

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, religious belief, physical security and safe and dignity (as based on the [Nelson Mandela Minimum Standards](#)). 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 person with conviction is 'cast out' from society; with this comes *stigma*, which may remain firmly attached to the individual long after their release, or 'liberation' as it is referred in Scotland 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 are controlled and happen 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. Goffman claimed that the process of entering a 'total institution' was 'mortifying' as it stripped individuals of their pre-prison identity, their autonomy, and personal possessions. These are replaced with what he calls an 'identity kit' of standard items, like a uniform and bedding, which are usually marked as property of the institution. He argued that prisons, along with army camps, concentration camps, asylums, 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

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

identified five '*pains of imprisonment*' experienced by prisoners, and these themes continue to be used in understanding prison life. These pains are:

- 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 heterosexual 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? Snap shot 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”. Their latest Annual Report 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.

In a [Scottish Parliament Justice Committee review it stated](#): “*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, repairing bicycles, and even taking care of guinea pigs or hens.
- Education: Prisoners can gain educational qualifications, ranging from basic maths and literacy courses, learning English as a Second Language, to SQA qualifications or university degrees with the Open University. Vocational skills training is also available within prison-based education centres including music, drama, art, cookery, and IT.
- Exercise

- Rehabilitative programmes and courses these include: 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

A former prisoner reveals what everyday life was like in prison

Newspaper article published in the Metro, 29 May 2017. Available here

<https://metro.co.uk/2017/05/29/a-former-prisoner-reveals-what-everyday-life-was-like-in-prisons-6661489/>

Howard League for Penal Reform: Early Career Academics Network Bulletin (April 2019) Issue 41 includes article from Caitlin Gormley on 'The prison experience of people with learning disabilities.' Available from: <https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ECAN-bulletin-Spring-2019.pdf>

Life Inside: Teenage Girls and Boys Prisons in UK (2017) BBC Documentary available to watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA-faknbTwo>

Life Lines (2017) Film created by young offenders in HM YOI Polmont based on their own experiences. Available to watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lsazc6litew>

Prisoners' Education Trust (2019) Learning to Break the Habit: Emma's Story. This article is about how one prisoner's experience of education in prison helped her towards recovery and a positive future. <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/story/learning-to-break-the-habit-emmas-story/>

Sage Publications *Prisons*, Chapter 7 Available from:

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

Schinkel, M (2019) A Life in Pieces. Available from: <https://my-sentence.com/a-life-in-pieces/>

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

http://www.sps.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?fileName=SPS+Annual+report+final+010720142195_1315.pdf

Scottish Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts (2018)

<http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Publications/Publication-6020.aspx>

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

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SCCJR's learning resources for schools (Modern Studies) were initially developed by Rebecca Foster and Greg Duncan. They are regularly reviewed and updated by SCCJR researchers. Any queries (including notes of broken links, ideas for development and new topics) about these resources should be sent to enquiries@sccjr.ac.uk

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