

THE NATIONAL PRISON SURVEY 1991

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The National Prison Survey 1991 was the first national survey of prisoners in England and Wales. One of the reasons that lay behind the undertaking was a recognition of how little the Prison Service would gain from the 1991 Census: when it was realised that, for example, prisoners' occupations were to be recorded as 'inmate' it became clear that managers, policy makers and planners were not going to find out much about prisoners backgrounds from that source!

The National Prison Survey had three principal objectives. The first was to obtain systematic information about the background characteristics of prisoners in England and Wales. The second was to learn about prison regimes as seen through the eyes of the prisoners themselves. Finally it was hoped that by comparing prisoners' childhood circumstances and background with the crimes they had committed, the sentences they had received and their attitudes to crime and criminality, some light might be shed on the roots of their criminality.

The Home Office Research and Planning Unit, in consultation with Prison Service Headquarters and other Home Office colleagues, developed proposals for the survey in 1989 and later contracted the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) to carry it out. A random sample of the prison population was interviewed in January and February 1991 using a questionnaire which took about 40 minutes to complete. Altogether 10 per cent of male prisoners and 20 per cent of female prisoners were selected and 90 per cent of these were interviewed, a total of almost 4,000 prisoners.

This article focuses on just a few of the topics covered by the survey; further details are available in the report published by the Research and Planning Unit

(Walmsley, Howard & White, 1992) and in OPCS' report to the Home Office (Dodd & Hunter, 1992).

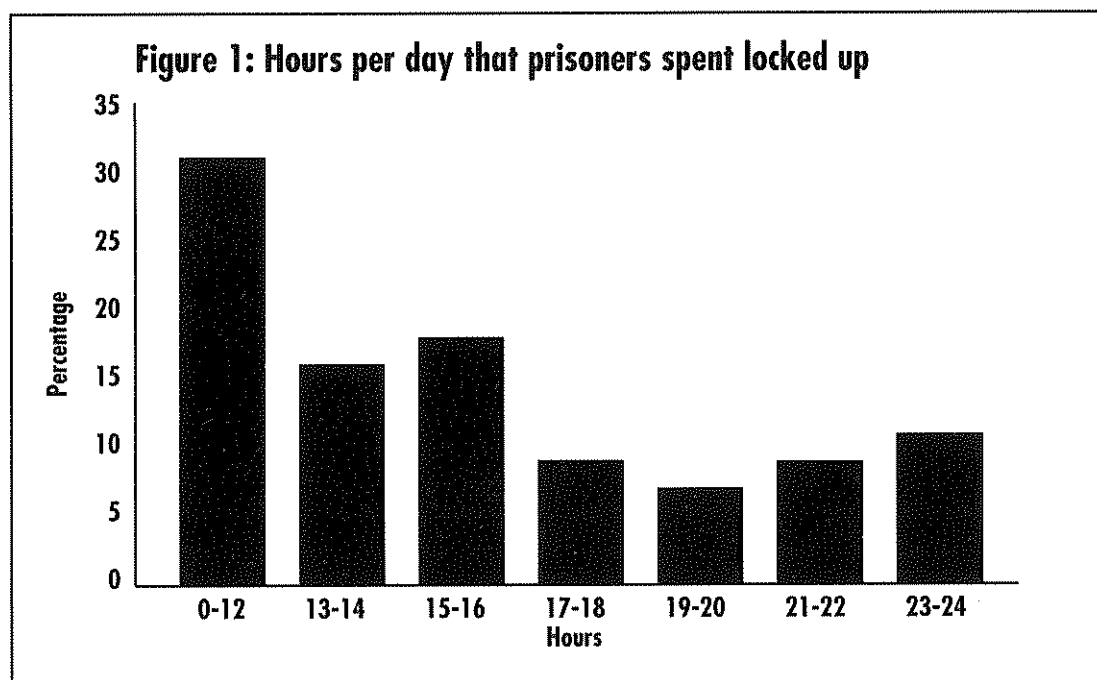
Background characteristics of prisoners

One topic which was covered in the section dealing with prisoners' background characteristics was childhood circumstances, that is, who prisoners lived with while they were growing up. 62 per cent of prisoners had spent most of the time up to the age of 16 with both parents and 19 per cent with just one parent. The proportion of prisoners coming from households that consisted of a single parent appears to be higher than in the general population. In line with changes in the structure of families in recent years, young prisoners were more likely than adult prisoners to have been brought up by one parent.

Twenty-six per cent of all prisoners said that they had been taken into local authority care before the age of 16. The proportion of young prisoners (under 21) who said this was 38 per cent. The comparable figure for the general population is only 2 per cent, with no significant differences between age groups. White and black Caribbean prisoners were almost equally likely to have had some experience of being in care (27 per cent and 29 per cent respectively). Only 10 per cent of black Africans and 6 per cent of Asians had ever been in care (it could be that many of these may not have spent their childhood in England and Wales, although they were not directly asked this question).

The prison regime

Prisoners were asked about a number of aspects of the prison regime including sharing of cells, hours locked up,



prison food, education and work. 20 per cent of prisoners said they had been locked in their cell for more than 20 hours on the previous day. Many of these were in fact locked up for almost the whole day, with 11 per cent of all prisoners saying they were locked up for at least 22.5 hours on the day prior to the interview. This was said by 34 per cent of those on remand in local prisons and 22 per cent of sentenced prisoners in local prisons. At the other end of the spectrum, almost a third of prisoners reported being locked up for no more than 12 hours on the previous day - the Prison Service's target for hours locked up. (See Figure 1)

There was a high level of belief in the value of prison education among prisoners who had taken classes. Just over two thirds of convicted prisoners who had attended classes thought these would be of use to them after release. Of prisoners who said that the prison they were in ran classes, 47 per cent attended these and nearly half of those who did not attend classes said they would like to do so. English was the class which had been taken by the highest proportion of prisoners (37 per cent of those who had attended a class), followed by music, art, drama and craft classes (31 per cent), maths (29 per cent) and computer sciences (25 per cent).

Attitudes to regime and ideas for change

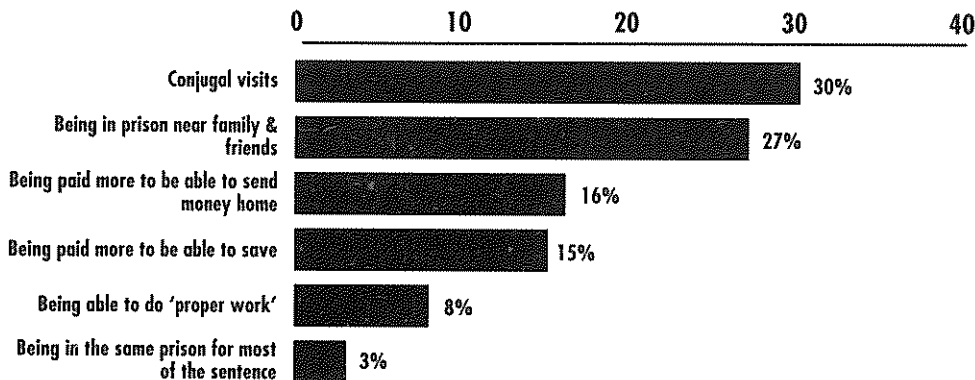
Prisoners were asked what improvements they would like to see in the prison regime. The main improvements favoured were better food (89 per cent of prisoners wanted this) and the use of (or more) phonecards (83 per cent). Better canteen facilities (78 per cent), more information on arrival (76 per cent), a TV in their cell (76 per cent) and more frequent visits (74 per cent) were also popular. When prisoners were asked what was their most favoured improvement, better food and more frequent visits were most popular (both 15 per cent), followed by the use of phonecards (12 per cent).

Looking at improvements in the prison service as a whole, 93 per cent of prisoners favoured being paid more for work so that they could save money, 90 per cent wanted to do 'proper work' and 88 per cent wanted to be in a prison near family and friends. At least two thirds of prisoners wanted to see each of the other three changes (to be paid more so that they could send money to their family, conjugal visits and to be in the same prison for most of their sentence). As with changes to the prison regime, prisoners were asked which of these changes to the service were most important. The introduction of conjugal

Figure 2: Improvements favoured in prison service as a whole

(each prisoner's most favoured improvement)

Percentage



visits (30 per cent) and being in a prison near family and friends (27 per cent) were those most favoured but prisoners' opinions varied according to age, sex and ethnic group. For example, conjugal visits were the most important change for about a third of male prisoners compared with 17 per cent of female prisoners. (See Figure 2)

Relationships in prison

Given that relationships between staff and prisoners, and relationships among prisoners, are vital to the existence of humane imprisonment and a positive regime, prisoners were asked about both of these in the survey. 41 per cent thought that prison officers treated them well, with only 9 per cent saying that they treated them badly. Although these figures varied for prisoners in different types of establishment and of different ages and ethnic groups, the proportion who said officers treated them badly never came near to the proportion who said they treated them well. Prisoners were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about prison officers. 71 per cent agreed with the statement 'most prison officers treat prisoners fairly here' but 25 per cent agreed that 'some prison officers assault prisoners here'. The latter was the statement which showed most variation by type of establishment. Less than 4 per cent of prisoners in open establishments agreed with it, compared with more than 30 per cent of those at remand centres, local prisons and closed YOIs.

As regards relationships with other

prisoners, 18 per cent said they did not feel safe from being injured or bullied by other prisoners. 26 per cent of those in a separate Rule 43 facility or segregated for their own protection said this. Asked whether they had been assaulted by another prisoner in the last six months, 9 per cent said they had been. Prisoners aged under 21 were the most likely to have been assaulted: 15 per cent of them said this compared with 4 per cent of those aged 50 or over.

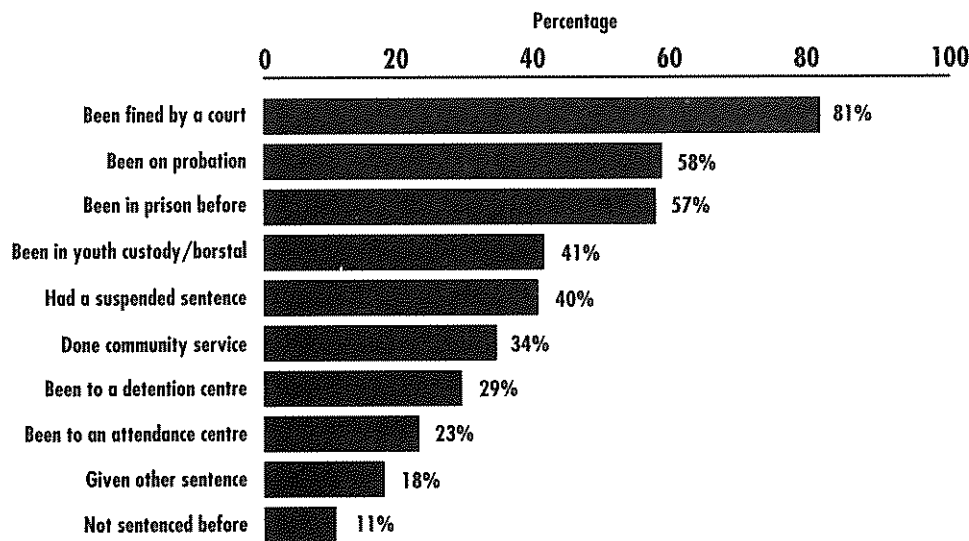
Contact with the outside

76 per cent of prisoners said that they had received a visit and 90 per cent said they had received a letter from a family member or a friend in the last three months. Of those who had been visited, 30 per cent said that their most important visitor travelled more than 60 miles to the prison, with an average distance of 62 miles. Visitors to prisoners in closed YOIs travelled furthest, an average of 101 miles. Nearly a quarter of those who had been visited said that their visitors had difficulties in getting to the prison and nearly half of all prisoners said that there was someone who did not visit them who they thought would do so if travelling to the prison was easier.

Convicted relatives

Research has shown that people who have a close relative with a criminal record are more likely to have a criminal record themselves. In the survey, 43 per cent of convicted prisoners said another member of their family had been convicted

Figure 3: Experience of previous sentences
(convicted prisoners only)



of a criminal offence and 35 per cent said that someone in their family had been imprisoned. Young prisoners reported even higher figures: 53 per cent had a family member who had been convicted and 44 per cent had a family member who had been imprisoned. In the general population, only 16 per cent said that a member of their family had been convicted of a criminal offence. Of those convicted prisoners who had a family member who had been convicted, in 73 per cent of cases a sibling had been convicted, in 35 per cent of cases it was a parent.

Previous sentences and attitudes to re-imprisonment

11 per cent of convicted prisoners said that prior to their present conviction they had never been sentenced by a criminal court; 43 per cent said they had not previously served a prison sentence. Prisoners with long prison sentences were more likely than those with short sentences to be serving a sentence of imprisonment for their first proved offence. Only 6 per cent of those serving a sentence of six months or less had not previously been sentenced by a criminal court, compared with 14 per cent of those serving over four years (including life). Women were much more likely to be first offence prisoners than men (38 per cent compared with 10 per cent). (See Figure 3)

Just over half of the sentenced prisoners thought that it was not at all likely that they would be back in prison at some time in the future while 10 per cent thought it was fairly likely and only 6 per cent thought it very likely. This can be contrasted with a study of a sample of prisoners discharged from prison in 1968: 26 per cent of these had been recommitted to prison under sentence within a two year period (Home Office, 1990).

Conclusion

The National Prison Survey has produced much information that will be useful for all those who are concerned to improve prison conditions and, in particular, to develop positive regimes that take full account of prisoners' needs, perceptions and attitudes. However, it has also demonstrated the potential of prisoner surveys and has made clear that there are many other aspects of prison life in which such information would also make a valuable contribution ■

References

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