years also been gradually embracing more professional approaches to the development of policies. The creation of the College of Policing, extensive research activity and evaluations rooted in random control experiments have yielded an evidence base showing strategies that work, which have then been implemented.<sup>14</sup>

Both policing and crime prevention have various initiatives that clearly bring together these important bodies of knowledge to enable practitioners to make use of them (see footnotes 13 and 14). Such approaches for security in general and prison security specifically would be beneficial if all relevant knowledge was brought together in a user friendly hub. However, there is also a need for more research. Some critics might immediately think this is just academics calling for more research and therefore funding. This is in part true, but research can also be done by practitioners as part of their normal way of working and there are also many ways for research to be stimulated by others to

undertake through relatively low cost options such as students studying degrees through to PhDs. The next section provides a snapshot of areas where the author believe there should be a priority for prison security research, it is not exhaustive and there are many more areas security professionals would consider. This is just a starting point.

### Security failure

Security failure is an act that breaches what the security system is designed to prevent. This could be a criminal act, such as a robbery, burglary, theft and so on; or a lesser act, such as trespass or breach of organisational rules.<sup>15</sup> Thus in a prison context it could be an escape of a prisoner to making alcohol in their cell. Security failure therefore encompasses a wide range of potential incidents that take place in different nodes and the consequences of which vary greatly. Failures of security in aviation have resulted in the catastrophic events of 11 September 2001, while security failure in a supermarket might mean no more than the loss of £50 worth of razors. Another consequence might be nothing more dangerous than huge embarrassment and bad publicity, such as in the incident in which a member of Fathers 4 Justice breached security at Buckingham

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Palace to reach the Queen's balcony in a Batman outfit in order to highlight the organization's campaign for greater access for separated fathers to their children. Security failure occurs all the time despite the millions of pounds spent to reinforce security systems. As Zedner<sup>16</sup> argues:

*...absolute security ... is a chimera, perpetually beyond reach. Even if security were today obtainable ... the potentiality for new threats means that the pursuit can never be said to be over ... Just as the capabilities and intentions of potential adversaries are unknowable, so there may be unknown vulnerabilities, revealed only when they are exploited. The central issue here is that security is not and can never be an absolute state. Rather it is a*

13 See for example <https://popcenter.asu.edu/>

14 See for example <https://whatworks.college.police.uk/Research/Research-Map/Pages/Research-Map.aspx>

15 Button, (2008) op. cit.

16 Op. cit., 2003, p 158.

*relational concept whose invisibility must be continually tested against threats as yet unknown.*

Security failure, however, is not an easy subject to study. First, the embarrassment of security failure can be such that the breach is never actually publicised (many frauds for example). Second, in order to minimise the chances of similar breaches happening again, detailed information of what went wrong is often not made publicly available. Consequently, the study of security failures is restricted to cases where information is available, which may well be a biased sample in the first place. Nevertheless, particularly in the public sector, when there is a major breach there is often some form of enquiry.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes the media carry articles that shed light on security failures, both reports from journalists and, in some cases, from the perpetrators themselves some years later. Finally there are also evaluations of particular security products, which can shed light on the causes of security failure and which can be used to further our understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding why security failures have occurred is central to improving security, as Button<sup>19</sup> has noted drawing upon the research of Toft and Reynolds<sup>20</sup> on disasters, which can be applied to security failure. Organisations can reduce adverse events such as disasters and security failures from occurring by engaging in three types of learning. First, there is organisational learning where individuals within an organisation draw their own lessons from an event. For example discovering a new means of a visitor smuggling in contraband into a prison should provide learning for all others in that organisation to prevent further breaches.

Second, there is isomorphic learning in which an incident (that occurred in another place, at an earlier time, or to another business or organization) is studied

by other similar groups. The intention of scrutinizing 'someone else's incident' is to identify and assess potential risks that might apply to your own systems or procedures and to eliminate them. Thus in this context prisons should be scanning more widely and if for example a new smuggling technique is uncovered in an airport, prisons should be considering whether it is an issue for them.

Finally, there is 'iconic' learning where simply being informed of a negative event is considered a learning event in itself. An example might be hearing that in another organisation an employee clicked on what they thought was a job opportunity sent to them by email, but actually it was malware which triggered a ransomware attack which led to serious damage to the organisation.

Toft and Reynolds argue that while the first and third types of learning are important, the most significant is isomorphic. What does this therefore mean for prisons? First prisons should be gathering data on all security failures that occur within them. This should capture as much data as possible relating to circumstances and causes. This data should be regularly analysed and used to fine tune security systems to reduce risks. The wider prison security management network should also be embedded, receiving analysis and feeding into the data. However, prisons should also be looking beyond prisons to conduct isomorphic learning and also feeding this knowledge into

the adapting their security systems. Security failures in other contexts related to smuggling, searches, perimeters to name some offer important knowledge. These activities can be undertaken "behind the wire" of the prison system without compromising revealing important security knowledge to prisoners. The opportunities from big data associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) could also be applied to such data gathering.

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17. See for example Home Office. (1966). Report of the Inquiry Into Prison Escapes and Security, by Admiral of the Fleet, the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty, December 1966. HM Stationery Office; Learmont, J. (1995). Review of Prison Service Security in England and Wales and the Escape from Parkhurst Prison on Tuesday 3rd January 1995. HM Stationery Office; Woodcock, S. J. (1994). Report of the Enquiry into the Escape of Six Prisoners from the Special Security Unit at Whitemoor Prison, Cambridgeshire, on Friday 9th September 1994. HM Stationery Office.
18. Gill, M., & Spriggs, A. (2005). Assessing the impact of CCTV (Vol. 292). London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate.
19. Op. cit., 2008.
20. Toft, B., & Reynolds, S. (1997). Learning from disasters. Leicester: Perpetuity Press.

## The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Security

There are a wide range of traditional security tools, strategies and systems where more research is required on their effectiveness from CCTV in specific contexts through to searching procedures. However, the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) holds the potential for a wide range of new methods and approaches to security that presents for a more pressing priority for research and experimentation. The 4IR is used to describe a variety of technological advances proceeding at pace, around three broad areas:

- ❑ Physical: autonomous vehicles, 3d printing, advanced robotics and new materials.
- ❑ Digital: 'the internet of things', block-chain, big data etc
- ❑ Biological: genetics, synthetic biology.<sup>21</sup>

Schwab<sup>22</sup> has argued:

*We are at the beginning of a revolution that is fundamentally changing the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope and complexity, what I consider to be the fourth industrial revolution is unlike anything humankind has experienced before.*

The application of the technologies of the 4IR to security are also emerging. For instance drones and robots are increasingly used to conduct surveillance; and digital advances are enabling big data to better profile risks and deploy mitigations to manage them. There is huge potential to utilise some of the technologies of the 4IR for prison security and to evaluate their success. Some of the technologies could yield more effective security at lower costs in the long term. Beyond the obvious benefits of using drones and robots to patrol perimeters and other important areas there is the potential to use big data to monitor and predict risks, such as risk of self-harm,

violence, insider threats etc. Indeed the latter issue is very important in prisons and utilising big data to identify potential threats could be beneficial. In finance such data is being used to predict potential fraudulent transactions with high degrees of accuracy and the UK is already pursuing such approaches in the prison sector.<sup>23</sup> The most important aspect of utilising these new approaches is using research to evaluate their effectiveness.

## The mental health and well being of prison staff

Working in prisons in general is a stressful and potentially dangerous occupation. Those officers with security roles face particular risks and with those risks come the potential for impacts on the mental health and well being of staff. Research conducted by the author on private security staff – who probably face less risks than prison officers – has highlighted significant problems with levels of well being and the mental health of such operatives.<sup>24</sup> These problems ultimately impinge upon performance and as research has illustrated in security failure, often the human element of security systems is the reason security failure occurs. There has been research in the past in the UK on this issue and in other countries, but much more work needs to be dedicated towards this.<sup>25</sup> Maximising the effectiveness of prison officers given their importance in security systems is an important objective and research can be utilised to

develop the most effective workforce.

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## Discussion and Conclusion

This article has briefly introduced some of the emerging thinking in security more general and applied them to prison security. It has, in-particular, identified some of the broad themes of research which should be

21. Schwab, K. (2017). The fourth industrial revolution. Crown Business.

22. Ibid., p1.

23. Patil, S., Nemade, V., & Soni, P. K. (2018). Predictive modelling for credit card fraud detection using data analytics. *Procedia computer science*, 132, 385-395; and ZDNet (2018) UK Ministry of Justice using data to gain control of prisons. Retrieved from <https://www.zdnet.com/article/uk-ministry-of-justice-using-data-to-gain-control-of-prisons/>

24. Talas, R., Button, M., Doyle, M., & Das, J. (2020). Violence, abuse and the implications for mental health and wellbeing of security operatives in the United Kingdom: the invisible problem. *Policing and Society*, 1-16.

25. Rutter, D. R., & Fielding, P. J. (1988). Sources of occupational stress: An examination of British prison officers. *Work & Stress*, 2(4), 291-299.

a priority for prison security managers. Central to the model identified is the need for professional security managers rooted in the traits associated with a typical profession such as grounding in a suitable high level qualification and working using techniques that there is an evidence base of their proven success. The lack of an extensive body of security knowledge in general and particularly to prisons requires much greater attention should be applied to security managers commissioning and conducting research. They should also be utilising isomorphic learning to scan for evidence from within their prisons, the wider prison sector and other relevant sectors to integrate that knowledge into their strategies. There are many areas where research should be priority and of varying levels of sophistication there is no doubt research already occurring in the UK. This article has stressed the importance of understanding security failure, which is a founding knowledge base for prisons; using and evaluating some of the emerging techniques associated with 4IR; and finally the mental health and well being of security operatives within prisons. There are many more, but the foundations of this approach can yield more effective security

decisions. Figure 1 illustrates the essence of this approach.

This article will end with an agenda for prison security managers to enhance security and they can judge to what extent they are fulfilling this agenda with new Government initiatives to professionalise security in the public sector and wider industry developments.

- ❑ Recruitment of managers of security who have been educated and trained in the discipline and who recognise the importance of and use research;
- ❑ The pursuit and commissioning of research where there are gaps to expand knowledge of what works;
- ❑ Active learning within prison security;
- ❑ Building a body of knowledge through a an easily accessible repository of knowledge; and
- ❑ Building a network to share that knowledge.

There are many other aspects to developing a profession beyond the scope of this article. These steps, however, are the most pertinent to developing a professional approach to security that maximises effectiveness.

Figure 1. Foundations of good security decisions

