

Prison life

Introduction

People are sent to prison as punishment not *for* punishment. This means people are punished by being cut off from their normal lives and participation in civil society. They are *not* meant to be punished by the conditions of prison itself, that is, by being sent to an institution that is dangerous or traumatising.



Decades of penal reform and international human rights treaties and conventions are aimed at recognising that people in prison have the same basic human rights as anyone else. These include rights to life, privacy, family contact and religious belief. When a person is in prison, they are in the custody of and entirely dependent on the state, and the state has to ensure these rights are protected. For example, prison authorities have to ensure, among many other things, that people in prison have adequate food and shelter, the ability to see their family if desired, and are able to practice their faith.

An important document that sets out the rights and responsibilities both of prison authorities and prisoners in Scotland is called [The Prison Rules](#). It covers things like when and how a prisoner may be disciplined, whether prisoners can have books and access to health care.

This briefing on prison life first presents some of the research about the powerful nature of institutions like prison and the effects they can have on people, and second, describes what life in prison is like in modern day Scotland.

The power of the prison

The prison is a powerful symbol of the state's power to *punish*. With this, comes the *labelling* of the offender as a criminal (a label which is particularly difficult to shake

off) and a public condemnation of their act or actions. The punished person is 'cast out' from society; with this comes *stigma*, which may remain firmly attached to the individual long after their release into the 'free world'.

The prison as a *total institution*

Canadian sociologist **Erving Goffman** coined the term '*total institution*' to describe places that control all parts of a person's existence. Unlike normal human existence, in a total institution all aspects of a person's life is controlled and happens in one place. When people work, spend leisure time and sleep in the same, confined place this has powerful psychological and social effects on their sense of identity and ability to function. He argued that prisons, along with army camps, concentration camps, and even monasteries and abbeys, are 'total institutions' that trigger such changes.

Prison subculture

Prisons have their own distinct sub-cultures: there are formal rules (about prison conditions and personal behaviour) enforced by prison staff and informal codes of conduct (for example, not '*grassing on*' other prisoners to prison officers). The prison environment creates an artificial social setting that produces its own values, attitudes, beliefs and vocabularies.

Prisoners adapt to this culture in a process called **prisonisation**. However, prisonisation can mean that prisoners become so accustomed to life *inside* that lives *outside* are very difficult to adjust to. This is sometimes referred to as '*institutionalisation*'.

The 'pains of imprisonment'

In 1953, American sociologist and criminologist **Gresham Sykes** conducted research in a maximum-security prison in the USA. He identified five '*pains of imprisonment*' experienced by prisoners, and these themes continue to be used in understanding prison life. These pains are:

Prisonisation: The process of adapting to and becoming part of the prison subculture

- Deprivation of liberty: there is in effect a double deprivation here – confinement *to* the institution and confinement *within* that institution. That is, a person is not only removed from their own home, but they are then controlled in how they can move about the prison.

- Deprivation of intimate relationships: men (and women) prisoners are deprived of intimate relationships, which are important for normal social life . The prison also constrains and channels how people are able to express their sexuality and gender.
- Deprivation of autonomy: prisoners have very limited power over their daily lives. Although people not in prison also can lack autonomy over their lives (such as set lunch hours, work commitments, etc.), people in prison undergo a level of micro-regulation of daily routines, in other words, control over even the most trivial of choices (like how many minutes a shower can last).
- Deprivation of security: prisons, for various reasons, can be scary. The person in prison is removed from the familiar setting of one's own home and neighbourhood and placed in a setting of unfamiliar people (both staff and other prisoners). There can be real threats to personal safety but also stress and anxiety of not feeling safe.
- Deprivation of goods and services: though the basic material needs of prisoners are met, they do not have access to those goods and services available on the outside, which offer more than just the bare necessities. Sykes suggests prisoners want interesting food, as well as the food that provides them with the requisite calories and nutrition; and individual clothes that express identity as well as 'prison clothes'.

[This chapter offers a useful overview of prison life](#). However, it has a North American focus, so not all of the sections are applicable to the Scottish context.

Prison Life in Modern Scotland

Other resources in this series describe who is in prison, which is important for understanding how people may have different views and experiences of life in prison (See [SCCJR 'Who's in prison? Snapshot of Scotland's prison population'](#) and [SCCJR 'Impact of crime: prisoners' families'](#)).

For most, imprisonment imposes hardships such as those described above. It is important to understand these common features (and hardships) of imprisonment before considering how prisons in Scotland care for prisoners.

The current *mission* of the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) is: “providing services that help transform the lives of people in our care so they can fulfil their potential and become responsible citizens”. An [executive summary of its current strategy can be found here](#).

In addition, the SPS describes its roles as “helping to protect the public and reduce re-offending through the delivery of safe and secure custodial sentences that empower offenders to take responsibility and fulfil their potential”.

What do prisoners do in prison in Scotland?

Although films and TV programmes present prisons as relentlessly scary and dangerous places, one of the main challenges of life in prison, both for maintaining order and supporting rehabilitation, is boredom. People in prison, in Scotland and elsewhere, can spend over 20 hours a day locked in their cells. Prison authorities therefore work towards ensuring there are plentiful and meaningful forms of activity.

A [recent Justice Committee review commented](#): “*purposeful activity of an educational, counselling, work nature and such others as family contact, are a fundamental element of the rehabilitation process*”.

What are examples of purposeful activities?

- Work and Training: sentenced (not remanded) prisoners (See [SCCJR ‘Who’s in prison? Snapshot of Scotland’s prison population’](#) for a definition of remand) can work in prison for a small wage. Prisoners can work as cleaners, kitchen assistants, laundry assistants, for example. Some prisons also offer work sorting mixed recycling, making wooden garden furniture and more.
- Education: Prisoners can gain educational qualifications, ranging from basic maths and literacy courses, to SQA qualifications to university degrees.
- Exercise: Prisoners
- Rehabilitative programmes and courses: these includes smoking cessation; support for drug or alcohol addiction; anger management; parenting and the Sex Offender Treatment Programme.
- Family contact: prisoners keep in contact with family and friends through visits, making phone calls and writing letters. Most prisons have play areas for children visiting a parent in prison.

- Through-care services: once released from prison, there is help to find accommodation or a job.

The SPS aims for prisoners to be engaged in activities such as those listed above for a full working day (9am - 5pm), however, this is not always possible.

SPS's annual report presents information about programmes prisoners are involved in, across the SPS estate. [The most recent annual report and accounts from the SPS can be found here.](#)

[The Justice Committee review also has more detailed information about these purposeful activities:](#) including provision, delivery and take-up, and issues surrounding them.

Further Reading

Sage Publications *Prisons*, Chapter 7 Available from:

http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/43448_7.pdf

Scottish Prison Service (2012) *Unlocking Potential-Transforming Lives*, Summary Report of the Scottish Prison Service Organisational Review Available from:

[http://www.lanarkshirecja.org.uk/documents/www.lanarkshirecja.org.uk/agenda_item_6 - sps organisational review summary.pdf](http://www.lanarkshirecja.org.uk/documents/www.lanarkshirecja.org.uk/agenda_item_6_-_sps_organisational_review_summary.pdf)

Scottish Parliament (2013) Justice Committee 5th Report, 2013, *Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons* Available from:

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_JusticeCommittee/Reports/jur-13-05w.pdf