

Staff-prisoner relationships are key to prison quality

May 17 2011

As public sector prisons move towards the thin staffing level model of profit-making institutions, with their high turnover of personnel who are less connected to their occupation, a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) warns of a potentially detrimental impact on prison quality.

"Until now, little has been known about the relative strengths and weaknesses of public and private prisons," says Professor Liebling of Cambridge University who led the research. "Today, when the privatisation of prisons is on the increase and the [public sector](#) staffing model is becoming more like the private one, it is vital that we look beyond the [stereotypes](#) to understand the two sectors."

In a four [prison](#) comparison, the private prisons showed weaknesses in policing and control, organisation and consistency, and prisoner development. Managers in the [private sector](#) prisons acknowledged that staff did not follow procedures as well as public sector staff. The researchers found that both of the private prisons they looked at had relatively inexperienced staff, and were sometimes hampered by their tighter staffing levels. Staff training in these prisons aimed to foster a respectful and positive staff culture, and appeared to be successful in doing so.

However, the benign intentions of staff were hindered somewhat by their lack of experience. The ways that staff used their authority had a significant impact on prison performance and the prisoner experience. In

one of the private prisons, staff tended to over-use their authority to achieve order, to the detriment of [interpersonal relationships](#). In the other, staff under-used their power and maintained good relationships but at the expense of safety and control.

In the public sector prisons, officers were confident and knowledgeable, delivering routines that were safer and more reliable than in the private sector. However, uniformed staff in the public sector was more jaded and cynical than those in the private sector, and this limited the levels of care and humanity that prisoners experienced. Indeed, when the research team evaluated three further private prisons, they found that prisoner quality of life was higher in two of these additional prisons than in either the poorer performing private prisons or either of the public sector prisons in the study. In these prisons, prisoners described feeling able to change and develop personally. Order, organisation and consistency as well as respect and fairness were part of what made a prison work.

"Staff-prisoner relationships of a certain kind are key to prison quality," says Dr Ben Crewe, the study's co-investigator. "Our research demonstrates that where relationships have the right balance of control and respect almost all aspects of the prisoner experience are enhanced. Staff need to be able to use their authority professionally – with both confidence and care – in order to create decent environments."

"This is a complex and demanding business, requiring highly skilled staff and outstanding leadership," says Professor Liebling. "[Staff](#) and prisoners still speak a moral language of making a difference but there is a general shift in the Prison Service towards a security-and-efficiency driven management style that risks stifling professional enthusiasm by its process and performance-oriented culture."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

Citation: Staff-prisoner relationships are key to prison quality (2011, May 17) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-05-staff-prisoner-relationships-key-prison-quality.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.