£370K grant awarded to investigate relationship between prison visitation and reoffending in the UK

Posted on Wednesday 29th August 2012

Dominique Moran (/staff/profiles/gees/moran-dominique.aspx) and **Louise Dixon (/staff/profiles/psychology/dixon-louise.aspx)** (Psychology) have been successful in obtaining a £370k fEC grant from the ESRC for a project entitled 'Breaking the Cycle? Prison Visitation and Recidivism in the UK'.

This 3-year interdisciplinary project will provide a new perspective on prison visitation and its relationship to the highly topical issue of recidivism. Macro-level statistical analysis in parallel with innovative mixed-methods research into visiting facilities will identify the nature of this relationship and its socio-spatial context, informing policy towards visitation and the design of visiting spaces, and contributing to broader debates about prisoner rehabilitation and resettlement.

In the aftermath of the 2011 UK riots, Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke described the rioters as a 'feral underclass, cut off from the mainstream', and blamed the riots on the 'broken penal system – one whose record in preventing reoffending has been straightforwardly dreadful'. Reoffending or recidivism is key to the operation of the repetitive cycle of incarceration, re-entry, re-offending and re-incarceration, and represents a major policy challenge. In the UK, 75% of ex-inmates reoffend within nine years of release, and 39.3% within the first twelve months.

Clarke's solution as set out in the government's "Breaking the Cycle" Green Paper is 'payment by results'; a 'radical and decentralising reform' with 'freedom to innovate' new interventions, opening 'the market to new providers from the private, voluntary and community sectors'. This project draws attention to prison visitation as an aspect of imprisonment which has already been demonstrated to improve the outcomes of released prisoners, but whose specific functionality is at present poorly understood. Through parallel methodologies, the project investigates the relationship between visitation and recidivism. It will generate both nuanced insights into the relationship between prison visitation and recidivism, and also critical insights into the socio-spatial context of prison visiting, to inform visitation policy and the design of more effective prison visiting spaces. It seizes an opportunity to influence policy and create impact, at a time when the coalition government is consulting on policy reform, in particular in relation to recidivism. It represents convergence of cutting-edge debates in cognate disciplines of human geography, criminology, psychology and wider social theory, and resonates with policy development in individual prison institutions in the UK in the context of the 'Breaking the Cycle' initiative.

There will be a 2.5-year Post-Doctoral Research Assistant position created in connection with this grant; post to be advertised in due course.

© University of Birmingham 2015