

Prisoner safety in HM prisons

By HM Inspectorate of Prisons

SAFETY INTERVIEWS

Safety interviews are undertaken to uncover areas of concern that contribute to people feeling unsafe while in custody. These structured interviews provide qualitative data that highlight particular safety issues within an establishment, which can then be explored in more depth by inspectors and potentially triangulated against other evidence.

This report amalgamates the findings from the safety interviews conducted in prison establishments between September 2006 and April 2007. These establishments were all identified by other sources of Inspectorate intelligence as facing significant challenges in the area of safety. The report highlights the most significant areas of concern across all establishments, within particular functional types and for black and minority ethnic prisoners.

A total of 159 interviews were carried out in 12 sets of safety interviews. They were conducted across nine establishments: one training prison, four local prisons, a split-site establishment holding adults/young adults, two split-site establishments holding young adults/juveniles, and a young offender institution.

Establishment	Functional type	Number of interviews
Dovegate	Training prison	13
Wandsworth	Local	11
Norwich	Local	11
Norwich	Young adults	6
Hindley	Young adults	13
Hindley	Juveniles	14
Portland	Young adults	17
Liverpool	Local	16
Birmingham	Local	21
Stoke Heath	Young adults	10
Stoke Heath	Juveniles	10
Winchester	Local	17
Total		159

Demographic information

The table below indicates the average demographic information for each functional type of establishment.

	Age	First time	Sentence length (range)	Time in prison (range)	Time at establishment (range)	BME	Foreign national	Disability
Adult prison	33	3	42 days to Life	8 days to 15 years	8 days to five years	4.5	1.8	1.8
Young adults	19.5	7.5	4 months	2 weeks to 30 months	6 days to 3 years	5	1	1.8

			to 11 years					
Juvenile	16	6.5	4 months to 7 years	2 weeks to 11 months	2 weeks to 11 months	6	1	1

Safety questions

Interview schedules were produced for the purpose of maintaining consistency, so all interviewees were asked the same questions. All interviewees were asked to identify areas of concern within their establishment and to rate the problem on a scale of 1–4 (1= a little bit of a problem; 4= a very big problem).

The table below is an amalgamation of responses from all of the safety interviews conducted in prison establishments. The 'seriousness' score is calculated by multiplying the number of individuals who thought the issue was a problem by the average rating score.

	Yes, this is a problem (number of respondents)	Average rate (1= no problem, 4 = very big problem)	Seriousness score
Staff interaction with prisoners	72	3	216
Lack of confidence in staff	61	3	183
Overcrowding	60	3	180
Lack of trust in prison staff	56	3	168
Aggressive body language of staff	54	3	162
Aggressive body language of prisoners	63	2.5	157.5
Response of staff with regards to fights/ bullying/self-harm in the prison	52	3	156
Availability of drugs	50	3	150
Number of staff on duty during association	48	3	144
Healthcare facilities	44	3	132
Gang culture	52	2.5	130
Not enough surveillance cameras on wings	31	4	124
Number of staff on duty during the day	41	3	123
Lack of information about the prison regime	49	2.5	122.5
Number of staff on duty at night	35	3.5	122.5
Isolation (within the prison)	40	3	120
Layout of prison/structure of prison	38	3	114
Existence of an illegal market	37	3	111
Discrimination on the basis of your ethnicity by staff	36	3	108
Procedures for discipline	34	3	102
Discrimination on the basis of your ethnicity by prisoners	31	3	93
The way meals are served	33	2.5	82.5
Staff members giving favours in return for something	31	2.5	77.5
Not enough surveillance cameras elsewhere in prison	27	2.5	67.5
Movement to work/education/gym	19	3	57
Discrimination on the basis of your religion by prisoners	22	2.5	55

Detox facilities	14	3	42
Discrimination on the basis of your sexuality by prisoners	13	3	39
Discrimination on the basis of your status (remand/sentence/recalled by staff	12	3	36
Discrimination on the basis of your status (remand/sentence/recalled by prisoners	12	3	36
Discrimination on the basis of your religion by staff	14	2.5	35
Discrimination on the basis of your age by prisoners	12	2	24
Discrimination on the basis of your sexuality by staff	7	3	21
Discrimination on the basis of your disability by staff	8	2.5	20
Discrimination on the basis of your disability by prisoners	6	3	18
Discrimination on the basis of your age by staff	9	2	18

Comments

Examples of comments made by prisoners on the five most significant areas of concern:

Staff interaction with prisoners:

'The staff are not respectful; they provoke you to get a rise.'

'Officers push their luck with you, they want a reaction out of you. They play on you – one officer pulled my stuff of the wall for no reason – just to make me angry.'

'Some are good, but they are outnumbered by hardened “robotic” staff.'

'They have no manners, talk to you like shit. Red badges are ok, everyone else is really bad. Treat you like you are nobody. They have a stinking attitude. Patronise you and antagonise you so that they can restrain you and put you in the block.'

Lack of confidence in staff:

'Staff do not do enough to help – only if you are aggressive towards them.'

'Officers say different things.'

Overcrowding:

'It makes it uncomfortable, single cells are made into double cells so you have no space for yourself.'

'Overcrowding meant I was on Operation Safeguard when I went to court last. I was moved around and had to spend two nights in police cells. It worries me as I have a few

court dates coming up now and I won't ever know where I'll be going after court. I just want to settle in at Norwich as I am looking at a long sentence.'

'Cells are only designed for one person so it causes stress and aggression.'

'There are too many people on the wings now.'

Lack of trust in prison staff:

'[Staff are] not at all confidential; when a complaint about bullying was put in everyone knew about it the next day.'

'Staff try to stitch you up.'

Aggressive body language of staff:

'Some staff muscle in – they take it too far when being twisted up. Once in seg I was being twisted and I told them I had calmed down but I was told to shut up and twisted some more.'

'Some staff are nasty, they make threats to you if you answer them back: "I'll bang you up all weekend.'"

'Staff are aggressive, they know they have the power over you and they use that.'

'Staff would rather keep you on the wing and play with you.'

LOCAL PRISONS

A total of 76 interviews were carried out across five adult local establishments. The most significant issues were:

	Yes, this is a problem (number of respondents)	Average rate (1= no problem, 4 = very big problem)	Seriousness score
Overcrowding	38	3.5	133
Staff interaction with prisoners	38	3	114
Lack of confidence in prison staff	36	3	108
Isolation	27	4	108
Availability of drugs	33	3	99
Healthcare facilities	31	3	93
Aggressive body language of staff	30	3	90
Lack of trust in prison staff	27	3	81
Aggressive body language of prisoners	30	2.5	75
Response of staff with regards to bullying/fights/self-harm in the prison	24	3	72

YOUNG ADULTS

A total of 46 safety interviews were carried out in four young offender institutions. The most significant issues were:

	Yes, this is a problem (number of respondents)	Average rate (1= no problem, 4 = very big problem)	Seriousness score
Gang culture	21	2.5	52.5
Aggressive body language of prisoners	17	3	51
Not enough surveillance cameras on wings	15	3	45
Overcrowding	13	3	39
Lack of trust in staff	14	2.5	35
Not enough surveillance cameras elsewhere in the prison	12	2.5	30
Staff interaction with prisoners	15	2	30
Lack of confidence in staff	10	3	30
Aggressive body language of staff	11	2.5	27.5
Lack of information about prison regime	11	2.5	27.5

Examples of comments made on the most significant area of concern:

Gang culture:

'They stick everyone from the same gang on one wing, so when you're out of your pad for an hour in the morning, it's not safe.'

'Groups are made according to where people come from, it means if you have a problem with one of them you have a problem with all of them.'

TRAINING PRISONS

A total of 13 interviews were carried out at one training prison. The most significant issues within this establishment were:

	Yes, this is a problem (number of respondents)	Average rate (1= no problem, 4 = very big problem)	Seriousness score
The response of staff to fights/bullying/self-harm in the prison	7	3	22
Staff interaction with prisoners	6	3	18
Lack of confidence in the staff	6	3	17
Overcrowding	5	3	15
Not enough staff on duty during the day	4	3.5	14
Not enough staff on duty during association	5	2.5	13

The availability of drugs	4	3.5	13
The existence of a black market	4	3	11
Movements to work/education/gym	3	3.5	10
Lack of information about the regime	3	3.5	10

Examples of comments from the most significant area of concern:

Response of staff with regarding fights/bullying/self-harm in prison:

‘They let it go on for a couple of minutes; they like to watch a fight.’

‘It would be safer if everyone was treated the same.’

‘Cell bells are not answered.’

‘Staff help the bully more, twist the loser in a fight, the bullied person. Don’t do anything to sort out fights, they just say “drop it” and walk away.’

JUVENILES

A total of 24 interviews were carried across two juvenile establishments. The most significant issues were:

	Yes, this is a problem (number of respondents)	Average rate (1= no problem, 4 = very big problem)	Seriousness score
Staff interaction with juveniles	13	3	39
Response of staff to fights/bullying/self-harm in the prison	13	3	39
Lack of trust in prison staff	13	3	39
Procedures for discipline/ adjudications	11	3	33
Aggressive body language of staff	11	3	33
Discrimination on the basis of culture or ethnicity by juveniles	7	4	28
Aggressive body language of juveniles	11	2.5	27.5
Not enough staff on duty during association	8	3	24
Gang culture	8	3	24
Lack of confidence in staff	8	3	24

BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC (BME) PRISONER INTERVIEWS

A total of 59 interviews were carried out with prisoners who identified themselves as belonging to a BME group across the prison establishments. The most significant issues were:

	Yes, this is a problem (number of respondents)	Average rate (1= no problem, 4 = very big problem)	Seriousness score
Staff interaction with prisoners	29	3	87
Lack of trust in the staff	28	3	84
Aggressive body language of staff	27	3	81
Lack of confidence in the staff	27	3	81
The response of staff to fights/bullying/self-harm in the prison	26	3	78
Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity by staff	21	3	63
Overcrowding	18	3.5	63
Lack of information about the prison regime	19	3	57
Gang culture	19	3	57
Availability of drugs	17	3	51
Aggressive body language of prisoners	20	2.5	50
Discrimination on the basis of culture or ethnicity by prisoners	16	3	48
Layout/structure of the prison	16	3	48
The way meals are served	16	3	48