



The role of the prison officer

Research briefing

Howard League for Penal Reform

Key points

- The Howard League for Penal Reform and Community worked together to examine the role of the prison officer, primarily in private sector prisons. This joint report presents the findings of focus groups and surveys with 27 prison officers.
- Prison officers are undervalued and their role has been neglected. Low staffing levels, a poorly defined job description, insufficient training and a feeling of a lack of decision-making power has left officers feeling ignored, ineffective and unable to achieve their aims. Staffing levels and patterns of working are dangerous. One officer said, 'I work from 7.15am to 8pm and I might only speak to another officer a couple of times a day'.
- The officers we spoke to felt unable to establish a fulfilling career in private sector prisons. Progression opportunities are almost non-existent in many prisons and officers find themselves on low or stagnant pay despite years of service.
- Morale is very low amongst officers and few see a long-term future for themselves in the prison service. Few of the officers we spoke to wanted to stay working in prisons in the medium or long term.
- Prison officers are enthusiastic for change and want to play a role in helping people turn their lives around. All officers we spoke to described wanting to make a positive difference by developing relationships with prisoners. They want systemic change so they are able to continue to develop their skills and receive the support they need to succeed in their roles.

Recommendations

- Private companies, ministers and officials need to demonstrate that they value prison officers. They must recognise their staff as professionals, fulfil their potential and ensure officers are able to build rewarding careers through creating clear career paths that enable experienced and skilled officers to progress.
- Prisons must work to ensure that they have enough well-trained staff to allow prison officers to do their jobs. They must provide opportunities to develop new skills and specialisms that are met with promotions and pay increases. Officers must be given the autonomy, professional discretion and responsibility to make a positive impact.
- Action is needed to reduce attrition. A full audit of the training and development opportunities available to officers in both the public and private sector should be taken. This should be independent of the Ministry of Justice and fully resourced.
- Prisons across the sector should look to reinstate meaningful mentoring and shadowing schemes for new officers. Thought should be given as to the adequate length of this scheme and as to whether a system similar to teaching or nursing would be beneficial in the style of a newly qualified year or a transitional probationary period.
- The government should support the setting up of a specialised training and standard-setting college, akin to the College of Policing, to promote and deliver high quality training across publicly and privately run prisons.

Overview

It has been well documented that the number of officers working in prisons in England and Wales has fallen dramatically in recent years, and that this has played a major part in the huge decline in prison safety and conditions. There is now a widespread consensus that more officers are needed and a major recruitment drive is underway to increase the number of officers by at least 2,500. So far, recruitment aims have not been met as officers are leaving prisons almost at the same rate that they are joining. It is therefore timely to look at the role of the prison officer: what are the aims of the role; what do officers spend their time doing; what are the obstacles to success; and how do prison officers feel about the jobs they do.

The Howard League and Community worked together to look at the role of the prison officer. Through focus groups and surveys, 27 officers currently working in prisons shared their views with researchers from both organisations about their roles and the changes they would like to see. The prison officers we surveyed work in a variety of prisons, including large category B prisons, category C prisons and women's prisons. Prison officers working in the public and private sector gave evidence to the project; however the majority worked in the private sector, for a range of companies. As a result this report primarily focuses on the private sector, although it contains important recommendations for both sectors.

Value

Today it is very difficult to have a rewarding career as a prison officer: the job description and aims are unclear; pay is low; training too short; development and promotion opportunities few and far between; and staffing levels and patterns are, at times, dangerous. As a result morale is low and few of the officers who participated in this project wanted to stay working in prisons in the medium or long term.

Many of today's problems stem from the lack of value placed on the role of the prison officer, both by employers and in wider society. Ministers, company executives and prison leaders must be more ambitious for current and future prison officers. They must focus on providing staff with the opportunity to have successful and fulfilling careers where they can make a difference. This, in turn, will have an impact on raising the status of prison officers.

Resources, overcrowding, drugs and other problems all play a part in the very challenging conditions that prison officers face. The undervaluing of prison officers, however, has exacerbated their impact. Prison officers feel they have been overstretched and neglected. Their ideas on how things could be improved are all too often ignored.

The role of the prison officer requires major thought, attention and investment, particularly in private sector prisons. Ministers, officials and prison leaders must demonstrate that they value prison officers and the work they do by focusing on professionalising the officer role and creating clear career paths that enable experienced and skilled officers to progress. The impact of placing more value on prison officers and providing working environments in which they contribute and succeed cannot be understated. As one

prison officer put it, 'If staff feel they are being taken seriously and their welfare is being looked after, they'll be more likely to stay, there'll be more staff, they'll be more enthusiastic, there'll be a better working atmosphere, this will feed back to the prisoners: there'll be better working relationships, better morale'.

Numbers

All the officers who participated in the project said that there were not enough officers working in their prisons. In some, there were staff shortages and prisons were recruiting. Other prisons were technically fully staffed, but the staffing levels were so low that they did not have enough people to achieve the very basics of keeping people safe and delivering a full regime.

Officers explained the impact the current staffing agreements in their prisons had on what they could achieve. For example, one officer said 'there are two officers on a spur of 61 men...when everyone is back for lunch, one has to supervise medication and the other has to go and collect the food from the kitchen. This means there is nobody else on the spur, the model incorporates completely unsupervised association time and with all the other tasks we have to do it really means that one officer is alone all morning and another in the afternoon.' Another said, 'on our house block we have 60-odd on a wing and I work it by myself. I work 0715 to 2000 and I might only see and speak to another officer a couple of times a day...I cover two floors and so might not know about an incident in a cell until the following day'.

Officers said that the standard staffing level with one or two officers to a wing meant that they were always 'firefighting' or 'crisis managing'. The majority agreed that an extra staff member would have a huge impact on what they were able to achieve: 'staffing levels are the main thing. It would cancel out so many other issues and problems' and 'when we've got three or four on the wing it's amazing how much more you can get done'.

Inadequate staffing levels not only stopped officers being able to do their jobs effectively but meant prisons were fundamentally unsafe for staff and prisoners. One officer disclosed that, 'we had a murder a few months ago. There wasn't enough staff on at night and nobody came when the alarm was rung. They thought one experienced staff member could run the house block on their own'.

Relationships

The backgrounds of those who took part in the research and the reasons that they started working in prisons were varied, however most cited wanting to

make a positive difference by developing relationships with prisoners. One officer said 'I joined as I wanted to make a difference to young people's lives...When you join you think you can make a difference'. Other examples included having a 'positive and rewarding career whilst trying to make a difference to prisoners' lives' and wanting to 'show prisoners they can be happy without breaking the rules'.

Many officers no longer felt that they could make a difference as the conditions in their prisons meant they could not form quality relationships with prisoners. Low staffing levels, high workloads and frequent rotations to different parts of the prison made many officers feel powerless to achieve what they saw as a central part of their role. For example, 'we're assigned seven (personal officer) prisoners, but often you might never see them. You might not see them for three weeks. It's hard to keep in contact, but you have to be a good officer and spend time with them. It's difficult though'.

Poorly defined and poorly equipped

The lack of attention placed on the prison officer role was apparent in the wide variety of responses from participants to questions about their duties and aims. Some described broad and competing aims and objectives: 'You're the emotional crutch, financial crutch, you're seen as a disciplinarian' and 'you're running a small community'. Others saw their role as maintaining order on the wings, and felt that some of the work they were being asked to do was inappropriate, 'I don't want to be a health worker or a social worker. I'm meant to control the wing and stop them from escaping' whereas others felt that 'the officer should be putting the prisoner in a position where they are ready to return to the outside world'.

Prison officers described a huge range of tasks that they were responsible for, including: cell searches, supervising medicines, building relationships, identifying people with mental health problems, helping prisoners navigate the prison system, mentoring, preventing suicide and self-harm, fetching food from the kitchens for the wing, ensuring people had adequate supplies of basic essentials, instilling discipline, helping prisoners keep in contact with their families and personal officer paperwork. Officers wanted to do all these things well, but felt a lack of time, training and too few staff often made this impossible. As a result many participants agreed with those who described their role as 'jack of all trades, master of none'.

Despite having a complex role and wide variety of duties, officers were able to exercise little discretion to problem solve and prioritise. The lack of attention paid to the prison officer role had left officers in

a double bind where they had a large number of prisoners, often with complex problems to monitor and look after, but with very little power to exercise those responsibilities. Several officers thought that this was a bigger issue in private sector prisons, where the removal of decision-making powers had been particularly marked in recent years. For example, 'we've had a lot of powers taken away from us. We had power over who worked as wing workers, who worked on the servery. We used to be able to choose so you had the right people in the right job. Prisoners realise that we don't have that anymore. Prisoners always ask for a manager because they know there's nothing you can do. So much stuff needs management approval. You're constantly being stopped from doing your job'.

Unsurprisingly, in these circumstances prison officers felt helpless and morale was low. One participant argued 'what am I doing for them apart from holding them on behalf of a judge? There is nothing to help them'. Another summed up the situation with a bleak prognosis: 'we're at rock bottom and it's going to take a lot to get that back'.

The 'who' not just the 'how many'

Officers were keen to stress that whilst low and short staffing was very important, getting the right people to be prison officers and ensuring that they stay were the most crucial issues.

Many of the officers working in private prisons felt that their companies were not sufficiently focused on recruiting people who understood the role and had the right skills to be a good prison officer. Officers felt that employers did not value the complexity and difficulty of the role and accused them of just trying to get 'bums on seats'. Several officers reported that new officers sometimes arrived without a full understanding of the realities of being a prison officer and as a result quickly left. This high turnover put enormous strain on longer serving officers.

Staff acknowledged the bind that their employers were in: they needed more officers to help improve conditions for prisoners and staff, but conditions were so poor that few people were applying to be prison officers and even fewer new recruits were staying in the job long-term. It seemed clear that training, progression opportunities and pay for new and existing officers required a significant overhaul, but companies were failing to act.

Training and development

Initial training

In the prisons that the officers worked in, basic training ranged between seven and nine weeks in length. Training length was viewed as far too short for the difficult and complex role officers carried out and reflected the lack of value attached to the

job by senior leaders and managers across the sector. Officers were critical of how their training compared to police officer and social workers: 'A prison officer's job should be a vocation. No other job like this has a nine week training period'.

For officers working in private prisons, their basic training was mainly classroom based. The majority view was that the training did not contain nearly enough on-the-job training or prepare people for the reality of life on the wings. For example, one officer said training at his prison, 'is death by PowerPoint...there's a mandatory five day course on control and restraint (CNR). It's not a pass or fail – just an idea of what happens. You are told that CNR can only be enforced by a three officer team, but there are never three on a wing – most of the time you would be on your own. I think it's too detached from reality. There's no training for what to do when you're on your own'.

Many of the officers thought that the training they received in the private sector was of a lower quality than that provided for public sector officers. 'It should be more like the public sector: residential training. Now it's just in a classroom on site, run by the learning and development department, they take random staff to do the training, it's a bit ad hoc. I'd have a specific college like the police or the public sector have; there it's about team bonding as well'.

Shadowing

Almost all participants cited shadowing existing officers as a crucial part of training and essential for preparation to work independently on the wings. Shadowing was viewed as the first time new people were able to understand what working in a prison would be like and an opportunity to start understanding and developing 'jailcraft'. The length of and importance placed on shadowing varied slightly between different prisons and companies, but it did not appear to be well organised or last for long periods in any of the institutions represented.

One officer explained that in the prison he worked in: 'in theory, they do two weeks shadowing. Although one of those weeks is annual leave that you've accrued from the training period, they encourage you to take it then so you don't take it when you're on the wings by yourself'. In other prisons it was even less and reliant on resources, 'we're short of staff, so we need to get them live. In an ideal world if we were fully staffed, new staff should be shadowing for the first few weeks'. Several officers said that in their experience there was even less time dedicated to shadowing than prisons often claimed, with one officer reporting that 'I only did three days of shadowing'.

Others were less concerned with the time spent shadowing, but with the quality. Staffing levels were so low and officers so overstretched that they felt couldn't give enough time and attention to the people who were shadowing them: 'when I was trained we had time to discuss the day and what had gone right and wrong. That almost never happens anymore'.

The very high staff turnover in some prisons undermined the whole concept of shadowing: for example one officer explained that in the prison she worked in 'now you have staff shadowing people who have only been on the wing for four weeks themselves'. Another described the process as 'like learning to drive and having an instructor who just gives you the keys and tells you to go'.

Very short shadowing periods, often with officers who were too busy to devote sufficient attention to it, meant new officers were working the wings when they weren't ready. There was little to no transition period for new officers, 'you pass on a Friday, then you come in on the Monday and get handed your keys and your radio and then you're on your own'. Officers argued that much more time and resources needed to be dedicated to shadowing and adapting to working on the wings, suggestions included, 'there should be a further six week period to help people to know what was expected of them' and 'if you had three staff on the landing, you could have two running the wing and another to shadow new staff. They can then see you interacting with prisoners to get the information you need and watch officers do personal officer work'.

Further training and professional development

There was a lack of additional training for long-serving officers. Officers reported that they couldn't access refresher training, mainly due to staff shortages. Others felt that they needed additional and more in depth training on issues such as mental health, working with sex offenders, identifying and preventing radicalisation and preventing self-harm in order to be more effective in their jobs, but found very few opportunities were available.

Whilst most officers wanted to access further training, many felt demoralised and dis-incentivised as the limited training available was not linked to formal professional development. Responsibility was often added as service length increased but this was not met by promotion or increase in pay. Officers explained that despite many years of service and the wealth of experience that they had built up they were still at prison custody officer grade, in theory no different in status to a person who had finished their basic training the day before.

Participants working for one of the companies running private prisons told us that 'there is no remit to be a senior leader on the wing, despite levels of experience and skills'. Another officer said 'there's no rank and file, there's very little structure. We need different grades of officers. Someone coming in day one has the same authority as someone who was there for ten days. Being there longer than a year makes you an experienced officer, although that isn't a different role, it's just what you're called. Being an experienced officer makes you more vulnerable to stress – experienced officers have to deal with the bigger problems'.

Officers for working for another company reported that their prisons had wing manager roles. Officers were very positive about these roles, arguing that they were crucial to running a wing and also provided one of the very few routes for progression available.

The lack of opportunity to train, progress, take on new responsibilities and be properly compensated for them was having a negative impact of staff morale in many prisons as well as retention of experienced officers. One officer said 'There's nothing available for staff to upskill. They're stopping people from being able to progress and better themselves across the prison. There were 20 leavers in October alone'. An officer with seven years' service said 'I've been here for years and nothing's changed, so why bother?'. Some officers had given up hope that they could develop a career and move on from their current position: 'progression is non-existent in our places'.

Pay and conditions

Pay and development opportunities were closely linked. A number of participants were of the view that the starting pay was reasonable in most areas of the country, but needed to rise as officers became more experienced and took on more responsibility. 'Starting salary is not the issue – lack of progression and support is the key issue around pay. There is no incentive to stay'. Others thought that the starting salary needed to be higher and commensurate with police officers and social workers in the same area. 'You can go and work in Aldi for £18,000 a year without having to deal with the things we have to deal with. It's nowhere near to what we should be paid for we're doing'.

A major source of frustration was static pay. Experienced officers were frustrated that their length of service and the skills they had acquired were not reflected in their pay packet. The majority thought that they would be better paid if they were working in public sector prisons.

The frustration was exacerbated by recent improvements to starting salaries and increments for new staff, but without any corresponding changes to more experienced officers pay or benefits. 'There is no reward for service – this means that officers who started a long time ago have lost money since starting – this is unfair. You now only have to work three years to get to 25k. Older officers have had to work 15 years to get to 25k and have no further benefits'.

Whilst officers understood that both the private and public sector needed to try and make the job more attractive to new people, many felt that the recent changes to some starting salaries were unfair and short term. Officers argued that if prisons ignored the pay of more experienced staff they would not be able to fix retention problems. It was clear that different levels of prison officer grade, which allowed development and pay increases, were needed to both improve recruitment and retention as well as allow prison officers to professionalise.

In 2017, the former Secretary of State for Justice, Elizabeth Truss, announced plans to create 2,000 new senior roles for experienced officers in the public sector, which will involve additional specialist training and salaries of up to £30,000. Plans have also been announced to award pay rises above the public sector pay cap. Whilst a fairly modest number of more senior roles are planned, it does show that the public sector are starting to acknowledge the importance of workforce development and beginning to act to introduce better career paths and pay for officers. If the companies running private sector prisons fail to act to ensure parity, this will widen the gap between conditions and career prospects in the two sectors further, exacerbating the staffing issues and outcomes in private prisons.

Vision for the future

There are choices to be made about the role of prison officers in public and private sector prisons, what they should be aiming for and the education and training that they need to achieve. Across Europe there are different models for the role, and we have chosen an uneasy hybrid that rests on requiring little education, delivering low level training with poor working conditions, whilst asking officers to deliver a complex and professional service to vulnerable and challenging inmates. In

some German prisons officers have a traditional 'turnkey' role, merely locking and unlocking doors and escorting prisoners around the prison whilst psychologists and healthcare professionals have responsibility for the management and treatment-focused work. Alternatively, in Norway, prison officers are the driving force behind the reform and resettlement work that goes on in prisons; they are highly trained professionals with degree-level qualifications and extensive on-the-job training. In England and Wales our men and women officers are required to be security guards, mentors, psychiatric nurses, wing managers, chefs and to respond to serious health and social issues. Despite this challenging model, most of the officers involved in this project did not want to change it, but they did want major reform to make it work.

Officers who contributed to this research had ideas and enthusiasm for how the future could be better. They had been drawn to jobs in prisons because they wanted to work with and help people. They were keen to be part of the solution. Officers wanted to have a positive role in helping prisoners cope with their sentences and succeed in reform and rehabilitation-focused work. They wanted a system that supported them to achieve something positive and worthwhile.

Now is the time to act. Whilst the government is devolving responsibility to governors it should also reform the role of the prison officer across public and private sector prisons. Recruiting more officers alone will not solve profound problems faced by prisons today. The answer is a workforce that is motivated, empowered, educated and allowed to exercise professional discretion at the front line.

About the Howard League for Penal Reform

The Howard League is a national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison.

About Community

Community represents more people employed in privatised justice and custodial sectors than any other trade union. We work on behalf of our members to create a better working world and a safer justice sector: www.community-tu.org/saferjusticesector

Cover image: Derek Anderson, Community prison custody officer, HMP Bronzefield

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