



PRISON SERVICE January 2021 No 252

JOURNAL

**Special edition:
Security in prisons**

Understanding the security profession: Interview with Professor Alison Wakefield

Dr Alison Wakefield is Professor of Criminology and Security Studies at the University of West London and was Chair of the Security Institute from 2018 to 2020. She is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett, a Deputy Director in HM Prison and Probation Service.

Dr Alison Wakefield is Professor of Criminology and Security Studies at the University of West London. Until the end of last year she was also Chair of the Security Institute¹, the UK's largest membership body for security professionals, with over 3,600 members. The Institute promotes the highest standards of integrity and professional competence in the business of security.

Dr Wakefield's publications are the books *Selling Security: The Private Policing of Public Space*², *The Sage Dictionary of Policing*³, and *Ethical and Social Perspectives on Situational Crime Prevention*⁴, and her next book *Security and Crime: Converging Perspectives on a Complex World*⁵ is due out in next year. She serves on the editorial boards of *Security Journal*, the *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice* and the *Internet Journal of Restorative Justice*, as well as the international advisory board of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*.

Dr Wakefield is a regular author and public speaker on security topics, and recent themes have included the security implications of fake news, security for the fourth industrial revolution and UK-EU security co-operation after Brexit.

This interview was conducted in September 2020.

JB: Could you tell me about your professional background and experience?

AW: My background is primarily in academia, much of that in security education which followed from my research interests, although I also worked in the private sector for a short while. I've specialised in teaching mature learners who are usually full-time security practitioners.

Early on, I was based at the University of Leicester, one of the few institutions to engage with the security sector at that time, and I was invited to get involved

with the professional community, representing the educational side. I've been working closely with the practitioner community since the end of 2004, supporting professional development in the security sector.

JB: What drew you to the security as a field?

AW: I had an interest in policing, which was how I had envisaged my career developing. I was a police cadet before going to university and worked as a special constable. I'd always planned to go into the police after graduation. I then decided to change direction. As I continued to study, I noticed that private security was a hidden area in terms of research. That then became the focus of my PhD research. Following that I found myself in an ideal position to teach on educational courses, with a niche that was broader than policing and with much scope for development. That has enabled me to be in a position to respond to the evolving educational needs of the security profession.

JB: How would you define security? What are the critical elements? Why are security professionals important?

AW: In simple terms it is about the protection of assets: people, property or information. That encompasses a whole range of different roles including people working internationally, nationally or locally; in the public, private or non-governmental sector; they could be in management, front-line, consultancy, investigative or analytical roles; they may be in specialist, generalist roles or ancillary ones such as mine as an educator, trainers, recruiters or media. There are a whole range of people playing a role in the resilience of governments, commercial organisations, non-governmental organisations, and the community.

1. For more information see <https://security-institute.org/>

2. Wakefield, A. (2003) *Selling Security: The Private Policing of Public Space*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

3. Wakefield, A. and Fleming, J. (eds) (2009) *The Sage Dictionary of Policing*. Sage: London

4. von Hirsch, A., Garland, D. and Wakefield, A. (eds) (2000) *Ethical and Social Perspectives on Situational Crime Prevention*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

5. Wakefield, A. (forthcoming) *Security and Crime: Converged Perspectives on a Complex World*. London: Sage.

JB: Your work draws together research in your academic work, teaching and practice. What is the significance of research in the practice of security?

AW: As the profession has become more sophisticated, it has become more methodology-based. That makes it more accessible to people coming into the profession — there are established ways of doing things, generally based around the risk management cycle. There is considerable value in such experience as working under pressure, and having to engage with a wide range of people. People working in prisons will recognise this as their role is amongst the most challenging. But there is also a wider body of knowledge in which to ground that experience. We are living in an increasingly complex world and there needs to be a focus on evidence-based decision-making. You need that evidence base to justify your decisions and get senior people to agree to what you are asking for, which is often a budget to take some particular action. The evidence base includes not only being able to draw upon other people's research, but also gathering your own data and establishing metrics to justify decision-making.

As the sector has recognised the value of education, there have been increasing expectations that people have academic and advanced vocational qualifications. There are also clearer development pathways, often starting with vocational qualifications that can take up to a year and attract recognised prior learning credits towards a university degree. As well as these routes, there are also a lot of free online learning materials on issues such as cyber security, counter terrorism and other aspects of security. There are many opportunities for those who want to develop themselves and give themselves the best chance to secure the most interesting positions.

JB: When I think about security practice in prisons, it can be quite traditional, more of a craft based profession where people don't necessarily undertake formal training but learn on the job. The training that they do undertake will be technical or about current practices rather than taking a broader perspective, theoretical perspective that you are describing. I can imagine some people asking why they would want to know about theory or learn about private security when that is not the setting they work in? What

would you say is the value of the development you are describing?

AW: In any organisation, if everyone comes with the same experience then you don't get much change, improvement or innovation. There is a wealth of research on the prison setting, for example: — there are different approaches to prison practice all around the world. Education gives you access to new ideas that can be introduced into different contexts. Any setting needs a good evidence base underpinning how things are done and a good diversity of staff who can bring different perspectives. We know that prison work is extremely challenging, perhaps now more than ever, where managers are dealing with tight budgets and all kinds of barriers. Sometimes what you can control are small innovations that might not cost much money. Education is a route to a wider range of answers and perspectives in any line of work.

JB: Organisations are measured in many ways including research, targets, audits, inspection. How do organisations know if security practice is effective?

AW: you need to be gathering data at every stage. You need data in order to make comparisons. The risk management cycle starts with understanding the context, knowing the organisation you are dealing with, the culture, the aspirations and the needs of the organisation. Then you come to the risk identification stage, which is the most crucial as if you miss a key risk you create a cycle that is flawed from the outset. You need to find ways of analysing the landscape, including issues internal to the organisation and in the external environment. What are the vulnerabilities within as well as the threats on the horizon? You need good qualitative and quantitative data-gathering techniques to find out this information. That goes through an analytical process, which will inform the approaches that will be taken to mitigate the risks or adverse incidents. There have to be robust ways of measuring those incidents so you can evidence whether there is improvement. Then there is a review process, which feeds back into the top of the cycle. There is data gathering and analysis all the way through. That should produce the evidence that practitioners need to communicate to others in order to have their decisions supported.

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JB: Your roles involve promoting security management and leadership. What are the key elements of security management and leadership? Are they different in the security context than in other settings?

AW: Starting with management, we all do this to ensure that day-to-day activities are happening. In security, the risk management cycle is at the heart of professional practice. Some people may mainly be involved in particular stages of the cycle. For example, analysts mostly focus on assessing the risks on the horizon, or business continuity experts are concerned with preparedness for emergencies. It is all about risk management. Leadership is about the strategic vision and objectives, and getting others to engage with them and work with you to realise those goals. You will be setting your objectives and values, such as excellence, growth, professionalism, ethics, integrity or inclusion, that you see as necessary for organisational success. That is more about inspiring people and bringing them with you.

JB: What is the role of the Security Institute and how do you see this developing?

AW: We are a UK-based professional association for security practitioners with over 3600 members. We run learning events, masterclasses and educational courses, and have links with universities. We also have knowledge-sharing and thought leadership functions, delivered through a growing number of special interest groups. These groups represent a wide range of disciplines, including cyber security, counter terrorism, the built environment, insider risks and many others. There are increasing numbers of people within the sector who want that kind of association to give professional recognition and support their development.

We are still a small organisation in terms of our employees; we only have nine employees, but we are growing. We have a volunteer Board of 15, and innumerable volunteers running committees and special interest groups and getting involved in a whole range of activities. We always say we are run by members for members. The Institute is now gathering a lot of momentum and new members. We are widening our reach and capacity to engage with government and industry at a senior level. Any revenue is ploughed back into the organisation as we are a not-for-profit. The

more we grow in numbers and income, the further and faster we can go along that journey.

It is very exciting that we have so many people across the sector coming together to develop our capacities and services. A lot of the most engaged members are involved in volunteering and they get a lot out of it: it can open up new opportunities as you can show what you can do and work alongside other people. It is a wonderful way of trying out new areas and opening up new opportunities.

JB: The Security Institute nurtures the idea of a cross-sector security profession. What is the value of sharing experience and expertise between such apparently different fields as retail security, prison management, and private policing?

AW: In the past they were very separate areas. The more that we come together around common methodologies, which are simply being applied in different ways and in different settings, then the more there is a knowledge exchange and opportunities for people to move around the sector. All of those areas are becoming more professionalised and there are common standards emerging. There is greater diversity of thought when people come together with different experiences and ways of doing things.

You might not think that someone working in a prison in a security role has much in common with an IT security professional, but they are still working within that security risk management cycle. A lot of IT security is not rocket science, it is based on the same principles. So we are seeing a distinct profession coming together, with a distinct identity and way of doing things.

To support this, we have nurtured cross-sector working. We instituted a body called the Security Commonwealth, which is an association of associations that has a rotating chairmanship so that different organisations take their turn in leading it. It is bringing bodies together to discuss areas of shared interest, support collaboration and establish a common voice. That is another way in which collaboration is growing. As we have all become more comfortable with video conferencing due to the pandemic and are now using it routinely, I expect this will facilitate even more cross-sector engagement because it has become so much easier.

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JB: How do you see technology reshaping security and the nature of both threats and countermeasures in the future?

AW: It is becoming something that everyone has to acknowledge is part of their remit. The world is so technologically dependent that the distinction between the digital and physical world is getting more blurred. We all need to improve our game in terms of understanding technology and its implications. We are working in an environment of increasing complexity. When you are working in a complex context, you face what are sometimes referred to as ‘cascading threats’ when one thing happens and there is a cascade of unexpected outcomes that generate something completely different. It’s like the butterfly effect. To manage in an increasingly complex world, people need to adapt their working styles to a more network- and partnership-based approach, and be more adaptable and agile. The prison system is an example of managing complexity at every level, but more and more dimensions of today’s world are characterised by complexity and that is a bit daunting for everyone.

JB: You’ve mentioned the risk management cycle a number of times, how can organisations and professionals best identify emerging security threats?

AW: You can start with very simple established frameworks. For example, the SWOT analysis is based around strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Strengths and weaknesses are within the organisation — what does it do well and where do its vulnerabilities lie? The opportunities and threats are external to the organisation — what is on the horizon? Horizon-scanning is a growing area of analysis, drawing on intelligence. If you are well-established in the profession it might not be practical to retrain in analytical skills, but you might think about employing a graduate to fulfil that function. Building a more analytical approach will build resilience, and getting talented younger people into the sector will improve diversity and encourage innovation.

Another example is PESTEL analysis. The letters refer to political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal issues on the horizon. It is a useful checklist about what the challenges might be. For example, with political risks, if you want to go into

business in another country, what are the particular bureaucratic obstacles and societal challenges that you need to be aware of before you decide whether what you want to do is viable?

JB: Part of the role of security professionals is to respond to risks and emergency situations. For example, the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the challenges of preparing and responding to global threats. What do you see as the role of security professionals in contingency planning and management? What are the best practices in this field?

AW: What it has highlighted is the tendency of many organisations and governments to ignore issues until something happens. The government was well aware of the threat from pandemics on the horizon. It has been on the National Risk Register in a prominent position. But actually getting organisations to invest sufficiently in the planning is the challenge. You have a lot of business continuity and crisis management professionals or corporate security managers fulfilling those roles.

Planning is key, drawing upon established methodologies to put together business continuity plans. Again, this is based on the risk management cycle in terms of understanding what is on the horizon, and outlining the potential impact of those risks that might derail the business and stop it functioning, to inform strategies of mitigation. Practitioners always recommend regular testing and exercising. This is often what falls by the wayside. You can have an excellent plan, but if you haven’t tested it, when the event happens you may struggle to get people to do what they are supposed to because they haven’t had a chance to test the issues out and operate under pressure. Testing is essential. Many consultants will offer to come in and run these for organisations but they can also run them themselves. Then there is the crisis management response when something does happen. Just like any other aspect of security, this relies on a lot of knowledge sharing and collaboration. It is an area that practitioners with frontline experience are often very good at, as they are good at harnessing networks and working under pressure.

JB: The security profession is often presented as being male dominated both numerically and in

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its culture? Has this been your experience? Does the security profession need to change?

AW: The historic issue is due to the security function not having initially been placed very high in the organisational hierarchy. That is changing. The closer it gets to the Board of an organisation, the more strategic, professional, and better resourced it becomes. Then it attracts a broader range of backgrounds and qualifications. In the earlier stages, it was lower down the organisational hierarchy, budgets were small. This is still a concern as frontline security workers are not always well-rewarded and there can be a high turnover. When a sector isn't well-resourced, it is not good at investing in staff development and will find shortcuts. Historically, the sector has relied upon retired police and military people to fulfil those roles. It is not that long ago that people in those sectors would do thirty year careers and then come out after that, while still relatively young. A lot would go into security, but not necessarily demand high salaries because they had a pension. As the sector has gained more credibility and standing, it is gradually changing and becoming more diverse with people coming in earlier in their careers and often through educational routes. Also, the scope of security has expanded with the cyber dimension as well as the physical, and other areas such as business continuity, investigative functions, counter fraud, and health and safety. The more functions, the more diverse the people taking up those roles. Having said that, there is still a large market for physical security, which does still attract more men.

The Security Institute has just launched an Inclusive Security Special Interest Group whose premise is that an inclusive profession is more healthy and innovative, as well as more welcoming. As well as being the right thing to do from an equal opportunities perspective, it makes good business sense to attract a broader range of candidates and remove barriers to the best people coming into the sector. There is still work to be done

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but more and more people are understanding the value of diversity.

JB: The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the revival of the Black Lives Matters movement has led for calls to reduce our focus on security measures, for example there have been widespread calls to defund the police and reinvest in community services. David Lammy's report on the criminal justice system in England and Wales⁶ also highlighted many ways in which policing and security is disproportionately directed towards people from minority ethnic groups. What can the security profession do to address inequality, disproportionality and racism?

AW: Police forces aren't doing very well in adhering to Robert Peel's founding principle when establishing the Metropolitan Service in 1829 that 'the police are the public and the public are the police'. At that time he was trying to deal with public resistance to the establishment of the police and emphasised that the police would be drawn from the community it served. Today it clearly isn't always drawn from the community it serves. Going back over 20 years to the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry⁷, there have been long-standing calls for the police to recruit from a more diverse body of people. They haven't been successful in doing that. That has got to be one of the first measures in order to build trust with those communities. That equally applies to security, particularly frontline security. It needs to cater to the needs of those being protected. Private security is more diverse than policing, but the diversity is not consistent through the hierarchy.

Everybody needs to play their part in understanding the barriers that other people face. Many of these are to do with poverty as well as ethnicity. Education is always key. It is important to teach frontline practitioners to think about and engage with the wider issues and context in which they are

6. Lammy, D. (2017) *The Lammy review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system*. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf.
7. MacPherson, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* London: TSO

operating. We can all educate ourselves better about issues of equality and diversity. When it is better understood, it is possible to identify the right actions required and embed a more positive culture from top to bottom. Ultimately organisations will be more successful as they will be richer and more dynamic for the talent and expertise that different types of people bring.

JB: What are your plans for the future?

AW: I'm relatively new in my job at the University of West London. I will carry on identifying new areas for research and teaching as my work takes me in different directions. When my Security Institute term of office comes to an end I will want to do some more voluntary work. I have undertaken voluntary roles since the age of 16 and I have many passions such as improving routes for young people into security and supporting diversity and inclusion.

I have just completed a book⁸ that I will be promoting next year, which is intended to convey to any practitioner, no matter where they sit in the grander puzzle, that we are all part of a common framework. It looks at security from the international level downwards. It has a chapter on regional security, taking a developing world perspective. There are chapters on national security; local security, primarily around policing; security from an individual perspective. It also covers the cyber, corporate and maritime spheres. It looks at threats ranging from transnational organised crime to street crime, knife crime, corporate crime and pandemics, and the common challenges being faced now and anticipated in the future. The idea is that it draws together a range of ideas to present a bigger picture of security that anyone will be able to relate to and apply to their own work. It will show how security has become a major organising feature of society.



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8. Wakefield, A. (forthcoming) *Security and Crime: Converged Perspectives on a Complex World*. London: Sage.