

UK inmates comfortable with diversity

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'Ethnicity, Identity and Social Relations in Prison', carried out by Dr. Coretta Philips of the London School of Economics, explored how prisoners' ethnic identities helped them cope with prison life, and whether such identities informed a social pecking order and the formation of gangs. More specifically, it explored the influence of prison practices on prisoner and group identities.

In January 2009 British broadsheets voiced fears of a flourishing gang culture in UK top-security prisons following an inspection report on Long Lartin jail in Worcestershire. By contrast, the LSE research - comprising ethnographic studies conducted in Kent over eight months each at a young offenders' institution and an adult male [prison](#) - found that, superficially at least, there was an acceptance of diversity amongst prisoners, with some welcoming it.

There were no gangs in either institution, and no religious or ethnic pecking order. However, prisoners tended towards same-ethnicity friendships, and formed groups providing physical protection, for sharing, and for access to items such as mobile phones and drugs. Muslim groups - encompassing a range of ethnicities - were both envied by non-Muslims for their potential for seeking concessions on religious grounds, and disparaged for their solidarity.

Although racist undercurrents led to conflict and division, prisoners lived in harmony much of the time. Dr Philips commented: "We found that the younger prisoners tended to be more attached to their neighbourhood than to their ethnicity, with local allegiances giving them a sense of self

and of belonging beyond the prison walls. Any negative views of ethnic groups were typically held by those from semi-rural neighbourhoods, whereas those from London neighbourhoods valued the diversity they found on their own patch.

"By contrast, older prisoners tended to see themselves more in paternal and family terms, and it was notable that amongst these prisoners the ability to resolve disputes without violence was valued."

Prisoners from all ethnicities had issues with institutional approaches, although for different reasons. Many minority ethnic , mainly black, prisoners felt they were treated more harshly by staff than white prisoners. By contrast, many white prisoners resented what they saw as the preferential treatment of minority ethnic prisoners who claimed racist treatment. They were themselves, often uncomfortable in encounters with black prisoners and were fearful of being called racist.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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