

# PRISON BULLYING AND VICTIMISATION

Kate Gooch and James Treadwell



*'Only a whole prison approach can counter the rapidly changing dynamics of prison victimisation'*

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There are growing concerns about the safety of prisoners across the male prison estate, with an increasing number of deaths in custody, incidents of self-harm and assaults. Prison bullying continues to be a widespread problem, particularly in young offender institutions.

However, the contemporary problem of prison bullying is little understood. The effects and impact of victimisation are significant both for the individuals concerned and the wider prison community. Understanding how, when and why prison violence and bullying occurs is crucial.

A newly published Birmingham Law School research report, *Prison Bullying and Victimisation* says that only strong leadership, good staff-prisoner relationships and a 'whole prison approach' to anti-victimisation can counter the evolving problems of bullying and violence in prisons. Gooch and Treadwell's research offers a unique insight into the new dynamics of prison bullying and victimisation, and the illicit sub rosa economy. The report concludes that high levels of violence and bullying are not inevitable, but will not be reduced without a whole prison approach.

*'I had footprints all over my head, basically cracked open, blood everywhere.'*

**Interviewer:** *Why did they do that to you?*

*'Because I showed a sign of weakness. Because I showed that I was a victim and I was talking to other people who had been victimised.'*

Sam, prisoner

*'[Bullying] happens in every jail. You are never going to be able to cut it out completely but you can try and make it as little as possible, minimum amount.'*

Peter, prisoner

## WHAT DID WE DO?

The research was conducted between October 2014 and July 2015. During this ten-month period Gooch and Treadwell frequently visited a young offender institution accommodating young men aged 18–21 years old. This multi-method research combined ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis to gain a rich insight into the nature and dynamics of victimisation.

# RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

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## WHAT DID WE FIND?

### 1 Victimisation is a widespread, multi-faceted and evolving problem

- Recent technological, operational and social changes have rapidly altered and re-shaped the dynamics of victimisation within the prison walls.
- Bullying is only one form of victimisation and difficult to tease out from the wider range of victimising behaviour.
- Prison violence often has roots in an array of conflicts occurring in the community that spill over into custody.
- Perpetrators are not always 'long rangers'. Some of the worst acts of victimisation occur when several prisoners act in collusion with others.
- Victimization is often inextricably linked to the prison sub rosa economy and the nefarious trade in contraband, food, tobacco and toiletries.

### 2 Understanding who victimises others, why and how they do it is core to tackling prison violence and bullying

- Classic typologies of prison bullying are unduly narrow and fail to capture how prisoners engage in, experience or avoid bullying and victimisation.
- Perpetrators, perpetrator-victims and victims do not behave homogeneously. Thus, understanding the individuals involved and the circumstances of their involvement is vital.
- There are marked similarities between victims and perpetrators.
- Given the right opportunities, and in the right context, perpetrators can and often do change their behaviour.
- Without effective care and support, victims often resort to self-harm, cell damage and arson.

### 3 Necessity of a 'whole prison approach'

- There is no 'magic bullet' or single solution that will solve the problem of prison victimisation.

- Victimization can be prevented and reduced if a whole prison approach is adopted.
- A 'whole prison approach' requires:
  - 1 Strong leadership
  - 2 Strong staff-prisoner relationships
  - 3 A decent environment
  - 4 Proportional security
  - 5 Legitimate use of force
  - 6 Access to purposeful activity
  - 7 Family contact
  - 8 Rewards and opportunity
  - 9 Appropriate support for victims and new or vulnerable prisoners
  - 10 Appropriate, just and proportional use of sanctions
  - 11 Consistent implementation of an anti-victimisation strategy
  - 12 Effective offender management

## WAYS FORWARD

### 1 Implementation of National and Institutional Anti-Victimisation Strategies

- National and institutional strategies should focus on 'anti-victimisation' rather than maintaining the distinction between violence reduction and anti-bullying strategies.
- Anti-victimisation strategies should avoid the pitfalls of monitoring bullying through a tiered or 'traffic lights' approach.
- Anti-victimisation strategies should not solely focus on identifying 'bullies' but should frame a robust and proportional response to all perpetrators.
- A clear strategy for victim support must be included.

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### 2 Effective support of both the victim and perpetrator

- Victim support within the prison environment must be improved.
- Punishment alone is insufficient and is often an ineffective deterrent.
- Responses to victimisation must be framed in a rehabilitative context where opportunities for reward, hope and positive encouragement are fostered.
- Specific programmes should be developed to address prison victimisation.
- Specialist support should be made available for young prisoners with unresolved and/or recent experiences of trauma, loss, abuse and bereavement.
- An Enhanced Support and Action Plan should be developed to support victims with specific needs but for whom an ACCT document is inappropriate.
- Closed visits should not be used as a punishment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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