

HMP HIGHPOINT AND DRUG COURIERS

*Ron Curtis, Governor,
HMP Highpoint,
and Pam Durrant,
Education Officer.*

*The authors argue that this
group of prisoners has special
needs and if they are not
recognised, the prisoners will
be further disadvantaged and
corrupted.*

HMP Highpoint lies on, and is intersected by, the main A143 Bury St Edmunds/Haverhill road. It was previously RAF Stradishall and received its first prisoners in May 1977. Since this time there has been a major programme of rebuilding and refurbishment.

It has a population of some 750 prisoners housed in two separate Category C prisons and one Category D unit of 70. There are approximately 360 staff and the annual budget is £8.8 million pounds.

It is a training prison overcoming past, chronic problems of poor accommodation and unemployment. It offers a full range of education classes and of trade and skills training.

Since 1989 there has been a significant change in the ethnic composition of the population, and within this, the small but significant group of prisoners who are foreign nationals subject to deportation procedures - most of these convicted of

drugs offences.

Race Relations Monitoring was started at HMP Highpoint in July 1987 when the non-white population was 26 per cent. Between January 1989 and December 1989 this rose from 30 per cent to 40 per cent. It peaked during the Winter of 1990-91 at 42 per cent and thereafter declined to the current proportion of 36 per cent.

Between July 1989 and January 1992 there was a considerable increase in the proportion of African prisoners. In July 1987 it had been 3 per cent, during the Spring and Summer of 1990 it peaked at 13 per cent, and today is 9 per cent. This trend is shown in Table 1, which reflects that the fluctuations in the non-white population as a whole, and of the African population in particular, were similar.

The breakdown of the population by ethnicity on 9 March 1992 shows the preponderance of West Indian/Guyanese and African prisoners among the ethnic minority (Table 2).

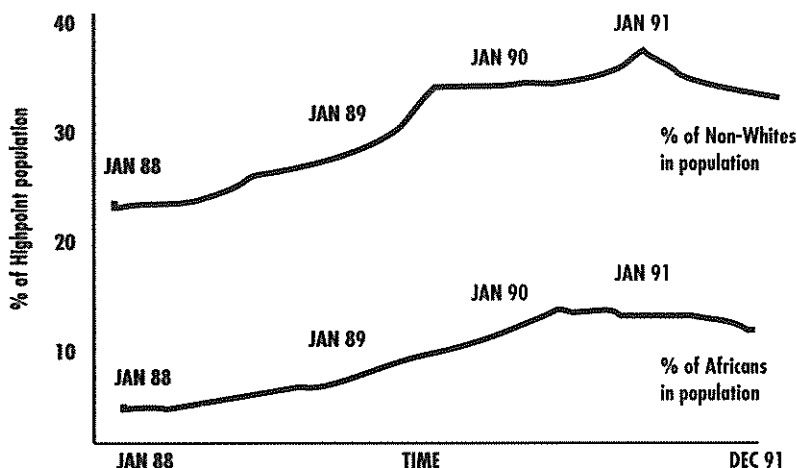
Further statistical evidence shows that of the number of inmates whose main offence was drug trafficking on the same date the majority, 51 per cent, were of African origin (Table 3).

Additionally, the number of prisoners who were subject to deportation proceedings by ethnic groups shows that African prisoners again represent the majority, 65 per cent, and shows that the majority of these, 37 out of 47, had drug trafficking as the main offence (Table 4).

It is also known that this same group of African 'deportees' convicted of drug offences have few, or no, previous convictions.

The average time spent at Highpoint Prison by all 'deportees' on 9 March 1992 was 74 weeks, by African 'deportees', 89 weeks, but by African 'drug courier deportees' 97 weeks. This compares with an

Table 1
PERCENTAGE OF NON-WHITE AND AFRICAN INMATES AT HMP HIGHPOINT
OVER THE PERIOD JANUARY 1988 TO DECEMBER 1991



average time spent at Highpoint by all prisoners of 32 weeks, and with a recent group of discharges of which 17 per cent had spent only eight weeks at Highpoint (Table 5).

All these statistics then identify a group of the prison population which is distinct and identifiable in several important respects. It is a well-represented ethnic group, convicted of the same offence, with no significant criminal background, and subject to deportation proceedings. Members of the group are serving long sentences and have been in one prison for a considerable period.

In prison terms this is not seen as 'a problem of drug couriers', neither is there a problem of integration or acceptance. There have been few racial incidents at HMP Highpoint, indeed HM Chief Inspector of Prisons noted in February 1990, 'There were few signs of racial tension; much of the credit for the harmony which existed must go to Highpoint's staff.' In as much as there is a problem, it arises from a distinct group of prisoners with a strong group and racial identity. Other features of this group which strengthen its identity are:

1. They are likely to be intelligent and articulate (despite problems of language and communications noted elsewhere).
2. They are motivated to gain knowledge/skills far more than English prisoners. In particular they are over-represented on educational and certain trade training courses.
3. Respect for authority is higher than normal and behaviour is better, in particular as measured by adjudications (Table 6) and segregation on R43 'Good Order and Discipline' (Table 7) which show this group to be 'under-represented'.

Another feature is that many of this group of prisoners arrived together during 1989-90 and were concentrated in the same accommodation in the prison. This happened because of the practice (now discontinued) of allocating accommodation according to work activity and, as noted above, many of the group followed the same activity. No doubt there was also an amount of 'self-selection' when accommodation was allocated. The group is further distinguished by being made up of foreign nationals in an English prison, and hence having 'special

Table 2
ETHNICITY OF INMATE POPULATION AT HMP HIGHPOINT
ON 9 MARCH 1992
(including temporary absences)

Ethnic group	No of inmates	% of total population
WHITE	462	64
W. INDIAN/GUYANESE	153	21
AFRICAN	67	9
INDIAN	13	2 35
MIXED ORIGIN	9	
PAKISTANI	6	
ARABIAN	5	4
OTHER	5	
CHINESE	1	
BANGLADESHI	0	
	721	

Table 3
NUMBER OF INMATES WHOSE MAIN OFFENCE WAS DRUG TRAFFICKING
ON 9 MARCH 1992

Ethnic group	No of inmates	% of drug trafficking
AFRICAN	45	51
WHITE	24	64
W. INDIAN/GUYANESE	15	17
INDIAN	2	2
PAKISTANI	1	1
ARABIAN	1	1
	88	

needs'.

More recently, the group, partly for the reason given above, have become more sensitive in their perception of racial discrimination by staff, and by 'the system' and indeed, by 'the Governor'. This has at least partly arisen from grievances and problems felt over the long period they have been at Highpoint Prison, and about which little progress has been made.

In a recent group discussion I noted how the grievances sounded similar to those that one might meet in any group of long serving prisoners, but were given a particular emphasis because of the particular identity of the group. It seemed to me that these prisoners had in their period in prison

Table 4
NUMBER OF INMATES WHO WILL BE OR HAVE BEEN RECOMMENDED
FOR DEPORTATION ON 9 MARCH 1992

Total number of deportees = 72
 Represent 10% of Highpoint's population.

Ethnic group	No of inmates	% of all deportees
AFRICAN	47	65
W. INDIAN/GUYANESE	14	19
INDIAN	5	7
WHITE	2	3
PAKISTANI	2	3
MIXED ORIGIN	1	1
ARABIAN	1	1

Number of African deportees whose main offence was drug trafficking = 37

Table 5
TIME SPENT AT HIGHPOINT BY DEPORTEES
ON 9 MARCH 1992

	Number	Time in weeks
ALL DEPORTEES	72	74
AFRICAN DEPORTEES	47	89
W. INDIAN/GUYANESE		
DEPORTEES	14	52
INDIAN DEPORTEES	5	54
AFRICAN (DRUG COURIER)		
DEPORTEES	37	97

Table 6
ADJUDICATIONS BY ETHNIC GROUP

Ethnic group	% adjudications
WHITE	66
W. INDIAN/GUYANESE	26
INDIAN	1
PAKISTANI	
BANGLADESHI	
CHINESE	
AFRICAN	4
ARAB	
MIXED ORIGIN	1
OTHERS	

adopted a number of the negative aspects of the normal prison culture, in fact what I was seeing seemed to be a 'culture built upon a culture'.

This was illustrated during an incident in a living unit on 22 March 1992 when there was a violent confrontation between Nigerian prisoners on the one hand, and a mixture of white and other ethnic prisoners on the other, arising from dealing in drugs and/or tobacco. This was not a racial incident as such, essentially being a 'power struggle' because of a recent increase in prices of contraband. Nonetheless the power groups had a racial identity.

Specific grievances and problems raised by this group are as follows:

1. The difficulty of obtaining Home Leave and Category D status:- I have recently introduced guidelines agreed at Area level and published to all prisoners which have increased the possibilities of home leave for 'deport' prisoners. However, the fact remains that despite the discretion that Governors have to grant home leave for this group, it is more difficult than for English nationals. Category D status continues to be difficult to gain.
2. Parole:- Because a significant number of this group are serving five years and above for drug offences they came under the 'restricted policy' for parole. (This policy has now been discontinued).
3. Diet:- The difficulties of providing 'ethnic diet' for many groups are well known.
4. Library Provision:- The problem is part of a more general problem of providing ethnic minority literature.
5. Telephone Communications/Phone Cards:- A foreign national who wishes to make international calls finds that the low denomination Prison Service phone card will connect him but will leave insufficient time for a reasonable conversation. In addition, restriction on the number of phone cards in possession might in any case mean that international calls of any significant length would be prohibited. Prison Service Headquarters is considering with British Telecom the provision of higher denomination phone cards. It will then be for Governors to decide what the limit for 'in possession' will be.
6. Family Ties/Visits:- By definition, distance from family and communication with family are more problematical than for most prisoners.
7. Lack of Consulate Support:- Nigerian prisoners have lacked support from

their consulate; neither have they sought it. This has in particular been associated with the wish to keep the circumstances of their imprisonment confidential on their return home, and the law introduced in Nigeria which lays them open to further charges and further imprisonment for the same offence on their return.

8. Distance from London-Based Organisations: London-based organisations concerned with the welfare of immigrants are likely to find contact impeded by distance.

A number of other issues have been raised with Prison Service Headquarters about the management of this group of prisoners.

Most of those responsible for allocating prisoners do not monitor allocation according to ethnic group, although this has now started in a number of establishments. We have had to ask whether allocation of this group of prisoners and other ethnic minorities might represent hidden discrimination. Is it assumed, for instance, that a 'deport' prisoner has no family ties and therefore can be allocated to a remote Suffolk Prison, although this will make contact with London-based support organisations less easy? Is the fact that we provide at Highpoint a service for this group of prisoners in itself perpetuating the situation?

On the other hand the concentration of this group may be beneficial because it leads to 'specialization' in dealing with their needs. As Penny Green has noted in her research 'in addition to the mutual support that shared background and culture may provide, the presence of significant populations of foreign nationals can prompt certain progressive institutional responses. The effect of a large population of Nigerians at Highpoint Prison, for instance, has resulted in an Education Department which actively encourages the study of African Literature, Politics and Culture. Many of the men interviewed had never had the opportunity to study their own society in such depth before and all found the opportunity rewarding. In the same prison Nigerian prisoners have organised themselves into a lobby group petitioning journalists and politicians in an effort to reform parole and home leave regulations.' (Quote from a Howard League publication called 'Drug Couriers' written by Dr Penny Green.)

To illustrate the response at HMP

Table 7
RULE 43 SEGREGATION BY ETHNIC GROUP

Ethnic group	% R43 (GOAD)
WHITE	64
W. INDIAN/GUYANESE	28
INDIAN	
PAKISTANI	2
BANGLADESHI	
CHINESE	
AFRICAN	4
ARAB	
MIXED ORIGIN	
OTHERS	

Highpoint to the special needs of this group of prisoners Pam Durrant, a teacher in our Education Department who has taken a particular interest in this group, describes how the Prison Education Department has adapted to Nigerians:

Adapting to Nigerians in a Prison Education Department

Many of our 'drug courier' prisoners are Nigerian. Dealing with a large number of prisoners from a different culture poses specific problems for various aspects of prison life. The Education Department is an example of this, as at least 90 per cent of Nigerians spend some time on Education classes during their sentence.

I have been teaching Nigerians for five years. In 1990 my classes were 90 per cent African, mostly Nigerians. At that time 50 per cent of the students in the department were Nigerian. The Education Department has had to adapt to working with Nigerian students and to dealing with specific challenges, such as communication, cultural differences, demands on the curriculum and resourcing.

There have been communication problems for both teachers and students. African speech rhythms and syntax often make Nigerian English difficult to understand. In Nigeria, English is a bureaucratic and academic language, and Nigerians find it difficult to use English in a personal way. For example, often they have not learnt to negotiate in English, and this can lead to misunderstandings. There are cultural differences in the use of body language. The Western World, for example, considers that eye contact indicates straightforwardness and honesty, for an African

eye contact is disrespectful.

A teacher needs to have an understanding of Nigerian culture and thinking in order to deal with her students effectively. Status, for example, based on sex, age groups, academic qualifications and money is culturally very important. When Dr Penny Green visited my classroom her status was potentially low; not only is she a woman, but a young woman. Therefore, I introduced her as 'Dr Green', in order to emphasise her academic status.

Perhaps the greatest gulf in Western and African thinking is colonialism. To the West, colonialism is something in the history books; the African lives with the ongoing results of it. To him, colonialism is a live and recurring issue.

We have had to adapt to the demands made by Nigerians in terms of curriculum and teaching skills. There has been great demand for examination work in Economics, Law, Computing, Business Studies and E.S.O.L. Students have wished, and been encouraged, to study the history and culture of their own tribes and country.

In English studies, we have had to learn to deal with the particular problems posed by African syntax and grammar, and to understand the literary tradition and culture from which our students are writing.

There are obvious resourcing implications arising from these curriculum demands. In some areas we have had to extend the quantity of material available. In others, such as novels, poetry, literary criticism, history, cultural background, economics and examples of business practice, we have had to locate and buy Nigerian material.

Our Nigerian students are well worth this effort. They are motivated, studious, and delightful people to work with. Many of them are highly intelligent. My class of 1990 included a doctor, a dentist and an architect. Although many are now on Vocational Training Courses, I keep in touch with my former students. As their sentences progress they are becoming increasingly disgruntled and depressed because of the anomalies of their position as deportee prisoners compared with that of English nationals serving similar sentences for similar offences.

Nigerian drug couriers are a 'special needs group', both in terms of their situation as deportees, and in the way in which prisons have had to adapt to their needs. I think that there is a case to be made for selected establishments to specialise in taking Nigerian prisoners so that the skills and resources which have been acquired can continue to be put to good use ■

What do you know about Aids?

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT AIDS?

**The issues raised affect everyone
Sex, Illness, Disease, Loss &
Bereavement, Men, Women
and Power Relationships**

**The Lantern Trust offers an
educational programme which
combines clear factual
information with an exploration
of these issues at its Centre in
London.**

**for an information pack
contact:**

**THE LANTERN TRUST
72 Honey Lane
Waltham Abbey
Essex
Telephone: 0992 714900**