

GROUPWORK IN PRISONS A NATIONAL SURVEY

This survey was based on a pilot study by Towl (1991) which surveyed groupwork in prisons (in England) with psychology units. A major finding of the pilot survey was that Probation Officers were participating in more groupwork than any other professional group. Given this provisional finding it made sense to collect our questionnaire data through Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) for the main survey. Thus the SPOs were asked to co-ordinate responses from their prisons. The Towl (1991) pilot survey sample was of only 32 prisons, our survey covered 128 prisons in England and Wales. Of 128 sets of questionnaires distributed 84 (66 per cent) were returned. This survey provides an up-to-date survey of groupwork in prisons.

The questionnaire was based on that used in the pilot study but with a number of changes to elicit more useful and detailed information. The first section of the questionnaire used in our study simply requested respondents (Senior Probation Officers) to tick, from a list, those types of groupwork currently underway in their prisons. Included in the list was an invitation to specify what 'other' types of groupwork were underway that were not included within the eight types of groupwork specified on our list (derived from the pilot study). For each type of groupwork noted in the first section of the questionnaire respondents were requested to complete a 'description form' which constituted the second section of the questionnaire and was structured with 10 questions;

- 1) Please circle facilitators - probation officers, prison officers, teachers, psychologists, 'outside' agencies, others.
- 2) How many facilitators run each course?

- 3) What are the total number of hours each groupwork intervention runs for?
- 4) What are the total number of hours involved in preparation and selection of candidates for the groupwork?
- 5) Over the past year (July 1991 to July 1992) how many of these groups have run?
- 6) What is the average number of prisoners in the group?
 - (a) at the selection stage,
 - (b) at session one,
 - (c) completing the group.
- 7) Is the groupwork evaluated? If yes how?
- 8) What is the main difficulty in doing groupwork in prisons?
- 9) What is the main strength of this type of groupwork?
- 10) What is the main limitation to this type of groupwork?

On the basis of the answers given to the above questions in our survey we sought to answer three related questions. What type of groupwork is done? who does it? and at what type of establishments is it done?

What are the most common types of groupwork undertaken in prisons?

Eighteen (21 per cent) of our sample reported doing no groupwork whatsoever. Fifty one per cent of all the groupwork reported was accounted for in four types of groupwork; offending behaviour, alcohol, drugs and anger. Anxiety management, social skills, lifer groups and sex offender groups accounted for a further 24 per cent of the reported groups. Those types of groupwork recorded under 'other' on our

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Table 1
Numbers of the four most common types of groupwork
by prison type

	Off behav	Alcohol	Drugs	Anger
Male				
Local (N = 13)	5	3	5	2
Open (N = 9)	6	4	2	1
Training (N = 19)	10	12	10	8
Dispersal (N = 5)	3	3	2	2
Y.O.I. (N = 20)	11	12	9	10
Female (N = 6)	3	2	3	2
Unclassified (N = 12)	2	4	4	3
Total Prisons (84)	40	40	35	28

questionnaire, accounted for about a quarter of all groupwork reported and included 32 different types.

We can see from table 1 that just under half of the prisons in our survey reported doing offending behaviour groupwork. Also, the same number of prisons report doing alcohol control groupwork. Male training prisons and male Young Offender Institutions (Y.O.I.s) appear to have more groupwork than in other establishment types. It is perhaps unsurprising that local prisons have the least amount of groupwork given the high throughput rate of prisoners to other prisons with inevitable logistical difficulties in groupwork organisation. Indeed, if we take offending behaviour groupwork as an example of a possible form of groupwork in a local prison, one candidate recruitment problem may be that prisoners on remand may be less willing to talk about their offending behaviour. Conversely, male training prisons have regimes which are increasingly being assessed on the basis of 'inmate activity' hours, hence groupwork may be viewed as a legitimate 'inmate activity'. From this we can see the importance of groupwork in prisons fitting in with the organisational structure. This is an important point, especially given the difficulties associated with broader institutional and sub-cultural constraints which remain as a core difficulty for facilitators of groupwork in prisons.

Perhaps the most obvious commonality across these four types of groupwork is that each is (usually) directly related to the control of criminal behaviour.

The offending behaviour groups are explicitly just that. Alcohol and drug misuse are commonly implicated in the commission of offences. Anger can be associated with the commission of violent crime. Psychologists have been largely responsible for the introduction of anger control groupwork in prisons. Anger control groupwork has been the fastest growing type of groupwork in prisons in recent years. About one in three prisons have tutor teams able to run anger control groups (Towl, 1991, 1993, 1994). Each of these most common types of groupwork are likely to increase over the coming years with the implementation and influence of the Criminal Justice Act (1991) in prisons. Under the terms of the Act it is clear that prisoners will have an increased incentive to attend such groups. Their early release will be subject to a demonstration on their part of having addressed the issues that led to their offending.

Who facilitates groupwork in prisons?

Table 2 provides us with an indication of who facilitates what groupwork in prisons (of the four most common types).

Probation officers do considerably more groupwork in prisons than any other professional group. Indeed the table shows that as a professional group they report involvement in 83 groups for our four most common types. This seems to indicate a considerable input given that our total sample of returned questionnaires batches was 84, and that 18 of those reported doing no groupwork at all. Overall, prison officers do marginally more of the major types of groupwork than outside agencies. Teachers facilitate marginally more groups than psychologists. Outside agencies are responsible for facilitating many alcohol and drugs groups. Psychologists are directly involved in more anger control groupwork than alcohol, drugs and offending behaviour combined.

What other types of groupwork are there in prisons?

Let us now turn to the four next most common types of groupwork. (See Table 3)

The pattern of responses on Table 3 differs from that of Table 1 in a number of important ways. Male training prisons and male Y.O.I.s have a similar pattern of frequencies of these groupwork types with the notable exception of lifer groups. This difference possibly reflects the respective prisoner population characteristics across these two establishment types. We expected anxiety management and social skills groups to be more prevalent in Y.O.I.s. Lifer and sex offender groupwork are relatively common in dispersal prisons. Again, this probably reflects the profiles of the prisoner populations of these prisons, given the number of life sentenced prisoners and sex offenders inside the prison dispersal system. Although groupwork 'types' have been reported in this survey it was evident from our results that some groupwork types were more homogeneous categories than others. This point is illustrated below in our description of the fourth to eighth most common types of groupwork in prisons.

Lifer groups in the different prison types are liable to be quite different in their purpose, structure and content. For example, lifer groups in dispersal prisons where prisoners are generally at the beginning of their sentences, are most likely to include psychological preparation and strategies for survival over the long term of imprisonment to follow. By contrast, lifer groups, in say, male open prisons, are likely to be more orientated towards adaptation to moving out of prison.

Sex offender groups are on the whole conducted within the national sex offender assessment and treatment programme. These groups are based on 'vulnerable prisoner' wings or units in an environment where prisoners are less likely to feel intimidated by the draconian mainstream prisoner subculture.

Social skills groups are liable to include a variety of different areas. The term social skills is a broad one and may include a whole host of different types of training skills.

Given the high levels of anxiety experienced by prisoners it is perhaps surprising that anxiety management groups are not more prevalent. However, perhaps this assumption is based on perceived needs rather than a fuller understanding of the prison context. The macho subculture of prisons are not conducive to individuals

Facilitators	Off behav	Alcohol	Drugs	Anger
Probation	30	19	21	13
Prison Officer	13	10	10	9
Teachers	5	3	2	3
Psychology	1	1	1	7
Outside Agencies	0	13	21	0
Other	2	1	0	1

showing or sharing their anxieties, particularly within a group setting.

Probably the most robust finding across all eight types of groupwork identified is that they are most commonly facilitated within male training prisons and Young Offender Institutions. To reiterate an earlier point we would argue that this is partly because training prison and Young Offender regimes in terms of their ethos and organisation are liable to be, in principle, receptive to the inclusion of groupwork 'activities'.

We will now move on to look at the likelihood of prisoners participating in groupwork in prisons. For the purpose of this paper we will restrict our discussion to the four major areas of groupwork listed in Table 1. From our survey we were able to calculate approximate probabilities of groupwork attendance by dividing the reported number of prisoners on each group per year by the Certified Normal Allocation (C.N.A.) for the prison. The C.N.A. is the

	Lifer	Social Skills	Sex Offender	Anxiety
Male				
Local (N = 13)	0	1	5	1
Open (N = 9)	4	1	0	1
Training (N = 19)	10	6	3	1
Dispersal (N = 5)	3	2	3	0
Y.O.I. (N = 20)	2	6	2	2
Female (N = 6)	2	2	1	1
Unclassified (N = 12)	2	3	3	2
Total (84)	23	21	17	8

total number of prisoner places that a prison is deemed to be able to accommodate at any given time. Hence, given 'throughput rates', our calculations are liable to represent an overestimate of the likelihood of attendance in groups for prisoners. However, certain patterns have emerged.

In terms of the total numbers of prisoners attending groupwork relative to the C.N.A. Young Offenders are the group of prisoners most likely to attend. Interestingly, women prisoners are more likely to attend alcohol control groups than other types of groupwork. Indeed, per head of population, women in prisons in our sample, are more likely to attend alcohol groups than men. Women prisoners are highly unlikely to attend offending behaviour groups. Prisoners in male local prisons are more likely to be involved in drugs groups than other groups. The probability of attendance in groupwork overall, for our four major categories of groupwork, is second highest in male training prisons.

So, in sum, most groupwork in prisons happens in Young Offender Institutions and male training prisons. Women prisoners are relatively more likely to attend alcohol control groups than men. The four most common types of groupwork in prisons are directly related to criminal behaviour. Some of the groupwork 'types' are likely to be heterogeneous in form for example lifer groups, whereas others are likely to be more homogeneous for example sex offender and anger control groups which are part of national treatment programmes. Most groupwork in prisons is facilitated by probation officers.

The Context

Groupwork invariably takes place within the context of a particular culture at a particular time. The current political zeitgeist in the public sector involves a great deal of emphasis on the measurement of identified outcomes which are viewed as critical in evaluating the value (for money) of the service. The term groupwork may beget two messages for the prison managers. First, it is liable to be a constructive activity. Second, it involves using a small number of staff to engage a (relatively) large number of prisoners. This first message is generally plausible, especially so, given the baseline of 'prison life'. The second message is less convincing despite its superficial plausibility. Planning, preparation and candidate

selection are all time-consuming activities, often well beyond what would happen with one-to-one interventions. Prisoners agendas for groupwork may be somewhat different. For example, for some, groupwork is a useful forum for real change, for others, it is simply an aspect of what Goffman (1961) would term a conversion strategy. Conversion is where an inmate 'acts out' the role of 'ideal inmate'. As alluded to earlier the implementation of the C.J. Act in prisons may increase the use of such conversion strategies.

Evaluation

We found very little evidence of the evaluation of groupwork in prisons. It would be a mistake to assume that a lack of evidence of evaluation work of groups is simply a product of the difficulties associated with working in a prison setting. In a recent survey of groupwork in the probation services of England and Wales no mention is made of the evaluation of the groupwork (see Caddick, 1991).

Where the evaluation of groups in our survey was reported, it tended to be of a very limited type, focusing upon whether or not participants had found the group useful and enjoyable. With such a relatively high level of groupwork activity being undertaken in prisons it seems to us to represent a significant opportunity to do evaluative work. Psychologists in prisons are well placed to assist in the design and implementation of such evaluative studies.

One of the reasons sometimes given for not evaluating groupwork is that the limitations of particular evaluations are seen as outweighing the benefits of service evaluation given a context of very limited resources. Another problem may be that group facilitators do not feel confident or able to effectively evaluate group interventions. Inevitably, limited resources may feature as a reason for not conducting evaluation work. There are also a number of conceptual and logistical difficulties associated with the evaluation of groupwork intervention.

Despite the difficulties, the evaluation of our interventions is important on both empirical and ethical grounds. The empirical point is that we need to demonstrate what works (and what doesn't). At its most basic level, the ethical point is that if it does work we need to do more of it and if it doesn't we need to stop such groups.

Reflections

Our four major categories of groupwork (all related to criminal behaviour) are likely to persist. Offending behaviour groups will probably continue to thrive, particularly whilst there are probation officers based in prisons. Alcohol and drug groups are facilitated, in large part, by outside agencies and thus are less dependent upon prison personnel for their continuation. Anger control groupwork is the second largest national 'treatment' initiative and as such is liable to continue to increase over the coming years, although growth will be dependent upon a shift in facilitators from psychologists to prison officers. Sex offender groups are likely to improve further in quality because of the high profile and resources involved in what is the major national assessment and treatment initiative in prisons. Numbers of

lifer groups are liable to reflect numbers in the overall prison lifer population (currently on the increase). The future of anxiety management and social skills groups is less clear.

Overall, groupwork appears to be on the increase in prisons, the immediate future is fertile for development. ■

References

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DEAFNESS

Conference

'In prison deaf inmates are isolated and very often frightened resulting in violent behaviour.'

Progress through equality

I wish to focus this article on the deaf and to give an insight into their world and their specific communication problems.

The conference was aimed to make 'professionals' aware of problems in other specialist areas. It focused on five main areas Forensic, Mental Health, Education the justice system, Rehabilitation and the Counselling services. I will be trying to extract impartial issues from that conference.

Communication at the conference between deaf and hearing people was first class and set a standard for us all to aspire to. Many lectures were 'signed' by deaf professionals and for hearing people a 'Voice over' translation was provided. For the 'spoken' lectures the 'signing' was interpreted into Sign-supported English (SSE), British Sign Language (BSL) and mouthed orally for the deaf without signing skills.

For the benefit of European visitors French Sign was provided. For the hard-of-hearing a loop system was laid which connected directly with hearing aids.

Types of sign

To explain further about sign language, each region of the country has variations (as with our accents) and there are four main types of 'Sign', BSL, SSE, Piaget Dormann and Makoton.

Each country also has its own 'sign' language (so Esperanto it is not).¹

Forensic aspects of mental health and deafness

Under the Forensic aspects of deafness and mental health speakers from Rampton Hospital made us aware that not only were their inmates deaf but also disordered, detained and dangerous. Yet despite these

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¹ (Esperanto) = An international artificial language based on words common to the main European languages.