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(PRI0031)**

We submit evidence to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee as independent researchers at University College London (UCL), specialising in prisoners' rights, inclusivity, and health and social care. Our research is driven by a commitment to enhancing the lives of individuals often marginalised by society. Through our work on prisoners' rights, disability advocacy, and the promotion of inclusivity in research and decision-making, we have developed extensive insights into the experiences of those affected by the criminal justice system. This submission will address several key questions raised in the call for evidence, providing insights based on our research and relevant studies conducted by other academics and the Ministry of Justice. The aim of this paper is to address three of the key questions highlighted in the call to evidence:

1. What makes a "good" prison officer from the perspective of prisoners? How do relations between prisoners and staff affect the experience of those in the prison system (staff and prisoners)?
2. What factors contribute to the 'culture' of a prison? How are prisoners affected when a prison is badly run?
3. How does the public see the role of the prison service and how can any misconceptions be addressed?

This research concentrates on the work of Swehli (2022), utilising testimonies from previously incarcerated men to underscore the issues presented in prisons. The key points made are:

1. The prison environment significantly impacts inmates' experiences, behaviours and post-incarceration prospects.
2. The relationship between prisoners and prison officers can have long-lasting effects, echoing Sykes (1958) pains of imprisonment.
3. Mental health support in prison is inadequate and is not addressing root causes.
4. Education: access to education is limited despite its ability to improve rehabilitation.
5. Financial incentives: the prisons financially incentivise inmates to take up jobs rather than education opportunities, causing many to perceive prison as a profit-driven institution.

#### Male Prison Estates

The environment within male prison estates plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences, behaviours, and prospects of incarcerated individuals. The relationships between prisoners and staff, the availability of educational opportunities, the prioritisation of prison labour, and mental health care management all contribute to the overall prison culture. These factors not only influence life within the prison but also have lasting consequences beyond the prison gates, affecting reintegration into society.

My colleagues and I<sup>1</sup> examined previously incarcerated men's experience of the labour market. During this research, we questioned life within the estate and its impact on the individuals. Quotes from this research are included throughout to highlight some of the issues faced in prison. Names and locations have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Regarding the relationship between prisoners and staff, it is evident that the staff's treatment of prisoners extends beyond the prison gates and can have far-reaching effects, potentially leading to harmful consequences for those affected by the criminal justice system:

*"And you know, a lot of people that come out of prison, I feel I feel when they're in prison, they get stamped on personality wise. And when they come out of prison, they don't really let that foot come off of them. They carry that print around with them."*

Leo, mid-50s, White British, over 12-month sentence

*"One thing prison teaches you is to be more tougher. I don't mean physically, though; I just mean mentally and mentally because every day is a battle."*

Gab, early 60s, White Scottish, less than six-month sentence.

*"But the guy, the guy did actually kill someone, he didn't set out to kill them. But that was the end result and he got punished. Going into prison as a murderer, you get treated in a certain way, it makes you act like a murderer. So I needed to deconstruct the personality that he built as a defence mechanism, to survive the environment he was in. And he turned out to be a great guy."*

Leo, mid-50s, White British, over 12-month sentence

This highlights issues discussed in Gresham M. Sykes's *The Society of Captives* (1958) concerning the USA. Key elements of his discussion include the deficiencies of total power, whereby prisoners have limited control over any changes that occur, and environmental deprivations, known as the pains of imprisonment, which lead to the development of a prison culture where prisoners adopt specific patterns of behaviour for survival. These new behaviours rarely dissipate simply because the individual leaves prison; rather, they adopt this new personality as a coping mechanism<sup>2</sup>. The environment of the prison must be considered with utmost importance because this environment is what may be the difference between rehabilitation and a disregard to the prison establishment. As such, to answer what contributed to the 'culture' of prison and how prisoners are affected when a prison is badly run, we must consider the environment and treatment of the body in prison<sup>3</sup>.

Mental health is a significant concern within prisons; however, because many are poorly managed, individuals affected by the criminal justice system argue that

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<sup>1</sup>see Swehli, M. (2022) *"The only option they have is to go back to crime": Using Critical Race Theory to explore Labour Market Barriers Impacting Previously incarcerated individuals* [unpublished master's thesis], UCL (University College London).

<sup>2</sup> Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society of Captives*. Princeton University Press

<sup>3</sup> Buncy, S. and Ahmed, I. (2014). *Muslim Women in Prison. Second Chance, Fresh Horizons*. Muslim Hands and HPCA. Retrieved 10 Jan 2025 [[https://muslimhands.org.uk/\\_ui/uploads/kqe5a9/mwip\\_report.pdf](https://muslimhands.org.uk/_ui/uploads/kqe5a9/mwip_report.pdf)]

Ocen, P. (2013) Unshackling Intersectionality. *Du Bois Review*, 10(2), 471 -483.

prisons merely apply a temporary fix to mental health issues rather than genuinely addressing the problems that could facilitate rehabilitation:

*"You can get on anti-depressants much easier [than getting therapy]"*  
Josh, early 50s, White-British, long-term sentence.

*"And really, and truly, I think my main thing with the government, and I spoke to people while I was in jail, is that they need to work more with why people are actually going in and out of jail. If you've got the majority of people that are just bouncing in and out, in and out, in and out. And, yeah, it all stems to mental health"*  
Zain, early 40s, British-Southeast Asian, long-term sentence.

*"There is actually a big outcry in prisons to do with the mental healthcare."*  
Gab, early 60s, White Scottish, less than a six-month sentence.

These mental health concerns are further perpetuated when prison staff are not treating all inmates with the same level of respect and encouragement. Both our participants who identify as a racial or ethnic minority experienced discrimination in prison and simply had to accept this discrimination because the prison environment was not supportive:

*"What can you do? There's not an awful lot that you can do...you just got to try and live with that and keep going. You know, unfortunately, as it sounds, it isn't something that you should have to accept. But we do."*  
Zain, early 40s, British-Southeast Asian, long-term sentence.

*"I think I think that's just like the current climate, though. I just felt, I think a lot of Muslims feel like that"*  
Bryson, late 20s, British-East African, long-term sentence.

This impact was not only felt by ethnic and religious minorities but also by inmates who were not English:

*"I'm beginning to think it's got a negative effect with English probation because I sensed, when I was in prison...there was a racist sorta feeling against me because I was Scottish."*  
Gab, early 60s, White Scottish, less than six-month sentence.

These testimonies align with the research conducted by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons annual report examining prison conditions. The report found, among other things, that minoritised racial and ethnic inmates have significantly more negative experiences upon arrival at the prison, feel less supported by staff, and are less likely to believe that their complaints and legal rights are addressed fairly.

When a prison runs ineffectively, even aspects that encourage growth and rehabilitation may not be appropriate or come in the right format. When discussing educational classes, justice-involved men suggest that not enough, if any, appropriate courses are being provided whilst incarcerated:

*"I was in jail pre COVID there was no relevant training courses at any of the jails I went to. I wanted, I thought, while I'm away, I can, you know, retrain, I*

*realised that there'll be barriers to employment because criminal record is a barrier to employment. So, the thought was to retrain as either an electrician or a plumber. I could, you know, I could do that. And then get myself a job. Get my own trade, but all the jails that I was at that wasn't offered...what they do in jail was teach you how to write a CV, but if you've never had a job, how are you going to write a CV?"*

Zain, early 40s, British-Southeast Asian, long-term sentence.

*"Government will tell you it can provide you with help about helping prisoners who want to work. For prisoners in prison they need to provide them with things like education or anything like that. This should be done in prison not after they are released. This should be done in prison because they have a lot of time on their hands"*

Gab, early 60s, White Scottish, less than six-month sentence.

Furthermore, when prisons incentivise working over educational classes, the prison system is prioritising labour over educational rehabilitation:

*"I would say a lot of prisoners would rather say do a job, a job in the workshop, for example, or something like that. The thing is they'll often pay more money doing that. It's a strange, they'll pay people more money to work in the workshop. They'll even give them a bonus"*

Josh, early 50s, White-British, long-term sentence.

These critiques of the prison system cause inmates to see prison as a for-profit business. While this is not specifically about the general public, but rather a sub-population of the public, which consists of prisoners and people impacted by the criminal justice system, their views on the role of the prison service are not positive and they do not see any rehabilitation benefits of incarceration:

*"I don't I don't believe that prison works. I think I I think it's, it's a business. It's a very carefully engineered business."*

Bryson, late 20s, British-East African, long-term sentence.

*"Imprisonment is not a very good idea. Really. No, this country uses it way too much for too long of sentences. Yeah, I don't think... Michael Howard says prisoner works. I don't really think that, only in the way that people can't offend while they're inside."*

Josh, early 50s, White-British, long-term sentence.

This view of prisons is detrimental to any rehabilitation benefits because if the people themselves don't think the prisons are made to improve their life outcomes, then this significantly impacts their trust in the system and, ultimately, the want for change and a future away from crime. Policies must be adapted to provide more incentives towards a life away from crime:

*"And it's probably a policy that needs to be reviewed at government level, because otherwise you're going to get criminals thinking that the only option they have is to go back to crime"*

Zain, early 40s, British-Southeast Asian, long-term sentence.

## **Concluding remarks**

Within this paper, we highlight the testimonies of justice-involved men's experience within the male prison estates, revealing deep-rooted systemic issues which are hindering rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. There is reason to believe that there is a prioritisation of control, labour and short-term management over any long-term benefits for both the prison estate and those impacted by the system. The relationship between staff and prisoners plays a crucial role in shaping experiences, as does the lack of appropriate educational opportunities and inadequate mental health support. When prisoners feel that prisons are operating more like businesses than rehabilitation centres, individuals are left feeling they have limited options upon release, reinforcing cycles of reoffending rather than breaking them.

For prisons to evolve into centres of rehabilitation rather than mere sites of punishment, a shift in priorities is essential. Increased investment in mental health services, alongside the expansion and incentivisation of relevant educational programmes, can contribute to lasting change. Furthermore, prison policies need to be reviewed and adapted in light of this evidence, examining how these conditions funnel individuals into the justice system and why reincarceration rates remain persistently high. Without these changes, the cycle of incarceration will persist, undermining both individual lives and the broader well-being of society. This research underscores the urgent need to listen to the voices of those directly affected and to address the systemic flaws within prison estates; policymakers have an opportunity to redefine the role of incarceration in the UK. Rehabilitation must not be an afterthought; it should lie at the heart of the prison system's purpose. Though it was not within the scope of this paper, we also advocate for the importance of distinguishing between the experiences of minoritised populations, including those related to gender, ethnicity, and religion.

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