

charge 24 hours a day - because prison telephones screen out 0800 numbers. The same policy denies us access to DSS benefit advice lines and a whole variety of other counselling services that do not cost a penny. Why?

Shortly I begin work on a book detailing the experiences of lesbian and gay inmates and staff, to be published in 1995 by Cassell. I am co-writing the book with a lesbian who was an officer for 16 years and whose partner is still a serving officer: their treatment and that of other staff who have

contacted us, shows that the homophobic 'Canteen Culture' of the police, is alive and well in the prison service.

As an openly gay prisoner with a partner outside, the prison service will not convince me it is serious about EO as long as it continues to practice such homophobic policies as that which disqualifies gay/lesbian partners from the ambit of both inter-prison visits and the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme. In January 1994 the Home Secretary said he 'did not think taxpayers would want their money spent on this sort of

thing'. Is it only heterosexuals who pay tax then?

The problem afflicting prison EO is to be found in the approach that tackles issues not because it is politically expedient at the time. The end result of such an approach is that the solutions put in place to address the problems, are often as transient, fragmented and disingenuous as the purported concerns which gave rise to them.

Yours faithfully

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Reviews

BOOKS

Parole in transition: evaluating the impact and effects of changes in the parole system.

Roger Hood and Stephen Shute. University of Oxford, CCR Occasional Paper No. 13. Published 1994. Price £10.00.

The book is the first of a three-part evaluation of the parole system prior to, and consequent on, the 1991 Criminal Justice Act.

This initial study is intended to show how the system operated before the Act, and to produce baselines against which to measure the changes. The authors suggest that the evaluation will also be useful in studying the problems of parole systems in general, and point out that there has been no previous full study which examined the whole system. One would have expected an in-depth study to have preceded the Carlisle Report.

The evaluation which forms the subject of this paper was carried out between April and September 1992, before the 1991 CJA took effect.

Hood and Shute attended between them 16 meetings of Parole Board panels, at which 383 long term determinate cases were considered. They also interviewed 201 prisoners serving determinate sentences of four years or more, at Parkhurst, Albany, The Verne, Featherstone and Wandsworth, together with 54 prison officers, 20 seconded probation officers and six wing governors at the same establishments.

The study examines the actual process of the panel meetings, and how decisions were made. For instance, the average time taken for discussion and decision on long term cases was only 4.7 minutes, though panel members were expected to be thoroughly familiar with the contents of the parole dossiers before attending the meeting. The researchers found no consensus within or between

panels regarding the weightings to be given to different factors in reaching a parole decision, and there was minimal use or mention of the Reconviction Prediction Score by the panels.

In general, the prisoners interviewed, knew little about the parole system. The staff interviewed had a wide range of views and interpretations, with marked differences in attitude towards the importance of different factors leading to a favourable parole result. This reflected the vagueness of the panels on the weightings to be given to different factors.

Both the staff and inmates involved in this study saw the system as a 'lottery' and the results of this evaluation seem to bear out this view. The booklet would make depressing reading for inmates and could only serve to reinforce their cynicism.

Hood and Shute estimate that 110 fewer prisoner years per annum should be served under the new system, compared to the old. Against this must be weighed the fact that in the past many cases seen as 'high risk' by panels were still released early on parole because it was considered safer for them to be released under supervision. Under the new system, these people would still receive supervision, even if released at the two-thirds point of their sentence, and therefore may be kept in prison longer (to their NPD) than they would have been under the old system.

Both prisoners and staff interviewed had generally high expectations of the system introduced with the 1991 CJA. There can only be increased cynicism and disillusionment if these expectations are not met.

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