

Who Cares?

Exploring distress in prison from
the perspective of people in prison

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Acknowledgements

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Summary

It is a sad fact that self-inflicted deaths and incidents of self-harm are an enduring part of prison life. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) produce Fatal Incident Reports following a death in custody, but find they make the same recommendations over and over, with future deaths in custody occurring before recommendations have been implemented. We also understand the PPO are currently looking to make their reports more impactful, to include more than procedural recommendations but to also consider the reasons for prisoner distress. Self-harm, and in the worst cases suicide, are often responses to emotional distress first, and the result of procedural failure second. This report focuses on how aspects of the prison environment can interact with well-known self-harm and suicide risk factors to either reduce or increase risk further.

We sought to explore distress in prison from the perspective of the prisoner without any set questions or agenda. We explored secondary data published within the last five years, looking at what prisoners (and ex-prisoners) had said about distress in prison using television documentaries and podcasts, mainstream and prison specific newspaper articles, academic and grey literature containing prisoner quotes, as well as twitter and lived-experience blogs.

The key themes centred around the *physical environment* of prison (including separation from society as well as factors such as noise and lack of hygiene), the *emptiness of prison* (including issues such as boredom, loneliness and monotony), the *big events* (such as violence, recategorisation and release), *mental ill-health* (which might be pre-existing and pervasive) and *substance use, shifting sense of self* (and how this can impact on self-worth), *staff reaction to distress* and any potential *protective factors*. These themes interact and will be experienced differently by each prisoner. We conclude it would benefit those working in the prison system to have training on the impact of the culture on prisoners if there is to be a reduction in distress, self-harm and self-inflicted death.

*My head's getting bad and I just can't take it
These girls chat sh*t but bruv I aint faking it
I go to the docs but they just up my meds
I want to sort my problems but I need a new head
I'm sat in my pad cos my life got off track
Now I'm sat in jail and I can't take it back
I wouldn't be inside if they sorted out my brain
But living with these demons is driving me insane
I wanna be better but it's just so hard
Cos if you'd seen what I've seen
Then you'd know I'm scared
I hope things get better, but I'll let them take their course
I'm depressed in my cell, and I'm full of remorse*
(Prisoner's poem published in *Inside Time*, February 2019).

1. Introduction

Prisons, by their very nature, are likely to be associated with sadness, discomfort and deprivations. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death in prisons, after death by natural causes (Tomaszewska, Baker, Isaksen & Scowcroft, 2019) and has been identified as an international priority (World Health Organisation, 2007). Self-inflicted deaths are over six times more likely in prison than in the general population (Bromley Briefings, 2019), with the Ministry of Justice reporting 80 self-inflicted deaths in custody in the 12 months to March 2020, with 39 of the all other deaths in custody from the same period awaiting classification. This accounts for as many as four in a week (Inquest, 2020).

There are many reasons for this, and this is well-explored in the available literature. Some reasons are related to prisoners' lives before imprisonment (such as enduring mental ill-health, exposure to adverse childhood experiences and later trauma). Some reasons are concerned with the traditional "pains of imprisonment" (such as loss of liberty, goods and services, relationships, autonomy, and security; Sykes, 1958) and also the more modern day pains where psychological stressors are common (including indeterminacy and uncertainty, psychological assessment and self-government; Crewe, 2011).

We also know prisons to be places where suicide and self-harm happen at higher rates than in the community. This is not a new or localised phenomenon, but instead has been shown to be true both internationally and across decades. This makes the context of prison a significant risk factor (Towl and Walker 2015).

Plentiful academic studies, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, empirically explore and define the risk factors for prisoners, overwhelmingly acknowledging the interplay between historic, current, psychological and situational factors, differing for each prisoner (see Marzano, Hawton, Rivlin, Smith, Piper and Fazel, 2016 for a review). This interplay is essential to recognise, with The Samaritans issuing guidelines warning against "*over-simplification of the causes or perceived triggers for a suicide*", which are "unlikely to reflect accurately the complexity of suicide" (Tomaszewska et al, 2019).

Empirically supported risk factors have included:

- Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- Enduring psychiatric morbidity.
- Substance misuse.
- Isolation.
- In-prison experience of bullying.
- Personality disorder/issues.
- Lack of engagement in prison activity.

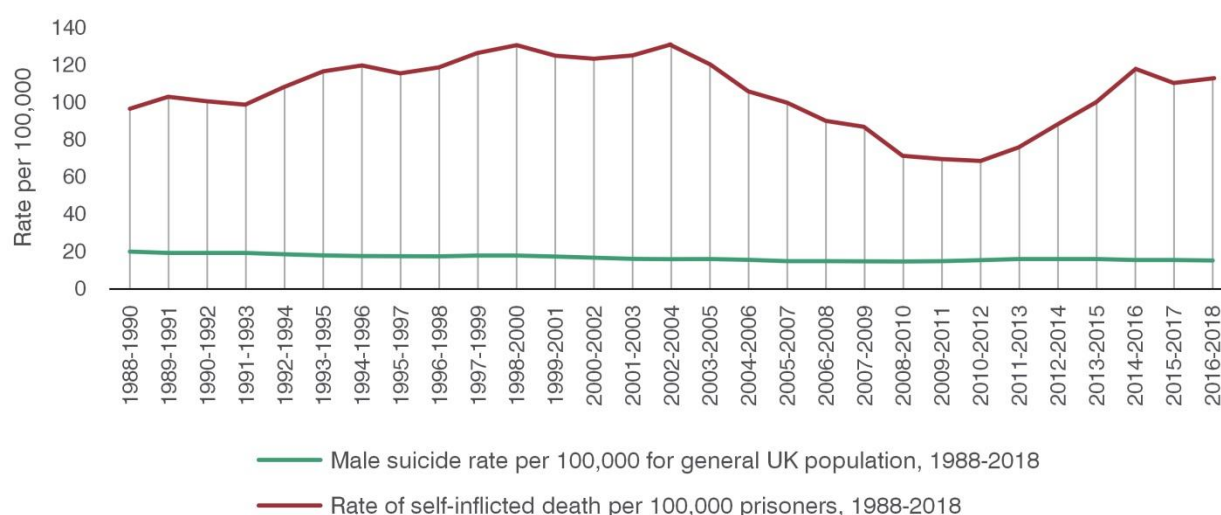
Looking at the highest risk prisoners, we know around a third of self-inflicted deaths in custody happen in the first 30 days of imprisonment in England and Wales (Prison Reform Trust's Bromley

Self-inflicted deaths are over six times more likely in prison than in the general population

Briefings, 2019), and around the same number is true of those who are in prison for the first time (Tomaszewska et al, 2019).

In 2016, people identifying as white accounted for 85% of self-inflicted deaths (and 74% of the prison population), and this increased by 33% between 2015 and 2016. Black men accounted for 6% of self-inflicted deaths (and 12% of the prison population) (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Risk of suicide is significantly higher for women. 46% of women in prison report having attempted suicide at some point in their lifetime. This is twice the rate of men (21%) and more than seven times higher than the general population (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). Hanging remains the most common method of self-inflicted death for both males and females in prison in 2019, accounting for over 85% of all incidents (Tomaszewska et al, 2019).

The following graph is taken from a recent Samaritans report (Tomaszewska et al, 2019) and shows the rate of self-inflicted deaths in the prison population, using 3 year rolling averages, for the past 30 years in England and Wales. It is compared with the rates of self-inflicted death in the community.



*Suicide rates in general population and rates of self-inflicted deaths in the prison population
 (Tomaszewska et al, 2019)*

Further, statistics released by the Ministry of Justice in 2020 show 63,328 incidents of self-harm in the 12 months to December 2019, an average rate of one every eight minutes over that period. This represents an increase of 14% from the previous 12 months. For context, when comparable data started to be collected in 2004, the number of self-harm incidents in was 19674. This represents an increase of 221%, compared to an 11% increase in the number of people in prison. The Prison Reform Trust (2019) highlights the disproportionate number of self-harm incidents in women in prison compared with men, however, it also acknowledges a sharp increase in the male prison population.

It is interesting to see these upward trends in suicide and self-harm despite Safer Custody initiatives such as Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork: (ACCT) system, which was rolled out in 2005-06. The ACCT encourages a multi-disciplinary team approach

to safeguarding, looking at each prisoners' reasons for distress and individual risks of harm. A live and dynamic plan is created to help prison teams monitor those subject to an ACCT document. There can be no doubt that without the ACCT process, many more lives would be lost. However, if we are to understand the extent of suicide and self-harm in prison, ACCT needs to be a part of the picture. In fact, in 2014, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) recommended the Prison Service review its safer custody strategy, in particular, the ACCT process to ensure it was meeting the needs of those in its care. Research findings from 2015 were published in 2019 by Ministry of Justice following a qualitative study undertaken with staff and prisoners to glean their views on the ACCT process and to make recommendations. We have not included all the recommendations here, but they centred around improved resources for managing ACCT, additional guidance and training, and adaptations to the document itself (Pike & George, 2019).

In their Annual Report in 2018-19, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) considered the prison-based processes needing attention if self-harm and suicide is to be reduced. These include the appropriate use of ACCT, the suitability of the checking intervals, the quality of multi-disciplinary working (especially in the case of those with comorbidity such as mental illness and substance misuse), the promptness of emergency response and the effectiveness of drug strategy (Prisons and Probation Ombudsman Annual Report, 2018-19).

Of note here is the commission of the *Shaw Review*. This review focused on HMP Woodhill's suicide and self-harm prevention processes, precipitated by bereaved families. Shaw (2017: page 36) provided estate-wide critique that suicide prevention policies were "*designed at a time when the number of staff in prisons was significantly higher [...] and [...] the prison population was significantly lower*". Following Prison Instructions regarding suicide prevention procedures was therefore an:

... impossibility in Woodhill [...] This will apply to the vast majority of prisons. [...] It is not healthy for what is practicable to diverge so wildly from what is described as a mandatory action".
(Shaw, 2017, pg 36).

The review further highlighted:

the lack of consistent staffing. [...] Regularly at night there were insufficient staff to unlock a prisoner in distress. [...] The combination of reductions in the complement and difficulties of recruitment and retention have resulted in a completely unacceptable situation at Woodhill. These staffing pressures have been allowed to persist for far too long.

(Shaw, 2017, pg 38).

Beyond processes themselves, a number of papers have advocated for wider change within the prison system, particularly in relation to preventing self-harm and self-inflicted deaths, each in turn making a series of recommendations (Samaritans, 2019; Howard League for Penal Reform and Centre for Mental Health, 2016; INQUEST, 2020; Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP), 2017). What is consistent and clear through all these reports is the deeply concerning level of distress felt by those currently held in prison.

Many prisons are failing to learn lessons from self-inflicted deaths. HM Inspectorate of Prisons found PPO recommendations following a death in custody were not implemented in a third of prisons visited in 2018–19, which had remained static for two years. The PPO are now looking to explore how the Ombudsman Fatal Incident Reports can be expanded and improved, and this report is intended to contribute to the debate which leads to these changes.

In their 2018-19 Annual Report, the PPO state there is a need for “appropriate action to minimise the reasons for distress”, which is the focus of this report. To minimise the reasons for distress, they must be understood and this paper is intended to contribute to that growing knowledge base. Despite a wealth of knowledge of risk factors to self-harm and self-inflicted death, we wanted to explore what it is about prison that means distress can thrive but crucially why it is so often cultivated and keenly felt. We wanted to consider the wider prison environment, as part of a broader discussion within the PPO regarding how aspects of the prison environment can interact with the known self-harm and suicide risk factors to either reduce or increase risk further.

2. Method

We sought to learn more about distress in prison. Of course, this can only be explored through listening to the voices of people in prison. Within this group, we include both current serving prisoners with the benefit of nowness, alongside former prisoners with the benefit of reflection. It is only fairly recently that prisoners' direct voice is being brought to the centre stage within conversations to shape the criminal justice system (Aresti & Harriott, 2019). Aresti and Harriott (2019) argue this is not only essential in systems change, but also counters against the "the indignity of speaking for others", an expressed concern of Paul-Michel Foucault.

In this vein, we recognise the risk of researcher bias in regard to creating interview schedules, topic guides and in terms of the production of knowledge. In a recent paper by Aresti, Darke and Manlow (2016), it is highlighted how despite consulting with prisoners, much of what is published by even the most well-meaning organisations can be "standpoint specific" and is "filtered through a privileged lens", which can dilute the voices of the prisoners themselves (Aresti et al, 2016). Since the current paper is predominantly written by someone (Lucy Wainwright) without lived experience of the criminal justice system, this presented a potential issue. We conceded the production of a wholly "unfiltered" voice is not possible; however we made some steps to redistribute the power of voice.

Firstly, we rejected the concept of asking specific questions to prisoners regarding their experience of prison, and specifically about their feelings about why suicide and self-harm happen in prison. Instead, we worked with secondary data. Our data was any published quotes from a current or former prisoner that related to distress in prison. We did not have a specific focus but took a wide angled lens regarding the meaning and description of distress. Secondly, data was collected by a range of individuals to ensure researcher bias was reduced as much as possible, some of whom had lived experience of the criminal justice system, some had learned experience.

Further, we ensured this report was not finalised without the oversight of people with lived experience of being in prison to counter against any potential misrepresentation in the research team. The summary and conclusion have been written by an associate who served two years of a four-year sentence from 2012-14.

There was a lot of available data and within a report of this nature, and it would have been impossible to include everything said by prisoners regarding distress. However, we sourced our data broadly, remaining within the last 5 years. We looked to find prisoner voice through:

- Qualitative research academic papers – sourced using Google Scholar using search terms of "prisoner

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distress”, “prisoner suicide”, “ACCT”, “prisoner self-harm” and subsequently using the reference sections from each relevant report/paper. Voluntary sector reports – sourced predominantly through exploring the websites of known organisations working in this field and their reference sections.

- Blogs from prisoners and former prisoners – sourced using search engines and recommendations.
- Podcasts – sourced using search engines and recommendations.
- Television programmes – sourced using on-demand TV facilities.
- Social media – We explored the twitter pages from the last five years of those tweeting from prison (often via a family member) or tweeting following a period in custody.
- Newspaper articles - we worked through every online edition of Inside Time from 2015 – 2020, reading the published letters for references to distress, suicide or harm. We also used online search engines to find other prisoner / former prisoner written submissions.
- Books – sourced through similar means to journal articles but also through searches on book retailers and via twitter accounts.

We included quotes taken from others’ already analysed research (therefore with a degree of filtration), as well as whole letters which had been written to newspapers from the confines of a prison cell (presumably without any filtration at all). We were inclusive of all communication, written prose, poetry, spoken word and research participation. In total, we used 57 sources, and starting our analysis with a “long list” of almost a thousand prisoner and former prisoner quotes. A full list of our data sources can be found in the appendix.

Prisoner voices were collated, and key themes were identified. Pertinent, representative examples have been included verbatim within this report, which is loosely organised thematically to illustrate some of the challenges facing those living with distress. Beyond a light thematic analysis, we have avoided too much interpretation of the findings, in light of the assertions of Aresti et al (2016) and allow the voices to take prominence.

3. Findings

This findings section is organised to demonstrate seven themes we identified within the data: the physical environment, the emptiness of prison, the big events, mental ill-health and substance use, shifting sense of self, staff reaction to distress and potential protective factors. Before starting on the first theme it is worth noting many of these themes interact and are not exclusive to one another, often presenting with mutually reliant relationships. Themes are not presented in terms of their importance; this will be different for everyone.

3.1 The physical environment

By necessity, prison is detached from mainstream society. It physically separates those living within its walls from those living outside. Many prisons are old and have struggled to keep up with the modern prison service. As many as 34 of the establishments currently in use were built in the 19th century or earlier and in 2016, 1287 cells did not have in-cell sanitation (Webster, 2019). Importantly too, many are repurposed over the years, with the population needs not always matching the physical environment.

Within the walls itself, there is a distinct culture, which does not mirror that of mainstream society. This culture is impactful, very often altering the way a person behaves, their mental health and their sense of identity. This in turn can impact on individual prisoner's propensity to self-harm or consider suicide. Although we understand past behaviour to be a good predictor of future behaviour, with a fifth of all men and almost half of all women in prison having previously attempted suicide (Samaritans, 2019), we also noted prison can awaken vulnerability to suicide and self-harm for the first time, and affect decision making.

I don't self-harm out there, I've never done it out there, it's only when I've come to jail. I always thought, like, why did I do that, do you know what I mean, most stupidest thing ever.

(Prisoner quoted in Fitzalan Howard & Pope, 2019)

I was in a bad way and did consider suicide for the first time ever in my life ... I learned to cope, but not everyone does ...

(Prisoner quoted in Howard League & Centre for Mental Health, 2016)

It wasn't my finest decision to have unprotected anal sex with a recovering heroin addict in a prison cell. Prison does strange things to your thought processes.

(Former prisoner referenced in "Prison UK: An Insider's View" [blog], 2016)

We know from research evidence, the early days in prison is a particularly vulnerable time (Samaritans, 2019), and our data analysis supported this. People described entering prison as "scary" and "intimidating" for first timers, with the unique physical environment given as a contributor for this intense psychological distress.

There was a degree of emotional battery, including periods in solitary confinement and the realisation of what losing your liberty really means.

Within minutes of arrival from court, you will be strip searched. And depending on the officer doing the search, that may involve squatting.

(Foster (former prisoner) writing in *The Metro*, 2017)

It's your first time, it's all new the noise the keys, the smell. Keep yourself to yourself take it day by day.

(Prisoner speaking on "Welcome to HMP Belmarsh" [Television series], 2020)

I didn't know anyone in there and I was literally shitting myself. And I wanted to do myself in because I had nothing to live for.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2017)

One former prisoner noted it is possible to get one telephone call during your first night, which might neutralise some distress, but importantly "beware, it only lasts a minute".

Beyond the first night, the reality of what it means to be in prison gradually unfolds. The reality was that "normal" had gone and a strange, unnerving "new normal" emerges.

There was a degree of emotional battery, including periods spent in solitary confinement and the realisation of what losing your liberty really means in practice. No longer having any real choices. Not being able to engage directly with family members and friends at will.

(Former prisoner writing in "Prison UK: An Insider's View" [blog], 2016)

The things you take for granted ... until you realise you're actually never gonna have access to that again.... sitting at the bus stop, I used to hate waiting for buses, I couldn't think of anywhere better to be than waiting for a bus.

(Former prisoner speaking on "The Secret Life of Prisons" [podcast], 2019).

Several prisoners spoke about their desire to find elements of normality within prison, but accepted these moments were contained and sometimes fleeting.

I just wanted some normality, like be able to speak to someone about how I felt or just to escape the shit for a bit.

(Prisoner quoted in Chant & Crane, 2020).

I went to the library and it was a bit of escapism you're only allowed 10 minutes a week so you have to know what you're looking for. At first I got books on farming, parrots, cars, I was clinging on to normal life to give hope...

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2017)

... when I either am outside walking because I have to go get something or someone or following somebody to a visitor, or just having my break, stepping out for five minutes to clear my head, trees, the cleanness ... It feels more calming.

(Prisoner quoted in Moran, 2019)

What I'd give for a window that opened.

(Tweet from @Prison_Diaries, 2019)

In contrast to normality, the prison environment was often described as being dirty, unhygienic and difficult to live in. HM Inspectorate of Prisons produced a thematic report in 2017 specifically looking at living conditions. They reported a blend of experiences, with some

prisoners having access to clean, newly decorated and well-equipped cells. However, they also reported “*too many prisoners live in squalid cell conditions with inadequate ventilation, damaged furniture and unscreened toilets*” (page 28), which was certainly one of the themes within our secondary data analysis.

I would say to people it's like some third world country stuff in there. There's like cockroaches, hundreds of them on a night-time. There's no windows, it's dirty, filthy, no cleaning products to clean out your cells.

(Prisoner speaking on Sky News, 2018)

When they first took me on to the wing and put me in that cell - I was mortified. It was absolutely disgusting, filthy. Oh the smell....I felt physically ill.

(Former prisoner speaking on “Secret Life of Prisons” [podcast], 2019)

The physical reality of sitting looking at the four cell walls for long periods of time, up to 23 hours a day, combined with being unable to find mental release was a trigger for the prisoner below who opened up about his mental health in prison.

I've been deteriorating bit by bit, like little things have been happening, yesterday I couldn't cope no more with everything. I'm in these four walls and I can't control nothing you know what I mean? I'm in a pickle that I don't wanna be in.

(Prisoner speaking on ‘Inside Prison: Britain Behind Bars’ [Television series], 2019)

Another aspect of prison life which appears to compound the reality of lost liberty is incessant, inescapable noise (Herrity, 2018; Wener, 2012). Noise comes from prisoners talking, shouting, playing music and their televisions, from officers shouting instructions or seeking out for particular prisoners, from alarm bells, keys and gates. This is powerfully captured though a 36-minute National Prison Radio broadcast entitled “Sounds Inside”, which covers a 24-hour period in HMP Brixton.

This is how prisons are, they've been like this since ... I don't know how long. I've been here 30 years ... you've got the talking and the shouting ... you've got ceilings like this and it just bounces back. You can't hear yourself speak sometimes, that's how loud I'd say it is.

(Prisoner speaking on “Sounds Inside” [podcast], 2018).

Once the door is closed for the night, it won't open until the morning – no matter how much shouting or screaming you do.

(Foster (former prisoner) writing in The Metro, 2017).

There's no gentle start in prison.

(Former prisoner broadcasting on “Sounds Inside” [podcast], 2018)

It's clattering chaos from the minute you are unlocked – shouting, banging doors, tinkling keys, all echoing and bouncing. There are no carpets, no soft anything, everything in prison is tinny and hard.

(Cattermole, 2019)

There is of course, very little space or opportunity to get away from the noise, moreover the case for prisoners sharing a cell.

In prison you're always with somebody – with your cell mate, your inmate, colleagues while at work around the prison, or people coming to your cell for a chat. I really liked the off hour or two, maybe only once a month, of just being in my cell, on my own; it was nice just to relax and be alone. In the real world, I'm a very private person.

(Foster (former prisoner) writing in *The Metro*, 2017).

I want to come back to my pad and do whatever you know just chill out, not have to sit there and fucking baby sit someone.... I've got my own problems as well, my own shit going on outside.

(Prisoner quoted in Nixon, 2019)

The night-time however, can be quiet, leaving prisoners alone with their thoughts. One former prisoner is cited in a newspaper article (2018) about his first night in prison.

I was stressed out like you wouldn't believe. There was no way I was going to sleep. My whole world had just fallen apart. It was just me and my thoughts. And silence. It was eerie. There was no noise on G Wing that night.... All I could think of was how powerless I was. I didn't sleep, I couldn't sleep.

(Former prisoner quoted in [Scheerhout](#), 2017)

Never being physically alone but feeling psychologically alone was a frequently reported feature of prison life. Many prisoners and former prisoners reflected this was one of the hardest parts to prison; not being able to share their perceptions, feelings or fears with those they trust, inducing a sense of loneliness.

I had never felt so alone and petrified ... The fear of the unknown was overwhelming.

(Former prisoner writing "The Tartan Con" [blog], 2016)

One current serving prisoner explained via a poem submitted to Inside Times that he felt unable to share his true feelings with his family, for fear it would cause them worry. This meant the fear was further internalised.

*I tell you that all is good, that prison life is misunderstood,
The food's ok and work is fine
Yes there's problems, but none are mine,
I think it's what you want to hear,
I twist the truth to dull your fear,
I think it's for the best,
I say the same as the rest,
But would you really want to know,
What happens here that I don't show,
The times I sit here feeling bad,
Drives me crazy and sometimes mad.*

(*Inside Time*, July 2019)

The importance of family connection was clear in supporting people through a custodial sentence. This was highlighted by Lord Farmer as the “golden thread”, encouraging that family ties be woven throughout the judicial, custodial and probationary service.

Your family keep you grounded when you feel like you're just about to lose your head. They're the people who can talk me down when I'm having it with someone and I want to hit them round the head with a sock full of cans of tuna.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019)

Yet, we saw many examples of prisoners who were estranged from their family, due to frayed relationships or long, costly distances to prisons far from home.

I haven't seen my family for three years.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2018)

Missing them contributed to a sense of loss and emotional distress for many. This was compounded by a sense their imprisonment was responsible for any hurt felt by their families.

*As I sit and wonder all the reasons why
I can't help the tears in my eyes
As I realize all that's been lost
And all the lives have gone
What else is left to base my life on?
No kids, no home, family all gone
I just don't know how to carry on
Carry on smiling, lying, I'm ok
To people all around me
So what else is left to say!*

(Prisoner writing into 'Inside Time', April 2019)

I'm finding it harder and harder to pick the phone up, harder and harder to look at their pictures. As a mummy that breaks my heart because you're never gonna get them days back again.

(Prisoner speaking on 'Inside Prison: Britain Behind Bars' [Television series], 2019)

I had had my girl on the phone the night before sobbing, sobbing she was ... about those bastards bullying her for having a mother in jail ... I was that worried ... how the hell was I meant to concentrate? ... I had no phone credit left. she says she's not going back [to school] ... and that I can't make her ... and she's right ain't she ... not from jail I couldn't, I couldn't do nothin ... I felt furious, furious with them ... but mostly furious with me [breaks down ...], how can I go in there and think about sentence planning when all I can do is cry my eyes out and think about [her]?

(Prisoner quoted in Baldwin, 2017)

Visits were spoken about positively generally, as something prisoners “long for”. However, they are not without their difficulties and the process of visits can lead to distress.

The stress of waiting to be called. Thinking please don't let me be the last person to be called, why can't my visitors be the first people. Because every minute really, really matters.

(Former prisoner speaking on 'Secret life of prisons' [podcast], 2019).

It takes that long to wait your turn and get searched half your visit's over before it started. my ex used to come and see me every week he stuck by me twice but it broke me every time he left. You have one kiss when you go in one kiss when you leave and that's it.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2017)

The first thing that hit me was the sounds of the other children, I haven't heard sounds like that since....your stomach goes - the emotion just comes and I picture my children who I've not seen for three months and I can feel how much I miss them.

(Former prisoner speaking on 'Secret Life of Prisons' [podcast], 2019)

There were some references to this intense missing of family being a trigger for self-harm and self-inflicted death. The first of the following quotations comes from a young man detained in a Young Offender Institution who feels he is unable to cope with the separation from his family. The second comes from an adult male prisoner.

I keep going on ACCT plans because I don't get visits and don't see my family I just feel lonely so I get depressed and self harm and then feel suicidal.

(Prisoner quoted in Harris & Brown, 2016)

I've been cutting myself to pieces because I find it hard to deal with prison life if I'm honest with you. It's not really prison life its being away from my family, I find it difficult.

(Prisoner speaking on "Crime and Punishment" [Television series], 2019).

The factors referred to in this opening section relate to the operational nature of imprisonment; being segregated from society (namely family), living in a small space (sometimes doubled up) and having no autonomy. While all necessary requirements, the sense of distress is compounded for some by the space being unhygienic and in disrepair, and the noise of prison. There are limited opportunities to talk to family about this, due to limited or short visits, or because of a sense of responsibility to protect those outside from knowing too much about life inside.

3.2 The emptiness of prison

A substantial theme in our work was about how monotonous and uninspiring life can be in prison. It is described as being predominantly inactive and boring.

I'm doing 22 years, so I can tell you, I've seen a lot of magnolia. It's depressing after a while you know.

(Prisoner quoted in Styles, 2019)

Every day is the same. I can hope for something to happen, but the truth is ... the next 18 years are easy to predict.

(Tweet from @Prison_Diaries, 2019)

*Prison turns
you grey
scale – you
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colour
yourself
back in.*

They say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, For me it's like the days just keep on getting longer.

(Prisoner writing into *Inside Time*, February 2019).

Prison turns you greyscale, grey tracksuit, from the crap food and lack of sun, thin grey hair from the stress – you need to find ways to colour yourself back in.

(Cattermole, 2019).

Many prisoners speak about being bored, wishing they could do something but there is simply nothing for them to do. Within the prison, there are “purposeful activities” but the number of activities and staff to support them has reduced steadily over a decade. Opportunities are reduced further for those who are deemed too unwell to go to work, due to physical or mental ill health. Looking again to HM Inspectorate of Prisons, two thirds of prisons visited were given a negative rating from inspectors in 2018–19 for purposeful activity work. We read about and listened to many prisoners who felt there was no purpose to their days. Purpose, or meaning said to be important cornerstones to quality of life, which makes this an important area for consideration (Seligman, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fredrickson, 2009).

At least 50% of every wing are behind their door every day. Many people are unemployed or underemployed.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2020)

I spent years in jail and watched it's steady decline. Lack of meaningful activity is the main issue inside”

(Tweet from @ExDrugSupplier, 2018).

[I just] loaf around, stay in my cell, watch DVDs. There's nothing to do. They've cut down the sessions in the gym.... Since I've been here, I have not done anything. It's like two years spent doing nothing.

(Prisoner quoted in Shalev & Edgar, 2015)

This was all exacerbated by the length of time spent locked up, which was very often said to be 23 hours a day. This is against the advice of HM Inspectorate of Prisons which recommends 10 hours out of cell at weekends and opposes any regime which amounts to more than 22 hours of confinement in any given day.

You've got to imagine you're banged up 23 hours a day, they just throw horrible food at you, they don't give you the right medication or care that you need, they're just throwing people behind a door in a 12 by 8 cell, it is ridiculous, people are going mad in there.

(Prisoner speaking on “Crime and Punishment” [Television series], 2019)

HM Inspectors warned that excessive time in cell was “leading to frustration, boredom, greater use of illicit substances and often deteriorating physical and mental health” (2019). Further, increased isolation was seen to be a key factor contributing to the vulnerability of prisoners to self-inflicted deaths (Howard League and Centre for Mental Health, 2016).

... an inmate on ACCT cannot be put on the basic regime due to the detrimental mental health effects it has. This young man was reassessed, taken off ACCT, placed on basic regime, and had his TV and all privileges removed. He was found hanged in his cell less than a week later. He made a very good job of taking his own life and didn't survive. So I would challenge anybody to lock themselves in their bedroom for just 24 hours with no TV, nothing to read, no view out of the window, and for them to tell me that it was a pleasant experience. Then multiply that by a number of weeks.

(Foster (former prisoner), The Metro, 2017).

We saw prisoners are left with excess idle time, which they explained can lead to overanalysing things and dwelling on problems from the past as well as their current pains of imprisonment. We refer to this at subsequent points in the report.

Too much time with your own mind is unhealthy.

(Tweet from @Prison_Diaries, 2019))

All you have is your thoughts of what's there, what can be, you don't know how long you're gonna get, you don't know if your family [will] leave you, your girl, all these things going through your mind and you ain't really got any way to take them off your mind.

(Prisoner quoted from Howard League and Centre for Mental Health, 2016)

It was interesting how many people referred to night-time and waking up when they spoke about prison, and its monotony. Several described it as “a nightmare” or a “bad dream” they are unable to escape from.

When I wake up in the morning, I'll tell you what is going through my head. Another boring day. Another day of exactly the same as what you have just gone through yesterday and the day before that and the day before that. Fuck, sometimes hope for me is just to do something different. It is mind numbing. Boredom is a massive fear, a really big thing. That is where depression starts I think.

(Prisoner quoted in Styles, 2019)

Rejoice when I am banished from your sight, into a world of never-ending night.

(Prisoner writing to Inside Time, February 2019)

Sometimes I wake up wishing I hadn't.

(Tweet from @Prison_Diaries, 2019))

In contrast to how quickly we can access information and answers in the community, everything in prison is perceived to take a long time. In the community, we are used to immediate digital processes, but in prison everything remains paper based. Pieces of paper move from team to team with no guarantee they will ever reach their intended recipient. There is also frequent lack of acknowledgement of receipt, leaving prisoners unsure of the status of their application. Applications are sent to various departments such as prisoner finances, to resolve canteen issues, to see a member of staff or to complain about something. For some, there is a perception that the wait can be unnecessary and deliberate obstacles are put in place which elongate it further.

The understaffed and over populated system often totally ignores requests big and small.

(Prisoner quoted in Cattermole, 2019)

In prison something that should take a month can take a year, that's not a joke.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2020)

Prison is like this: imagine if every day, your train gets in at ten to five and you go to the shop for milk. And every day when the shop-keeper sees you coming, he flips the open sign to closed. Every day.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2017)

This slowness causes frustration and tensions within prison communities and we saw some prisoners felt compelled to use violence, to “create a scene”, just in the hope that they would be heard.

When angry men feel that they are being ignored, some come to believe that only by smashing up the environment around them will their voices finally get heard”

(Prisoner writing in Prison UK: An Insider's View [blog], 2016)

Nothing has happened. When I dropped on the netting, all of a sudden, everyone asked me what I wanted – SOs, wing managers. All of a sudden I had their full attention.

(Prisoner quoted in Shalev & Edgar, 2015)

In specific relation to self-harm and self-inflicted deaths, there were some references to staff not answering cell bells, either because of neglect but also due to a painful lack of resources on overcrowded wings. A 2018 report from HM Inspectorate of Prisons saw the Chief Inspector referred to having seen cell bells going unanswered during the inspection, and just 11% of prisoners confirming cell bells were answered within 5 minutes. Improvements to emergency responses are a recurrent recommendation in PPO reports. The impact of delay in answering the cell bell can be devastating.

We all know how long it can take for bells to be answered in the normal course of things, but when someone is on suicide watch there is no excuse for not answering a cell bell.

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, June 2018)

At half two in the morning I heard him banging on the wall moaning I jumped out of bed press the buzzer and started kicking the door when a screw came I said get to his door now he's not well and it took them about 40 minutes to unlock his door in the morning he was gone I never saw him again he was dead.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

Within this short section we refer to the mundaneness of prison life, but it is important to note the length of the section does not depict its importance, nor the cumulative effect it has as it builds alongside the additional challenges of prison life. Many stories had similar, if not identical lines within them; stories about boredom, wasted time, lack of opportunities and crucially, being alone with thoughts and feeling stuck or trapped within the prison and those negative thoughts and feelings.

3.3 The 'big' events

As a consequence of prolonged periods of “bang up”, many people in prison become increasingly frustrated and wound up. Prisoners admit their reactions to seemingly small issues can be drastic. This was illuminated well in the documentary “Prison”, when a prisoner had a vape stolen from him; *“I wanna end everything, I’m gonna end everything I swear to God”*.

Torturous overthinking of a meaningless statement, a past trauma, or a small conflict with someone on a wing can lead to spiralling neurosis you wouldn't be part of if you were in the outside world or simply had something to distract you.

(Cattermole, 2019)

A prisoner's life is small and banal. Spilt coffee is a big issue for a prisoner, not for public.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2020).

These mounting tensions can be the consequence of mulling over issues that happened before bang up, either a long time before or immediately before. For example, resolvable incidents with prisoners, staff or even family will have been brooded over for 23 hours, with no outlet. They are also the result of feeling insecure or unsafe, a long established and crucial element in human wellbeing (Maslow, 1943).

I had some news from someone about my missus, which turned out not to be true. It kind of all hit home really. I ripped off a length of bed sheet and I woke up with them cutting it off my neck and putting me in the recovery position 'cause I went blue, stopped breathing. I thought it would be quick and easy, turned out it wasn't meant to be.

(Prisoner speaking on “Welcome to HMP Belmarsh” [Television series], 2020)

Those basic things have to be stable. If people are frustrated, pissed off and stressed, it's not safe.

(Prisoner quoted in Barkham-Perry, 2019)

Against the backdrop of boredom and inactivity, these are major incidents. These are the kinds of events that do not occur for many people in wider society, but happen regularly inside prison, to the point of potentially being normalised. The events we are referring to involve being a victim or perpetrator of violence, but also witnessing traumatic events such as an attack or peers “going over” following drug use. It can also be witnessing a peer attempting to take their own life or harm themselves. One former prisoner tweeted about the emotional impact of this: *“psychologically damaged, exposed to warzones on prison wings, all suffering different degrees of PTSD”* as a result of what they are exposed to on the wings during their sentences (Tweet from @Godwontlikethis, 2018).

There are also significant processes such as parole hearings and decisions, as well as transfers and releases which creates further anxiety. This contrast between boredom and high stress suggests prisoners need to learn to live in a hypervigilant state while simultaneously experiencing extreme boredom.

A prisoner's life is small and banal. Spilt coffee is a big issue for a prisoner.

I saw bad shit: vulnerable people getting terrorised for kicks, the manipulation of people with learning difficulties, razor blades melted into toothbrushes, unconfirmed sex offenders getting boiling water mixed with sugar poured over their heads, 30-man postcode fights and the occasional bit of “claret” splattered up the wall.

(Cattermole, 2019).

I once saw a man get stabbed in the eye with a sharpened toilet brush for being friends with someone.

(Tweet from @Prison_Diaries, 2019)

I’ve seen people get cut open in here, left with like 65 stitches down their face from one side to another it’s naughty and it’s all over spice.

(Prisoner speaking on Welcome to HMP Belmarsh [Television series], 2020)

I know the mental scars that a suicide leaves upon the staff AND the prisoners (Q, who can tell me if prisoners get counselling after witnessing a suicide. Nah, we’re only “cons” don’t worry about us.)

(Former prisoner writing “The Tartan Con” [blog], 2019)

As mentioned in an earlier section, people in prison acknowledge they can behave differently while inside and we identified many examples where prisoners explained this process.

I’ve done more violent things in prison than I have done on the outside of prison.

(Prisoner speaking on ‘Crime and Punishment’ [Television series] 2019)

I kept my friend hostage at knife point, I said to her when I went in there look I love you, I’m very sorry but go with it and then I pulled out the blade.

(Prisoner speaking on “Inside Prison” [Television series]’, 2019)

One woman explained the impact of this violence on others can be extensive, as shown in the quotation below.

This woman she was always flanked by two officers and was proper naughty. She’d been messing about with her daughter in front of a bloke. She done all sorts. We tortured her. She killed herself in the end.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

In prison, trouble is only ever seconds away, it’s totally exhausting. You can never take your eye off the ball.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019)

There was substantial evidence of men and women feeling scared in prison; scared of violence predominantly. They felt vulnerable for many reasons, including for their crimes, their appearance and due to one or many of their demographics.

I feel like I’m being threatened all the time, and I’m a vulnerable prisoner, I’m very small. And I don’t feel safe in this jail.

(Prisoner quoted in Harris & Brown, 2016)

I was laughed at and both directly and indirectly verbally abused. At one point one of the residents, who had been out on ROTL, decided to Google my name to get the details of my crime. She then passed the information to other residents to try and turn them against me. Although all crimes are bad, and I'm certainly not proud of mine, I don't expect for other convicted residents to do this as it is personal to me and should be my choice to share it or not.

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, September 2019).

*It's my vulnerability they see
That's why they pick on me
I clench my fist
Blade to my wrist
Heart pounds in my chest
I tried my best
I don't want to die
No more tears left to cry
What would the Listener say?
"It's your fault"
"You're f**king gay"*

(Prisoner's poem, published in 'Inside Time', November 2019).

... look at the state of these ... they are taped up at the sides here and the glass is as thick as jam jars and make you look a complete dork it does nothing for your self-esteem that's already rock bottom but it also makes you an easy target like, you're just laughed at all the time, its bullying I guess, and a man of my age. It's embarrassing and it riles me ... here I can lock myself away, in D Cat you can't it's everyday, but opticians won't pay to thin the glass and fix them cheaply and they break again so I have given up, I have to wear them because I can't see but then I put up with snide comments again.

(Prisoner quoted in Chant & Crane, 2020).

One of the pertinent themes that arose was around the lack of permanence prisoners felt in terms of their living space. We recognise cell moves are part of prison life, but we noted instability to be a considerable cause for distress in prisoners. This is unsurprising since stability provides a foundation from which people can work on their problems and consider the future (Goodman, Smyth, Borges and Singer, 2009). It was also found in a study in 2017 by Shelter that when faced with housing insecurity, over half of people in the community developed symptoms of anxiety and stress, when they had not previously faced them. For those in prison, we understand there is far greater likelihood of existing anxieties, and regular moving (or fear of moving) will only intensify these. It is for these reasons that we include cell moves within the "big things" section.

I have often said that if moving home is deemed to be one of the most stressful times in one's life then I beg you to understand the stress a prisoner has when that happens. You, the public, more often than not will arrange your move several weeks/months ahead of time. Imagine if someone were to knock on your door at 08:00 one morning and tell you to pack your belongings in an hour as you are moving. Additionally, you are not allowed to contact your family to tell them where you are going. It is no wonder, then, when a prisoner arrives at his new establishment he is rather volatile.

(Former prisoner writing in "The Tartan Con" [blog], 2019)

I was moved every 2-3 weeks because of my category – I couldn't settle.... I never settled down.

(Former prisoner speaking on The Secret Life of Prisons [podcast], 2019).

Because of security issues they don't always tell you when and where you're transferring to so you can never really prepare yourself physically or mentally.

(Prisoner quoted in Chant & Crane, 2020).

Security concerns can lead to cell spins, which are less permanent but similarly disruptive.

I was hit by not one but two target cell spins (full searches of my cell and belongings by the Dedicated Search Team (DST) as a result of undefined "intelligence"). The first took three days, the second took five, and for, the duration of both I was moved to another cell with none of my property. Nothing was found on either occasion, of course, but these things are a significant disruption to daily life.

(Mac (prisoner) writing in "Blogging Behind Bars" [blog], 2017).

Not only are the moves quick, they are not always explained, which can leave further confusion for the prisoner and sometimes increased feelings of vulnerability. They can also leave prisoners isolated, following an effort to acclimatise and make social connections.

... you get moved without any notice, they come and get you and you're gone the same day. It's horrible – you never know whether you'll be going everyday your face doesn't fit you said something they don't like they want to make room for someone else.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

You make friends at induction but then they move you off just as you are starting to feel comfortable. Then you start to feel anxiety about where you are being moved to; you are being plunged into a new situation and there is uncertainty. Today you've got a pad mate; tomorrow they may be moved — you feel unsettled on a day to day situation.

(Prisoner quoted in Cadet, 2019)

As mentioned in an earlier section, prisoners can feel destabilised when they are presented with a new cellmate, which is equally as sudden as cell moves. We read some prisoner writings which suggested some of the cell moves felt ill-informed and / or risky, leading to unmanageable distress.

I applied to become a peer mentor and I got the job. I did about 6-7 months, got really strong, stopped taking drugs, stopped smoking and I was training every day. I was doing fantastic and in a really good place ... I came to the end of my term and I got sent to another prison and it was a new beginning. I didn't want to go because everything was going so well for me. I only had 3 months left. The place was flooded with drugs and gang culture ... it was completely manic, drugs everywhere even on the drug [free] wing ... people selling their medication ... I went there and everything just crumbled ... in a matter of 5-6 weeks. Here I had everything ... I was the best I had ever been, I was doing really well, to nothing.

(Prisoner quoted in Nixon, 2019)

It is also worth noting distress is also caused by NOT moving, by stagnancy in the prison system. Being stuck was a clear challenge for prisoners; emotionally, psychologically, physically stuck while outside world keeps turning. This is particularly the case for prisoners on parole sentences. There are plentiful examples of prisoners feeling confused, frustrated and saddened by what they see as an unescapable sentence. The effects of the Indeterminate Sentence for Public Protection (or IPP) on prisoners' mental health are well documented, but it remains important to raise this within a report on prisoner distress.

When my parole date comes around I'm told that I'm not suitable for Category D or release because I haven't reduced my risk. But I am unable to reduce my risk as no prison I have been to has any clue how to help me. I go from prison to prison on segregation transfers. I have lost everything since I have been in prison and I feel helpless. If somebody knows how to help me, please get in touch. I think my only way out of prison will be in a wooden box, maybe that will satisfy the Parole Board.

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, September 2019)

Imagine how you might feel to know all of this and to want, more than anything else, to prove yourself through engagement on offending behaviour programmes so that you can go home to your family at the soonest possible opportunity on parole, but not to be able to because resources for such courses are so overstretched that the waiting list for a place is longer than your entire sentence.

(Mac (prisoner) writing in "Blogging Behind Bars" [blog], 2017).

... you feel trapped nowhere to turn to, you become wrapped up in the anxiety, frustration and I guess anger to a degree and you don't think of consequences or think things through.

(Prisoner quoted in Chant & Crane, 2020).

Overall, this section considers how major events can happen in prison, such as violence (as a witness, perpetrator or victim), transfers, releases or unexpected cell moves. The uncertainty of big events requires prisoners to exist in a hypervigilant state as a means of survival. Big events can induce a sense of threat and people may mask their true feelings and act differently to deal with this. The paradoxical relationship between these two states of being is complex mentally, and the focus of the next section.

3.4 Mental ill-health

We have noted previously a universal understanding that many prisoners have experienced previous trauma, often starting in childhood. We heard many prisoners speak about how trauma continues to affect their mental health as adults in prison, some of whom appear to be some of the most damaged and vulnerable people in society.

My problems started when I saw my mom getting bashed up by my stepfather. And then I got raped and my mum didn't believe me. But I never saw a psychologist or someone from mental health in prison. It wasn't even mentioned. the only treatment I got in there was the dentist.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

Seeing your mother hanged at 17 never having a father, being abandoned, having your grandmother die at 24. I have lost many people. Would you call that depression?

(Prisoner speaking on "Prison" [Television Series], 2020)

The latest Bromley Briefings from Prison Reform Trust (2019) detail that 67% of women and 43% of men surveyed by inspectors in prison were reported as having mental health problems. Struggling with mental health, critically without support, was an acute cause for distress in prison.

Some prisoners spoke about extreme cases of mental illness found in prison, presenting not only a challenge for the prisoner themselves in terms of their own coping but also for the operational staff, mental health teams and fellow prisoners in terms of providing support. Unmanaged or poorly treated mental ill-health impacts on whole prison communities. The first of these quotations is from a woman who felt supported only by an alter ego while in custody.

I got raped when I was seven and I developed a split personality they said it was to cope with the trauma. See, this is Val, but you also get Eve and she goes "Fuck you, I'll fucking kill you" and she won't take shit from anyone. She turns up when the circumstances are beyond control and if someone hurts me she tells me "fucking told you they'd do that." She served a purpose. She protects me. I would have died without her. She was there all the time with me in jail.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

There's a vulnerable inmate who's been given a life sentence suffering from very severe paranoia. The paranoias got so much that he decided to take a razor and cut his throat all the way around. Where the officers were at the door, he was then paranoid the officers were gonna hurt him, so I went in on my own and he handed over the knife and he's gone off - managed to get him treated. But someone like that needs to be down healthcare to get their head in the right place.

(Prisoner speaking in "Inside Prison" [Television series], 2019)

Someone just started shouting "fuck off" and "get away from me". A bit bizarre as we are all in single cells.

(Tweet from @Prison_Diaries, 2019))

*I have sliced
and diced
myself so
much that I
am scarred
from head to
toe.*

*Louder! Louder! Louder!
 These thoughts are screaming so loud
 My head is in the clouds, my radio is booming ...
 But all I can hear is my demon
 My screaming demon has a hold of my soul and won't let go
 He's relentless, so relentless he's with me so much
 I've even called him Butch
 I wish, oh how I wish and wish he would show me mercy
 Can't he see I'm done?
 I'm waving my little white flag high in the sky
 But Butch has crossed a fine line this time
 Look at my arms, look at the harm
 I'm sorry officer I didn't mean to cause alarm
 But it was Butch, he made me do it
 You see he's got a hold on me and he won't let go
 Now I'm in a room with soft white walls
 My parents are appalled
 "How could this be?"
 "Our sons a nut, rocking back 'n' forth"
 "He said he was fine on the phone this time"
 "He said they were helping him"
 He said a man called Butch had made him see the light
 And that he would be alright this time*
 Because he had a friend in Butch (Prisoner poem published in Inside Time, 2018)

Despite the evident presence of mental ill health felt in prisons, many prisoners did not feel adequate help was available. Mental health services are commissioned to help people in prison and should be a significant part of multidisciplinary approach under ACCT?. However, we found a large number of statements about the limited resources available for mental health support, alongside a lack of understanding / training of operational staff.

The Clinic denied me a diagnosis of gender dysphoria until I took the very extreme step of removing my own testicles with a prison razor blade.

(Prisoner quoted in Cattermole, 2019).

I've always suffered mental health issues and self-harm; I've explained that I need help but keep getting put off. I've been sectioned more than once for attempted suicide. I've been seeing a psychiatrist every month who put me on some proper meds - then I get here, and the psychiatrist takes me off everything straight away even though any doctor will tell you that you have to come off slowly because it will cause more damage to your head. Now he hasn't seen me in over six months and says I don't need to see him as he has taken me off his books. I have sliced and diced myself so much that I am scarred from head to toe. They say "I know how you feel", what a load of bollocks.

(Prisoner writing to Inside Time, June 2019)

Following on from this, even towards the most caring of staff members, there was an undercurrent of distrust and even contempt regarding mental health professionals in the prisons. Criticisms of the work of mental health nurses, psychiatrists and prison-based psychologists were common.

When I last self-harmed, back in 2016, I was surprised to find that the mental-health nurses were somehow offended by the fact that I hadn't asked them for help first. One said that she had been shocked to hear what I had done since I am not one of those prisoners who regularly claims to be in crisis and demands their presence on the wing. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she had heard my name. She claimed that if I had asked for help first, then this would have raised a red flag for them, and they would have come straight to the wing to see me as I am "not one of the frequent flyers". Imagine my frustration then when, just a few months later, I did indeed ask for help (due to experiencing strong urges to take my own life) only to find that no one came. Less than a week later I was being blue-lighted to the nearest hospital after being found unconscious. Again, the mental-health team seemed offended that I hadn't discussed my feelings with them beforehand, though on this occasion I was at least able to reply, "I tried ... but you didn't want to know"

(Prisoner writing to 'Inside Time', October 2019)

I almost lost my life in 2014 in prison due to a massive overdose that left me in hospital for 2 weeks in intensive care. Yet despite my long-term diagnosis and recent psychiatric reports and pleas for help from me and my solicitor to the prison's healthcare department, I have instead been ridiculed by a so-called psychiatrist and nurse as a 'meds seeker' and told that the best course of treatment would be 'to go and play pool during association' – really? Since my solicitor wrote to the prison expressing serious concerns about my mental health not one person/officer/nurse has been to see me to even ask if I'm ok.

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, November 2019).

The psychologist asked the group what's your favourite animal? Some bloke said my favourite animal is a Pitbull. She said, "Oh your favourite animal is a dog so you would like to have a best friend and be obedient for people but you need someone to tell you what to do." One guy, honest he was mentally disturbed and shouldn't have been in our class, he said "I want to be a hob nob", she said "we're talking about animals Brian not biscuits" and he said "I don't like animals I want to be a hob nob" so she went "alright then you can be a hob nob" and that was it he sat in the classroom telling everyone he wanted to be a hob nob. He's never getting out of fucking jail because he's a triple murderer and he's doing thinking skills programme with about 40 fucking years left. It's unproductive and stupid what's he even doing there?"

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

Part of the problem in terms of understanding is identified in the most recent PPO report that some mental health conditions present as difficult and challenging behaviour. Without adequate training and experience, staff will likely deal with these as behavioural issues rather than a symptom of mental ill-health and unmet need or support.

For a white person it's mental health and for a black person it's classed as anger management issues.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2017)

It's a nightmare trying to tell an officer that you are feeling too unwell to go to work, you get a warning for it.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019).

In response, some prisoners experience co-morbidity, openly disclosing they use illicit drugs to self-medicate and help manage their mental health condition. Of course, many will have had existing substance misuse issues from before custody, and sometimes this may have contributed to the prisoners' mental health needs.

This is what's daunting me, I thought crack would be out of my head, I can taste it in my dreams.

(Prisoner speaking on 'Prison' [Television series], 2020)

I had a go [at using spice] during the first few months and ended up getting twisted up by officers and placed in segregation because I thought the officers were vampires that had to be slayed. Steer well clear if you can.

(Prisoner quoted in Cattermole, 2019)

But in the absence of psychological, psychiatric or effective mental health support, the sense that using drugs will minimise pain felt in relation to past trauma or current pains of imprisonment was clear and common.

It's an escape mechanism as well, it makes me feel free. A lot of people say 'when I look at you, you're dying on your own vomit', but I can't remember that, and I'm stoned and I'm happy, I'm in my happy place.

(Prisoner quoted in User Voice, 2016)

I feel guilty every time I look at her, she don't want me—she cries as soon as I hold her ... and all that does is remind me of how crap I am ... at everything, but especially at being a mum ... on drugs I can forget it all ... when I'm off my face is the only time I can like myself even a little bit, sometimes I don't even want to be here no more, ... What's the point now?

(Prisoner quoted in Baldwin, 2017)

Drug use was regularly used as a means of passing the time and disrupting the boredom raised as an issue earlier in the report.

This is how I see it. If I'm sleeping 9 hours every day, and I'm off my head for 9 hours everyday, I'm only realistically doing 6 hours in prison – that's it.

(Prisoner speaking on "Crime and Punishment" [Television series], 2019).

They're bored out of their head, come out at lunch, graft a spliff, fall asleep 'til 4, come out, graft another one, come back, smoke and that's the day gone.

(Prisoner quoted in User Voice, 2016).

We continue to look at the response of the prison within the next section of the report, but to distress in general as opposed to mental health specifically within the next section.

3.5 Prison response

It is well established prison officers and prisoners can have contentious relationships. There was a striking lack of positivity regarding staff-prisoner relationships in all the data we read or listened to. Many felt prison officers fundamentally did not care whether prisoners were distressed or not.

There's a certain few who will sit down and give you the time of day. Others just are not bothered.

(Prisoner quoted in Fitzalan Howard & Pope, 2019).

*But deep down these people just don't give a fu*k, Just going through their motions till they bang you up, Yeah you've got problems? That's just bad luck.*

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, February 2019).

Many felt prison officers looked down on them and/or felt they were a nuisance.

I witnessed the sheer desperation of a prisoner, new into custody, who was being completely ignored by staff. They considered him to be a pest and annoying with all his questions. If they had only taken the time to listen to him they could have, perhaps, prevented him from sitting in the corridor and slicing his wrists in anguish.

(Former prisoner writing 'The Tartan Con' [blog], 2016)

[They] are quick to remind us that we're some of the worse scum on the earth

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, February 2019)

I hear the saying "you're in prison, what do you expect" a lot. I hear this from poorer thinking prisoners, they especially say this when they are scamming, stealing or abusing someone, as if that phrase makes it acceptable. But it is incredibly disheartening when I hear it from an officer.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019)

We noticed the punitive culture of prison to be the dominant one described by prisoners in our data sources. This left prisoners feeling they could not ask for help or make a mistake.

I hurt myself yesterday because it was the only thing I could do without getting nicked or getting trouble for. I was in a lot of pain yesterday.

(Prisoner speaking in "Inside Prison" [Television series], 2019).

In my first week at a Cat-C prison I once took a wrong turn along an internal walkway and ended up on a wing that appeared identical to my own, but which wasn't mine. I politely asked a passing wing officer for directions and was shouted at, made to feel about 7-years old and told I was "bloody lucky not to be down the Block on a charge for attempting to escape." Thank you too, Guv. Have a nice day.

(Prisoner writing in Prison UK: An Insider's View [blog], 2016)

Another theme we noted was ineffective practice. Prisoners and former prisoners had many stories to illustrate how officers did not

*Putting a
razor in your
arm is the
only tool
available to
many people
trapped in
the system.*

have the information, interest or even power to relieve them of distress.

Day after day I was informing staff about what was happening, and I was constantly told to "ignore it" and let it ride over my head. Staff also told me that it wasn't bullying and that I should "toughen up". I was told that because physical violence was not used, it should not affect me. The self-harm escalated and eventually I was shipped back to Bronzefield, as East Sutton Park didn't have the facilities to deal with my self-harm. I felt I was being punished for being bullied and that the staff had turned a blind-eye and allowed it to happen. I know I am not the first to experience this and, unfortunately, I'd guess I won't be the last.

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, September 2019)

In the following piece, the poet speaks to the lack of time prison staff have to support prisoners in times of distress. We have no way of knowing how this related to his personal lived experience of feeling suicidal or if this was something he witnessed in others. However, the poem has been included nonetheless as it is a poignant reflection from someone in prison about a prisoner in need not being "seen" by one officer at a time.

*Excuse me boss, I don't feel very well.
What d'ya want me to do? I'm busy can't you tell?
Excuse me miss, I'm feeling quite upset.
Go and have a lie down, That'll probably be best.
Excuse me Sir. I'm feeling quite depressed.
Go and bother someone else! My paperwork is a mess!
Excuse me please, I think I need some help,
I've got enough problems, Sort it out yourself.
I'm alright now, I don't need no help no more.
I've sorted it myself, Because I'm dead behind my door.
Everyone is banged up, whilst they're cleaning out my cell.
Then the governor came down, to see me for himself.
Didn't no-one notice, about his mental health.
We didn't notice nothing Sir, None of us could tell.
I'm just another number, stuck behind a door.*

And no-one seems to matter, because there's always plenty more
(Prisoner poem, published in *Inside Time*, November 2019)

As a consequence of these perceptions, combined with the punitive and "us vs them" culture often formed within prison communities, prisoners found it hard to trust staff. This is problematic, as strong relationships can be an important gateway for support and ultimately rehabilitation (Weaver, 2015). This is not just an issue between prison officers and prisoners, but with other civilian staff too.

The fact that I have previously been assaulted whilst in segregation and then accused of assault myself to cover their tracks meant that I was instantly worried that they might be planning to do the same thing again, and there was nothing I could do about it.

(Mac (prisoner) writing in "Blogging Behind Bars" [blog], 2017)

Normally I just keep it in me, I'm quite shy, I don't like people knowing me business. It's hard to trust [healthcare staff] when you get a bad one, one bad one has an effect. [when a different member of staff responds] you gotta explain that all again and again and again, there's no consistency.

(Prisoner quoted in Fitzalan Howard & Pope, 2019).

I explained my issue and she (the IMB) turned around and said to me: "you need to think long and hard about why you're here". Since then, I haven't spoken to them.

(Prisoner quoted in Fitzalan Howard & Pope, 2019).

We noted many instances where prisoners spoke or wrote about being treated badly by staff, even when in acute distress. There are clear implications in terms of the repercussions for the individual's mental health, but also in terms of what this means for longer term connections with professions who may be able to help them.

Even in a suicide cell I was punched and told "We'll bounce you off the walls" – why? Because I complained about medical treatment.

Prisoner writing to Inside Time, January 2019)

I attempted suicide 3 mths from end of 18-yr sentence, my mental health was deteriorating rapidly, there was no assistance or concern. When I came to in hospital, the screw said: "next time do a better job." Offenders are pushed into suicide and self-harm by an ignorant system.

(Tweet from @godwontlikethis, 2019)

I have been told to speak out and never to suffer in silence and always ask for help. So, having been feeling low and depressed and suffering with extreme anxiety which, at the time, can be real frightening to the point I start to believe that my life is in danger. So, I decided to ask for help. I pressed my cell-bell and when the member of staff looked in I was trying to express my thoughts and feelings, but I was totally shut down and given a verbal warning not to press my cell-bell unless it was an emergency.

(Prisoner writing to Inside Time, November 2019)

This is problematic, since there will undoubtedly be officers (and civilian staff) who are supportive, but due to the enduring culture, will not necessarily be confided in. We heard of a few staff members who had made positive relationships with prisoners and we refer to these within section 3.7. However, the prison culture does not appear to make it easy to sustain these more positive relationships.

At the time of my roughest session on the course there were just three officers I trusted enough to talk to about anything personal. Since then, two of them have been reallocated to another wing and I have been told by the wing management staff that they find the fact that I spend more time speaking to the third officer than most other staff "suspicious". As a result I told them that, to alleviate their suspicions, I wouldn't be speaking to that officer again. And I haven't done since. Support networks are extremely difficult to establish, but very easy for the prison to decimate.

(Mac (prisoner) writing in "Bloggng Behind Bars" [blog], 2017)

The time spent alone with nothing to do, combined with parole assessments or offending behaviour work, can encourage people to reflect on some of the issues they find most challenging. This strikes us as a critical point where strong staff – prisoner relationships could be highly beneficial. However, prisoners often find when they are ready to open up, woeful staff shortages and prison culture mean support isn't readily available. This is at best, disabling, but at worst, potentially dangerous.

My experiences of official efforts to rehabilitate (which mostly take the form of courses which are delivered by psychologists) is that they are really good at getting prisoners to open up about the deepest, sometimes darkest, often most painful and shameful things they have ever experienced. What they are not so good at is dealing with the aftermath. It is inevitable that when someone opens up that Pandora's box to deal with what they have kept suppressed for so many years, there is going to be at least some degree of emotional turmoil. However, at the end of a session on a psychological course in prison there is a short check out where prisoners are able to raise any issues they feel comfortable bringing up (if there is time), but then you're on your own.

(Mac (prisoner) writing in "Blogging Behind Bars" [blog], 2017)

When the girls are going through detox and that they don't understand the shouting and all the girls' emotions are coming out ... They're just going to burst into tears and not know what they're crying for and they're going to end up getting warnings, negative comments shouted back at them.

(Prisoner quoted in Lloyd, Page, Liebling, Grace, Roberts, McKeganey, Russell and Kougiali, 2017)

Inmates are left to their own devices to deal with their problems as you don't get proper help to deal with their situations.

(Prisoner quoted in User Voice, 2016).

In the quotation below, the prisoner is also referring to this practice of "opening of Pandora's box", or "prodding a wasp's nest". There is increased vulnerability for those who begin to address their problems but cannot complete this recovery journey due to limited resources or a lack of safe outlets. It presents an uncomfortable ethical dilemma of which is more damaging - to start exploring the past but not see this through to the end, or to leave the past untouched. Either is troublesome.

I was dealing my shit my own way, it might not have been the right way, drugs, block it out. I had it all in a box pushed down and it's like they've (officers/prison) have just opened it – like a jack in the box.

(Prisoner speaking in "Prison" [Television series], 2020)

We saw reference to the ACCT document specifically within our data sources. Again, there was some dissatisfaction with it. Partly because it was seen to be more process driven than person driven, i.e it was as much about avoiding a death in custody (statistics wise) than helping the prisoner to feel supported and avoid taking his or her own life.

I was told that if I was feeling so low the prison will take me out of my double cell, where I can at least talk to other inmates, and isolate me in a "safe cell" that has no TV, kettle, personal belongings etc. in order to monitor me. This sounds more like punishment for suffering from mental health problems.

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, November 2019)

*I don't know what the future holds or even if I have a place in it.
A dark and lonely cell with nothing but a toilet and a ring bell
Nothing to do but lie and sleep
Awakened every 15 minutes by jangling keys
The screw constantly lifting the hatch shouting ...
"Are you alright son?"
I say "You're having a laugh"
No one to talk to, no TV to watch
A padded suite and mat – that's suicide watch
Case conferences every few days
I have to convince them I'm ok
Building my hopes up that they will take me off
Because 'suicide watch' is no laugh
Staff want you safe – make sure you will not misbehave*

Because they care in their own way

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, November 2019)

They don't stop, talk, ask if you're okay or anything, they just look through [the observation panel in the cell door] and close it, to make sure you're not hurt, that's it.

(Prisoner quoted in Fitzalan Howard & Pope, 2019).

I remember being in a body belt, in a strip cell. They used to throw in the food and I'd have to crawl to eat it ... and the Board of Visitors, as they were called then, would pop their head and say how are you? well, how do you think I am?

(Prisoner quoted Shalev & Edgar, 2015)

There were other issues around the use of the ACCT procedure contributing further to the distress felt by prisoners, as opposed to reducing it. These are worthy of attention in terms of the ongoing suitability of the process and its continual refinement.

If I was to ask for the Samaritans phone you'd get abuse the next day. [Staff] used to carry an orange booklet around, they know – they know that you're on an ACCT. They leave it in the office where a prisoner can see it. I caught a prisoner reading me ACCT document before.

(Prisoner quoted in Fitzalan Howard & Pope, 2019).

I am on an ACCT, which I don't mind, but the part I find hard is the ACCT review. This is because officers doing the review come to my cell and ask me to go to the office for my review. The problem is that they do it when the other inmates are out, and I actually can't leave the cell when it's like that because of my anxiety. They think I'm just being difficult but I'm not, it's a mental barrier. I try explaining to them that if someone needed a walking-aid to get about, would you take it away from them? The only difference between me and that person is that you can normally see their disability, you can't see mine. Jail is stressful for everyone and there are a lot of people here with mental health problems, so surely there should be more help, support and understanding?

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, March 2019).

I hung myself. I was saved. I was placed on suicide watch. I told the governor I was not strong enough to come off it and that if he took me off the constant watch I would do it again. The governor had an ACCT review without me being present and decided to take me off my constant watch. Twenty minutes later, after they told me this, I hung myself and once again I was saved by a quick-thinking, skilled officer ... The governor had no right to have a review of my ACCT without me being present. He took me off it though I told him I was not ready. I could have been dead.

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, November 2019)

There is a significant issue regarding the perception that prisoners use self-harm as a means of gaining attention. This was spoken about by some prisoners who believed it was a common tactic, as well as those who had been wrongfully accused of it. Whether it is through frustration or pain, it remains a dramatic, desperate act.

[We need] clear and transparent dealing with those who break the rules so it isn't seen that if you kick off or threaten to cut up then you get what you want.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019).

Due to this bullying I began to become very mentally unwell. I am diagnosed with mental health problems, including high anxiety. I began to self-harm and was placed on an ACCT. Just after I had a bad anxiety attack I heard a girl tell everyone that I was "faking it for attention".

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, September 2019).

Mental health services have been cut back to the extent that if you simply request to get seen then you may not be seen for forever and a day, however, self-harming will get you to the hospital wing immediately ... putting a razor in your arm is the only tool available to many people trapped in the system.

(Cattermole, 2019)

The slowness and inaction spoken of in a previous section is clearly a contributor to this issue. This includes operational staff, mental health teams, psychological staff and senior management. Poor communication between different teams has been highlighted as a factor in self-inflicted deaths (Inquest, 2020).

Prisoners saw an act of self-harm or attempted suicide and the subsequent ACCT as being reactionary. They believed officers did not want a prisoner to die in custody, but there seemed to be a shortage of early intervention to reduce risk of harm. If there was an earlier response, we may not get to the point of needing to initiate ACCT procedures. ACCT certainly encourages officers to check on prisoners. But this “checking in” lasts as long as the ACCT is open for. After which, the prisoners feel they are returned to ‘business as usual’ as though the problem has disappeared. In the Ministry of Justice review of ACCT procedures, there is a clear acknowledgement that strained resources make the ideal ACCT process very hard to facilitate.

Being on an ACCT, I've never had so much attention, people asked me questions and gave me the attention I needed, now I'm off it it's like talking to a brick wall again. I think I'm better off on an ACCT.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2020)

I try to explain, I do tell them, but it's still they don't wanna know. Until you do something ... what do I have to do? Right, I'll cut myself. They might listen to me then.

(Prisoner quoted in Marzano, Ciclitira, & Adler, 2016).

While being a useful means of assessing risk, being subject to ACCT does not enable people to address the root cause of their mental ill-health.

*See that man in the empty cell
With not a soul that he can tell
About how his life is a living hell
Is there not a person who can help?
Feed him med's and lock the door
You can't see the problem anymore*

(Except from a prisoner's poem in *Inside Time*, October 2019)

It is clear from this section there is an enduring culture which supports the “us vs them” attitude relating to prisoners and staff. Staff are not trusted to understand how to help, or to want to help in times of crisis. This creates a conflict between demands to maintain order and security, but also support and care. There remains potential in the keyworker model to resolve this tension.

3.6 Shifting self

We saw an important theme within our review of the data which is not something well represented in the literature regarding self-harm and self-inflicted death in prison, although it does feature lightly within the 2017 IAP report of prisoner views on the subject.

Straight away, when coming through reception, prisoners go through a process of adapting their identity. This continues onto the wing, where a façade is put on, and the “real” person is hidden further.

Take off your Jewellery and here's your number – and these were quite symbolic moments for me.... you can't be you anymore.

(Former prisoner speaking in ‘The Secret Life of Prison’ [podcast], 2019).

*How are you
supposed to
come back
from this?
How are you
supposed to
retain any
self-respect,
regain any
dignity?*

When I got given my prison number, I felt like I was bottom of the barrel I felt disgusting, dirty, tainted. It changed my mindset, it changed who I was – emotionally it scared me.

(Former prisoner speaking in 'Secret Life of Prisons' [podcast], 2019)

This is heightened by fear and subsequent changes to behaviour and decision-making processes.

You actually lose yourself ... you are no longer the same person as you were before. You're afraid. Any little things, you start jumping. You have nightmares ...

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2018)

The reality for many is that a façade in prison is essential. The façade allows them to conceal their fear but is psychologically tiring if maintained daily, for weeks, months or years.

Jail is an intimidating place like you've got to be seen as a big strong man and that, if you get nervous in front of people that is just another weakness that people can find, it gets too much sometimes and you start panicking, sweating out, stressing and you just break down.

(Prisoner speaking on 'The Choir' [Television series], 2020)

Walking out of that door first thing in the morning on the wing if you're going to be honest it is scary, you never know how that day is going to go. Is it going to be you today, your body language has always got to be on point you never know how someone else is going to react are you going to look at someone, they are going to take it the wrong way and automatically they are going to act on you. There's a lot to it, not just getting up and walking out of a door.

(Prisoner speaking on "Welcome to HMP Belmarsh" [Television series], 2020)

The next quotation in this report resonated as it demonstrates the depth of the façade. Even during deeply disturbing moments like these, there is no room for error in regard to showing your emotion.

People were crowded around this guy's pad so I went over and he was hanging from the light fitting with his wrists slashed he was on remand waiting trial for rape and it's already been done for rape before loads of screws rushed in and we got banged up. And exercise was delayed so everyone was kicking off about that not the fact that someone was hanging there dead and when we did get out everyone was just laughing about it because they found out he was a rapist. people put on a front a cold heart like they don't care about stuff I didn't sleep for two nights.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

One prisoner referred to how vulnerability can manifest as a consequence of this façade, which they considered to be a risk of self-harm or suicidality.

I was vulnerable and prison disallowed me from feeling that because I had to put on a façade that I am coping, that I am a tough inmate ...

(Prisoner quoted in Howard League & Centre for Mental Health, 2016)

Prisoners are impacted by the way they are addressed. This relates to the strained relationships between prisoners and staff, as already

mentioned, but specifically about the degree to which they feel respected.

Eye contact, that would be a start.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019)

*Just fucking look at me when
You lock the box again
I may be a rancid piece of shit
Unwanted on your shoe
But I am me
As much as you are you*

(Prisoner writing to *Inside Time*, November 2019)

We saw prisoners felt belittled by staff and by prison processes generally. This gradually imposes on decision making and importantly on self-respect.

You become unable to solve your own problems.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2017).

Obeying orders, no matter how ridiculous or unfair or humiliating they might be. Being told off like a naughty child.

(Former prisoner writing for “Prison UK: An Insider’s View” [blog], 2016)

It’s not the major things, because we understand the need for them, it’s the petty minor things; that is what destroys your soul and eventually kills your hope in here.

(Prisoner quoted in Styles, 2019)

Being locked up and isolated behind your door for 100 hours or more a week will turn anybody into a nobody.

(Prisoner in Prison Reform Trust, 2020)

Prison takes a shot gun to self-esteem.

(Prisoner quoted in Page & Gratton, 2020)

There’s no value left in you. How are you supposed to come back from this? How are you supposed to retain any self-respect, regain any dignity?

(Former prisoner speaking in ‘Secret Life of Prison’ [podcast], 2019)

*Feels like I’m swept under the carpet!
Like a forgotten memory
Washed down the plughole
Without a second glance
Like a discarded cigarette tab in an ashtray
Just tossed away; left at the roadside*

(Prisoner poem published in *Inside Time*, July 2019)

Psychologist Roy Baumeister proposes an “escaping the self” theory of suicide, which suggests the proximal goal is to stop painful thoughts and self-loathing (1990) and given the apparent significance of imprisonment on the self, this is an important consideration. Furthermore, having a purpose to life (even within prison) is fundamental to human wellbeing and life (Frankl, 1946). Several prisoners in our sample did appear to be questioning their purpose, which leaves them open vulnerable to negative thoughts.

The dehumanising process of prison removes one's sense of purpose.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019)

I would say to Aisha, 'Oh go get your homework and I'll help you over the phone' ... she'd say 'No it's OK Nanny's done it.' Or maybe on a visit I would want to do her hair different and she'd say 'No Mummy, Nanny did it like this and I like it' ... I felt pointless.

(Prisoner quoted in Baldwin, 2017)

We noticed how for many prisoners, it was difficult to think of a 'normal' life beyond the prison walls, potentially again relating to being stuck. This is interesting since we also know prisoners are largely fixated on their release date (where they have one). As we started when opening this findings section, prison is a unique experience, unlike anything found in mainstream society. It is an ecosystem, and for many prisoners it is hard to imagine life outside.

You never think you are ever gonna move forward from this position that you're in, from having nothing, being nothing, being worthless, you never ever think you're gonna get out it.

(Former prisoner speaking in "Secret Life of Prisons" [podcast], 2019)

People say "don't you wanna be normal again?" I don't really know what normal is to be fair. Normal is what other people do.

(Former prisoner speaking in "Secret Life of Prisons" [podcast], 2019)

Disturbingly, we saw some prisoners who found life to be better inside the prison walls than they did outside, which is a grim reflection of how challenging some prisoners' lives were before incarceration. One female prisoner explained how she felt better when she arrived 'home', with the prison taking on the role of being home. Another, who wrote the poem below, spoke about prison representing hope.

*Prison—people think it's grey and dark and awful
Mine is yellow—yellow—the colour of sunshine.
My old life was the grey, the dark, the awful
I can see blue sky from my prison,
The garden is the most beautiful I've ever seen
Lives outside the walls—we see them—
we won't have that life
But it's a view of hope—maybe we will—they say it's
about choice
I choose that life—is it really that simple
No
So instead
I choose here—it's safe, it's home, it's calm
It's yellow here,
The colour of sunshine.
I choose this life
I won't leave.*

(Prisoner poem taken from Baldwin & Quinlan, 2018)

The former prisoner who made the following statement was excited to leave prison but was filled with anxiety predominantly because of the new identity she had formed in prison. She was no longer the

person she was when she entered custody. She was filled with worry about how her new identity would ‘work’ on the outside with her family particularly and how she would manage with a changed perspective on life.

When I left at, that day I left prison I was heartbroken, didn't want to leave. Because prison was my security, that had become a home. I was frightened of failure, I was frightened of life outside, I was frightened to be judged, I was frightened of me and who I was. I didn't know who I was anymore. In prison I had created my own identity within those walls, and here I have nothing. I was frightened I was gonna be a bad mum, I was overwhelmed with guilt.

(Former prisoner speaking on “Secret Life of Prison” [podcast], 2019)

The concept of hope was also a minor theme in this study. There was a distinct absence of hopefulness felt within the prisoner voices we heard or read, although it was sought.

I started self-harming when I got recalled for this sentence, I'd never self-harmed before then, you lock somebody up without a date for release and no hope for the future and they become hopeless. And when you become hopeless your behaviour becomes increasingly erratic.

(Prisoner speaking on “Crime and Punishment” [Television series], 2019)

If you've got no opportunities, you've got no hope. If people feel safe and then they have opportunities, they are going to have hope. If you have hope, that's the best and you can't get anything more than hope.

(Prisoner quoted in Armstrong & Ludlow, 2019).

I would rather die in the gutter than live in a prison without hope.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2019)

A sense of hopelessness was seen more frequently in those with indeterminate sentences, although not exclusively.

The shock of imprisonment and the soul-destroying prospect of years passing slowly creates such space for guilt with no respite that I can't tell you how narrow the gap between living and dying is. You can be on either side of the gap in a nano second.

(Prisoner quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2020)

I don't really believe in hope. I have got 28 years. My tariff will expire when I am 46 so there is no hope, no matter how you look at it. Everyone has washed their hands of you and you're in this environment, compressed and concentrated with the most dangerous criminals in the UK for the next forever years.

(Prisoner quoted in Styles, 2019)

It's a really, really hard emotional journey, really emotional. I mean, this parole, by the time it comes around in the new year is probably ... It's been deferred three times ... it's the constant waiting and not knowing.

(Prisoner quoted in Condry and Annison, 2019)

When I first got that 36 years, I was absolutely numb. I was here 3 weeks after being sentenced and a switch went, I'm never going home, that is it, you are dying in prison. I switched off and I wanted to die. I had no hope whatsoever, and at that point I would rather they had given me the death penalty.

(Prisoner quoted in Styles, 2019)

Despite the low levels of hope, we did also see prisoners trying to find something positive to build their sentence around. We saw prisoners focusing on education, on their family and even on prison reform opportunities, which impacted their sense of hope. This is the focus of the final section of the report.

You have to find something to survive. This is my young son, my wife and my daughter. I have somebody waiting for me. Maybe I am not a good father, and now I will never get the chance to be one. But I have hope to be a good grandfather one day, and this gives me power to survive and to think about the future.

(Prisoner quoted in Styles, 2019)

Being able to eat a meal sitting at a table talking with friends, rather than alone in a cell ... felt like a step back into normality.

3.7 Protective factors

Protective factors against suicide and self-harm were seen in relation to all the major themes in this report; the physical appearance of prison, purposeful activity, relationships and hope.

Firstly, in relation to the physical attributes of prison, we saw some evidence of prisoners speaking highly of establishments which maintained high standards, where gardens were maintained and decency was upheld.

Generally, if you're living in an environment that's clean as opposed to an environment where there's rats and cockroaches everywhere, your frame of mind is going to be different.

(Prisoner quoted in Barkham-Perry, 2019)

Making it a calmer environment seems really important. I know that our number one has put up a lot of pictures, like on the exercise yard that bring the outside in. Instead of looking at the fencing and a wing, residents can see pictures that help to normalise the environment and make things feel calmer and less institutional or oppressive.

(Prisoner quoted in Armstrong & Ludlow, 2019)

One of the most memorable experiences for me was arriving at Springhill and being able to eat a meal sitting at a table talking with friends, rather than being alone in a cell. It felt like a step back into normality.

(Prisoner quoted in Shah, Allen, Peters & Bennett, 2019).

Also, in terms of purposeful activity, we saw and heard about people who were concentrating on and progressing with external studies as well as those who found in-cell activities to take up their time.

If you put a load of people together who have all got their own problems and nowhere to go, then what do you expect? That is why it is important to find other things to do (i.e. like paint-by-numbers, listening to music, exercising, making phone calls, matchstick modelling).

(Prisoner quoted in Cattermole, 2019)

I would visit the library weekly, whenever possible. The prison library was pretty well stocked, and it was run by the local council, but sessions were often cancelled due to lack of staff. I have never read as many books in my life as I did during my time inside. The library even photocopied puzzles that could be taken away – crosswords, word searches, Sudoku etc. The most popular books in the library were, astonishingly, the prison diaries by Jeffrey Archer. With a little help from a friendly officer, it was possible to obtain board games. I managed to get Monopoly and Scrabble. Hours upon hours of playing Monopoly might sound tedious – it was – but given the alternative, it was something to do. One of my cell mates wanted something different and, between us, we made up our own board games. This is something primary school children might do but with such limited external stimulation, you do tend to revert to childish ways.

(Former prisoner writing in The Metro, 2017).

Some prisoners spoke about life changing moments in relation to finding members of staff who would support them, and how this changed their attitudes of staff and their overall sense of positivity.

Prison really was sanctuary prison was the first time in my life somebody said to me what do you want to do? I said to her, “I don’t understand, nobody has ever asked me that before”. I went to a Quakers’ meeting and this lady was so nice I didn’t understand why. I asked the screw, “Do you think she wants me to do something for her?”, the screw said “people like that do exist you know”. This was the first time I realised you could actually trust some people.

(Prisoner quoted in Hardwick, 2019).

The relationship between prisoners and officers goes a long way, which is where a lot of people go wrong they come in and it’s sort of like they’re the enemy. You reap what you sow your decent with them and they are decent with you and it makes prison life much more easier.

(Prisoner speaking in “Welcome to HMP Belmarsh” [Television series], 2020)

At school everyone has that one teacher that they really remember. It’s the same in prison and I had this one officer who really helped me when I was in Woodhill. In fact, I saw him here a few weeks ago and I was so pleased to see him, I went to hug him! When I first came into prison, it really affected me and my family. After I’d been in for a couple of days, he noticed I was down and came to my cell and said, “Right, get up, have a shave. You’ve got three years so do something with it, study for a degree. In the meantime, I’ve got a job for you.” He put me to work cleaning and helped pull me out of the misery I was in. Later, my wife and I were guest speakers at a “Family Matters” event, which he arranged and helped me prepare for. We all have that one person who has made a difference.

(Prisoner quoted in Shah et al, 2019)

When I received the letter from PET agreeing to fund me it made me the happiest young man in the prison. It really helped my self-esteem, which had been at an all-time low. It felt amazing that somebody was giving me a second chance and not just “shutting the door” on me and my future. I went on to complete the Open University course that PET funded, before graduating with an Honours Degree in Health and Social Care in 2010, just in time for my release from prison.

(Prisoner quoted in Clark, 2016)

Prisoners being able to have some autonomy to manage their mental health was also spoken about, in terms of potential opportunities within prison. One prisoner (cited below) refers to the importance of progressive regimes. New initiatives have been adopted across the prison estate in recent years, such as Rehabilitative Culture, Incentivised Substance Free Living (ISFL) units and Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPEs). A commitment to continued investment in novel pathways is important.

Prisons have many people who have mental health problems or have experienced terrible events in their backgrounds of childhoods. Putting them in a restrictive regime is just going to damage their self-esteem and encourage them to think that they have nothing to offer and they can never be anything other than a criminal. A more positive environment can encourage them to have a more healthy view of themselves, more confidence and so re-join society in a positive way. That needs practical support and resources, as well as compassion.

(Prisoner quoted in Shah et al, 2019).

The following two prisoners speak about how they have personally improved their mental health, through two very different methods, which demonstrates the need for individuality when we consider wellbeing.

With meditation ... We observe our emotions and the physical sensations that it brings, we observe our breath, our surroundings, and sound — so that we can ground ourselves and not be carried away by stress, anger, anxiety. You learn to be with difficult emotions — so that you don't have to react to them. I'm not saying I am cured, but I have an answer. I am not perfect, I have a long way to go, I have a lot of meditating to do, but at least now finally I am on the right path.

(Prisoner quoted in Russell and Russo, 2020)

I've been put on to [specialist unit], which is a unit downstairs and I've got a psychologist and an [occupational therapist], a social worker, a nurse therapist assigned to me, they're on my team.... If you're ever in, like, a real state you can just go to one and say, “Can I have a word?” and they'll make time for you, like.

(Prisoner quoted in Fitzalan Howard & Pope, 2019).

While it happens rarely, the impact of therapy was spoken about in the following quote, which suggests it is beyond the prisoner themselves and can extend to wider families.

[My children] never used to cwtch [cuddle] and things like that but now they just don't want to let me go ... it's mad, a brilliant feeling ... it's brought us so much closer ... even though I've been taken away from them that connection is still there ... it makes me feel 10 times better"

(Prisoner quoted in Templeton, 2019).

Having someone to talk with was a key theme from this piece of work, and some prisoners in our data set reflected on the positive relationships they had built, with both staff and prisoners. There was value found in the listener scheme, as well as peer mentoring. Prisoners who trained to become listeners and mentors were also positive about the impact of the opportunity on their lives.

When I come to jail I was in a bad way, I was self-harming and stuff and thinking I need to stop this. What made me stop was the Listener that was on this landing. He pushed me and said I need to do something positive and eventually I will get that positivity and I will feel better about it. It is the best thing I have done in prison. He has helped me. I can talk to him when I am feeling down and he will bring me back up and make me feel positive.

(Prisoner quoted in Nixon, 2019)

When a teacher told me that I would be good at doing it (peer mentoring), I started feeling positive about myself. People must see things in me for them to keep saying these positive things. At first, I wasn't really too sure as I'm not used to positive feedback, I'm used to negative feedback all my life.

(Prisoner quoted in Nixon, 2019)

Prisoners also talked about the bonds they had made with other prisoners on the wing and found them to be protective factors in times of distress.

My time in prison was grim, it was unpleasant, it was – to be frank – horrible. However, I met some of the most amazing people I've ever met in my life. Several are very good friends to this day. I would never want to return but I can't thank the justice system enough for giving me the most amazing experience. Nobody can appreciate the issues of incarceration unless they've been there. It's horrible yet intriguing.

(Prisoner writing in "Prison UK: An Insider's View" [blog], 2016)

We saw people looking to the future as a means of getting through custody

*Knowing I've got you son helps me hold it together,
And if I don't have you, this sentence may as well be forever,
I can only do what I'm able to Jack,
And as much as I want to,
I can't turn the clock back*

(Prisoner writing to Inside Time, July 2019)

Additionally, finding purpose as mentioned earlier was shown to be important.

Most days it's a struggle to even get up, let alone have hope. The good thing is the jobs that I have here mean people depend on me. Linda in the cookery class depends on me to help her. So, I suppose it's being needed, trusted and relied on that gets me up every day.

(Prisoner quoted in Styles, 2019)

Those engaged in higher education courses such as “Learning Together” spoke positively about how it affected their view of non-prisoners and broke down some of the barriers prisoners felt existed between them and mainstream society. They value the re-integration into society, building resilience and social capacity.

It teaches you that not all of society has the same perception about criminals — it gives you a sense of hope that when you get out, some parts of society might accept you.

(Prisoner quoted in Armstrong & Ludlow, 2016)

4. Summary and Conclusion

Time in prison ranks as one of the most challenging experiences to be endured and arrival into custody is rarely gentle. For many, trauma is a prominent feature of the journey that ultimately led to conviction and custody. Adverse childhood experiences, mental health challenges, substance abuse and estrangement from family are often par for the course, and that's *before* a resident even arrives in reception. The daily distress of prison life has yet to be added to the list of traumatic experiences.

Self-harm, and in the worst cases suicide, are understood to be responses to emotional distress. Key factors included the physical environment, often described as squalid and noisy with talking, TVs, music, officers shouting instructions, alarms, keys and gates slamming. The lack of private space, especially when forced to share a cell, was also raised.

In stark contrast, the quiet nights were reported as exacerbating the loneliness felt away from family and loved ones, leaving prisoners to ruminate over issues out of their control. The distress of isolation was all the more keenly felt as family visits were reported as emotionally challenging both during and after.

Prison life was reported as monotonous, boring and a source of frustration, with excessive periods of purposeless time spent in cells impacting on physical health, mental wellbeing and substance misuse. Slow responses to applications and requests were also reported as exacerbating frustrations and resulting violent acts on wings becoming the "norm".

Dramatic events, while offering an alternative to boredom and purposelessness, also contributed to a state of hyper vigilance, with fear of violence raised by many, and the states of hyper vigilance and extreme boredom combined considered significant stressors. Lack of permanence, with sudden and unexplained cell moves, new cell mates or searches, were also raised causes of distress. While those on parole expressed frustration at their lack of progression within the system.

Mental ill-health was a challenge for the sufferer, the operational staff, mental health team and fellow prisoners. Mental health services were reported to be under resourced and difficult to access, with distrust toward staff and a lack of understanding by prison officers (with some conditions viewed by the latter as difficult behaviours rather than conditions needing adequate attention). In the absence of effective support, prisoners admitted to self-medicating with illicit substances, with drug use also employed as a means of passing time and disrupting the aforementioned daily boredom.

Maintaining a daily façade of toughness to mask fear also takes an emotional toll. The "real" person is hidden, and officers respond to what they perceive, which strains prisoner-staff relations and impacts on a prisoner's self-respect. It is thought that the resultant self-loathing and loss of integrity could potentially contribute to suicidal ideation.

The Ministry of Justice have heard the same stuff a million times from a million people and the rates of self-harm and suicide keep rising.

Low levels of hope were observed in many but in spite of this, some found ways to cope and give themselves purpose by taking up educational opportunities, engaging in rehabilitative activities and nurturing good family relations, giving them something to look forward to on release. Distress was significantly alleviated by higher standards in the physical environment, purposeful activity and supportive relationships with prison staff. Others mentioned practicing meditation or accessing psychological support from mental health workers as impacting their outlook. Finally, having someone to talk to was a recurring theme of the research, with the “Listeners” and peer mentoring schemes cited as a source of support.

None of this is a surprise, nor is it new. The authors of the report began their research with an open mind as to what might exist in the current literature on the subject of distress experienced in prison. The emergent themes presented in this report were found to correspond well to what has been published to date. Again and again, we find interconnected themes in the multiple texts, evidencing the need for a diversity of effective strategies in response to this challenge.

The Ministry of Justice have heard the same stuff a million times from a million people and the rates of self-harm and suicide keep rising.
(Cattermole, 2019)

As someone who experienced first-hand the vicissitudes of prison life for two years, I found some of these testimonies heart-breaking. So many people with unmet needs in a barely functioning system. With so much research on the effects of emotional distress on self-harm and suicide in prisons and so many independent recommendations by different observers, why the rise in fatalities? And what next? What could these findings mean for those wishing to address the alarming rates of self-harm and suicides in British prisons today? As the title of the report asks, “Who cares?”

In my experience as both as a former inmate and now a professional engaging with current residents, I have come across many well-meaning operational and civilian members of staff, as well as many prisoners willing to engage in their rehabilitation. I regularly hear prisoners raising concerns about all the above and I wonder about the impact on their sense of self. What do these conditions convey to an individual about their worth, or more importantly, their worthlessness? Systemic improvements are needed to encourage and nurture goodwill on all sides. We need to cultivate a culture of trust.

Operational staff are woefully unprepared to deal with emotional distress in prisoners, many of them recently recruited and more often too busy dealing with the essentials of their role. A clearer understanding of the issues here, as well as their cumulative impact, could help prison staff better spot emotional distress in prisoners. These findings could be taken into account and collated with observations from other reports to train staff and begin to address the challenges of current prison culture.

The human dimension is paramount to this discussion. A prisoner’s experience can be one of physical and emotional disconnection and

devastating isolation. Relieving rates of suicide and self-harm in prisons will require more than (well-meaning) procedural recommendations. It would benefit all staff to be educated on the effects of dehumanisation and the value of human connection. And of course, we are yet to understand the legacy of Covid-19 on prisoner wellbeing, mental health and related suicide and self-harm.

Only today, I received a reply from a prisoner I engaged with by email (confined to his cell under Covid-19 restrictions), thanking me for his *“being listened to”* and, having shared the frustrations of his situation, remarking on the difference made to him by healthcare staff who ask how he is doing each day (this resident had previously mentioned the urge to self-harm in response to his distress). A kind word goes a long way to alleviating the distress of prisoners and, on the right day, could even mean the difference between life and death.

5. Appendix

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