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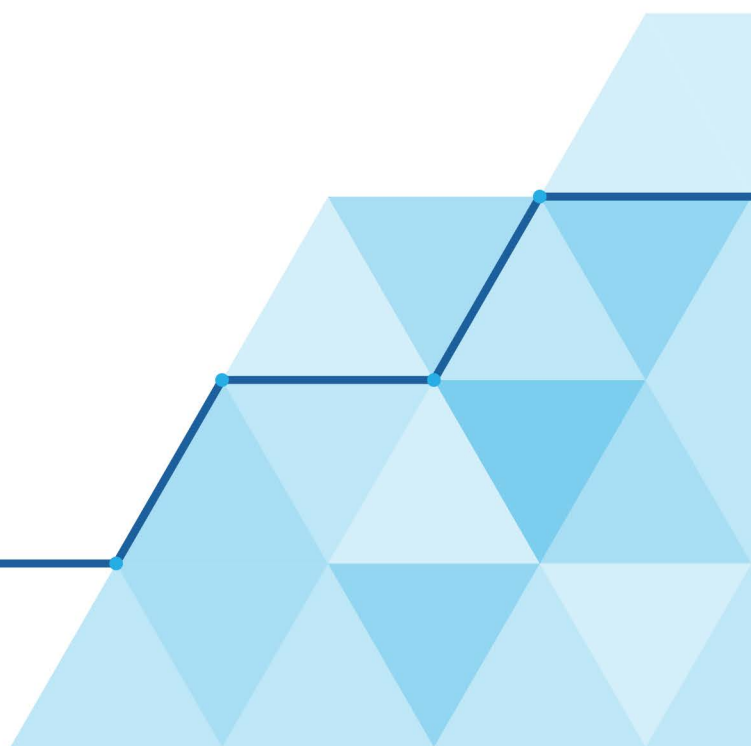
Exploring the nature of extremism in three prisons: findings from qualitative research

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Contents

1. Summary	1
2. Introduction	5
2.1 Background	6
2.2 Methods	8
2.3 Design	8
2.4 Materials	9
2.5 Procedure	9
2.6 Analysis	10
2.7 Interpreting the findings	10
3. Findings	12
3.1 Perceived Extent of Extremism	12
3.2 Perceived Nature of Extremism. Factors Associated with Susceptibility to Extremist Influences	15
3.3 Management of Extremist Prisoners	20
4. Discussion	25
4.1 Conclusion	28
5. References	29

1. Summary

Study aims

This exploratory qualitative study explores the extent and nature of prisoner radicalisation in three high security prisons in England, how the establishments were managing extremist prisoners and responding to the risk of radicalisation.

Approach and interpreting findings

Interviews were conducted, between January 2014 and January 2015, with 83 male prisoners and 73 staff from a range of disciplines, including, prison wing officers, security staff, psychologists, offender supervisors and chaplains across the three establishments. Interview material was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings should be viewed with a degree of caution as the views presented may not be representative of all prisoners or staff.

Key findings

While the study aimed to examine all forms of extremism, only Islamist extremism was reported by respondents, as this was considered to be the most prevalent extremist ideology in prisons at the time of the fieldwork. This study found that, despite their small number, those convicted of Islamist extremist offences had a disproportionately disruptive influence in the prisons, exerting power and influence over other prisoners. However, not all were interested in pursuing an Islamist extremism agenda. They tended to either be motivated by an extremism agenda or interested in orchestrating anti-establishment and criminal activities of what was frequently described as a 'prison gang'. Those who were motivated by extremism were making attempts to radicalise others. While some prisoners outside of these groups were reported to express sympathies with Islamist extremism, there was little suggestion they would act upon this when released.

Prisoners who were considered to be more susceptible to Islamist radicalisation were those thought to be most vulnerable within prison, who had the strongest sense of loss, loneliness, and alienation. They also tended to have grievances against society and the prison system, channelling their anger and frustration into extremism.

While it was reported by those interviewed that some prisoners were converting to Islam (with conversions to Islam reported to be higher than for any other faith), they were perceived, on the whole, to be doing so to help them survive in prison, with the Muslim faith offering the benefits of friendship and support. Religious behaviour did not typically compromise security and was identified by respondents as a useful aid to rehabilitation.

The study highlighted the importance of fostering a supportive environment in countering the risk of Islamist radicalisation, where staff were able to build relationships with prisoners. It was thought that this could be facilitated by ongoing staff training to increase their understanding of the Muslim faith and ensuring there were sufficient staffing levels to allow officers time to interact with prisoners. Media reporting was thought to increase divisions between Muslim prisoners and staff, with negative stereotypes of Muslims being perpetuated, especially in the tabloid press. The need for strong counter arguments to challenge these stereotypes was recognised.

It was generally thought that the strategies used by the prison service to disrupt the influence of extremists were largely effective. Management of extremists included moving problematic prisoners to different establishments to disrupt their influence and power base and gathering and disseminating intelligence on extremist activity. Imams were also thought to play an important part in countering extremism. However, it was recognised that their role was challenging and had expanded over time. The need to provide prison Imams with sufficient support so they are able fulfil their many, different functions was highlighted.

Placing findings within a contemporary policy and operational context

Since conducting the fieldwork for the study in 2014–2015, the operational and policy context has changed considerably. The terrorist offender population has more than doubled in number and its profile has become more complex, with increasingly diverse drivers of offending and a significant increase in Extreme Right Wing prisoners numbers. Alongside this, HMPPS has significantly strengthened its approach to managing terrorist and terrorist risk offenders. In 2016, a new Security, Order and Counter Terrorism Directorate (SOCT) was established to manage national security threats, maintain good order, and support operational partners more

effectively to tackle criminality. A Home Office and HMPPS Joint Extremism Unit (JEXU), created in 2017, works within this directorate and is the strategic and operational centre for all counter terrorism work across prison and probation.

The counter terrorism operating model in HMPPS is delivered through a dedicated network of CT staff operating a specialist end-to-end offender case management process. The purpose of this work is to both manage and reduce the risk that terrorist offenders present and to prevent individuals from being drawn into terrorism. A range of control measures support this work, including Separation Centres for the most influential extremists, communications monitoring and restrictions, and the removal of extremist literature from the prison estate. A range of assessments and rehabilitative interventions are also applied to the terrorist and terrorist risk cohort. Since this research was conducted, HMPPS has trained and supported a cadre of prison chaplains to deliver theological and ideological interventions to terrorist and terrorist risk prisoners, with positive results reported in a number of cases.

Following the terrorist attacks in 2019 and 2020 involving serving offenders, HMPPS has further reviewed its counter terrorism policies and operations and made significant further investment in this area to better manage national security risk. This has strengthened the full range of HMPPS' counter terrorism capabilities and enabled better partnership working with other agencies. For example, it has delivered a new multi-agency intelligence hub to co-ordinate quicker and better information and intelligence exchange between operational partners and enable better detection and disruption of the terrorist risk in prison and those under probation supervision in the community. It is also introducing a dedicated counter terrorism assessment and rehabilitation centre, where psychologists and specialist staff will deliver a comprehensive assessment and rehabilitation strategy, underpinned by the latest research and thinking. In addition, the programme is rolling out new and professionalised training to staff across the sector to better understand and respond to the signs of radicalisation and terrorism risk across the range of ideologies. Further improvements to counter terrorism work in the sector will be informed by the various inquests, inquiries and reviews that have been set up in response to the attacks and are yet to conclude.

Most relevant to this report, HMPPS will continue to prioritise work to understand radicalisation in prisons and to develop effective responses and stronger operational safeguards. Given the changes to the policy and operational context since this research was conducted, this will include work to assess the feasibility of undertaking another study on radicalisation in prisons.

2. Introduction

The number of individuals who have been convicted of an extremist offence has increased in Western countries in recent years (Hamm, 2012; Kessing & Andersen, 2019; Pickering, 2012). For example, there were 221 individuals in custody in Great Britain for terrorism-related offences by the end of December 2018. This was the second highest number since data collection began in April 2009; the highest number being held in the previous year (224). The majority of these (79%) were categorised as holding Islamist-extremist views (Home Office, 2019). This increase has resulted in prisons having to manage more extremists, which can present challenges to how to limit potential problems associated with extremists preaching their views, threatening prison security and disrupting the prison regime (Hamm, 2009).

It has been stated that prison can provide an ideal environment for extremist ideologies to flourish where vulnerable prisoners can be recruited to become supporters (Mulcahy et al, 2013) and there is a constant regenerating pool of potential extremists to choose from (Cuthbertson, 2004; FBI, 2012). However, there is limited evidence that radicalisation is commonplace. That said, concern is growing about the radicalisation of prisoners, especially radicalisation into Islamist extremism (Neumann, 2010; Ruiz Yamuza & Ravagnani, 2018). While extremists can support different groups, causes or ideologies, focus has been placed upon Islamist extremists because they represent the majority of convicted extremists.

Commentators on Islam in prison are divided into two polar opposite schools of thought: that Muslim groups in prison are breeding grounds for terrorism, or that there is no relationship between prisoner conversion and terrorism (Hamm, 2009; Mulcahy, Merrington & Bell, 2013; Thompson, 2016).

This study aims to explore the perceived extent and nature of prisoner radicalisation in three High Security prisons in England and how the establishments manage extremist prisoners and respond to the risk of prisoner radicalisation.

2.1 Background

Prison can be a vulnerable time and religion has been identified as an important mechanism in helping individuals cope with the pains of incarceration (Koenig, 1995). Research in the UK has found that conversion to Islam can be particularly appealing to prisoners as it provides a daily structure and moral framework around which they can rebuild their lives (Spalek & El-Hassan, 2007). The Muslim faith is growing within prisons across the Western world (Beckford et al; 2005; Pew Research Centre, 2011). In England and Wales, Prison Population Statistics show that the number of Muslim prisoners has increased from 8% in 2002 to 15% by 2018, with a count of 12,847 by March 2018 (Ministry of Justice, 2018). It has been suggested that this increase is due to conversions while in custody (Rushchenko, 2018).¹ However, it cannot be assumed that prisoners converting to Islam are showing support for extremist ideologies. Research from the United States indicates that many prisoners convert to the Muslim faith but only a small percentage will turn into violent extremists or go on to join a terrorist organisation (Hamm, 2009). Understanding which prisoners are most susceptible to extremist influences is a complex task. Prisoners have different characteristics and social backgrounds and respond to situations in different ways, which can depend upon specific circumstances. How they respond may also change over the course of their sentence (Pickering, 2012).

Furthermore, not all prison environments present the same level of risk of radicalisation. Hamm (2012), in a study of US prisons, found that extremism flourished in overcrowded prisons, as opportunities for rehabilitation were reduced and prisoner social interactions were more strained, violent and bullying. A study of 25 Spanish prisons (Trujillo, Jordán, Antonio Gutiérrez & González-Cabrera, 2009) found that in prisons housing both extremists and a higher percentage of Muslims, prisoners were more vulnerable to radicalisation, especially where there was poor control of prisoners and a failure to adapt regimes to effectively manage extremist prisoners. This mirrors findings from research into wider prison violence that has stressed the importance of situational factors in understanding prison violence, such as the absence of skilled frontline staff, poor physical conditions and limited

¹ Although data is collected on prison religious conversions, this data does not distinguish between corrections and conversions and is not always recorded consistently.

constructive activity, overcrowding, and geographical remoteness, which can limit the opportunities for family and friends to visit. (McGuire, 2018; Scottish Prison Service, 2008).

High security prisons can present particular challenges for prisoner radicalisation (Hamm, 2012). Those incarcerated in the most secure prisons are generally serving long sentences and are subject to greater control and restrictive regimes than those housed in other types of prisons. In addition, the High Security Estate (HSE) holds prisoners who are considered to be the greatest security risk, including the majority of prisoners convicted or suspected of committing extremist offences. Liebling et al (2011; 2012) carried out a qualitative study of a high security prison, which is, to date, the most in-depth exploration of Muslim prisoners in English high security custody. Whilst the study was not intended to explicitly explore the relationship between Muslim prisoners and others, prisoner conversion to Islam and the risk of radicalisation, these became important themes identified by the research. The study was a follow up to research carried out at the same establishment 12 years previously. The follow up study found a new population mix of prisoners, who were younger and more ethnically diverse, with high numbers of Muslim prisoners that disrupted established hierarchies and created tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim prisoners. There were high numbers of in-prison conversions to Islam, although knowledge of the faith was, for many, limited. This allowed extremist prisoners to fill the gap with a misinterpreted, extremist version of Islam. However, the study observed that most prisoners were resistant to extremist influences. The reasons identified in the study for converting to Islam while in custody included seeking an identity and meaning, looking for friendship, support and structure, and coping with long-term imprisonment; it rarely included radicalisation. However, as this study was carried out at a single prison, the findings may not be applicable to all high security prisons. It has been noted that prison regimes can vary across establishments within the same category and over time depending upon management styles and the political climate (Jones & Narag, 2019).

There is therefore a need for further research to explore whether prisoners are being radicalised in high security prisons in England, which prisoners are more susceptible to extremist influences, and how prisons are responding to the threat of extremism.

2.2 Methods

Data collection took place over a 12-month period, between January 2014 and January 2015. The data analysed in this report were part of a larger qualitative study examining gang activity and radicalisation in High Security prisons. The study had two central aims; 1. To examine group and gang related activity,² and 2. To examine the extent, nature and management of prisoner extremism.³ This report describes the research that addressed aim 2. The study received ethical approval from both MoJ/HMPPS National Research Committee⁴ and University of Birmingham's ethical boards.

2.3 Design

As little research has been carried out into radicalisation in prisons, this study used an exploratory, qualitative approach that allowed themes to be explored and developed.

Participants. Interviews were conducted with 83 male prisoners at three male High Security Prisons⁵ in England. All prisoners located in the main wings of each establishment were invited to take part in the research, which allowed views to be obtained from those who were living alongside extremist prisoners, those who were convicted of extremist offences, those who had been influenced by them, and those with no known association to extremism to obtain a more complete picture. A response of 88% was achieved (considered to be a high response rate in high security prisons, Apa et.al., 2012). Respondents were randomly selected⁶ from those

² See Powis,B., Dixon,L. & Woodhams,J. (2019) *Exploring the Nature of Muslim Groups and Related Gang Activity in Three High Security Prisons: Findings from Qualitative Research*. Ministry of Justice Analytical Series. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/806660/exploring-nature-muslim-groups-related-gang-activity.pdf for study report.

³ HMPPS defines extremist offending as any offence committed in association with a group, cause and/or ideology that propagates extremist views and actions and justifies the use of violence and other illegal conduct in pursuit of its objectives.

⁴ All proposed research in prison establishments, National Probation Service, Community Rehabilitation Companies or within HMPPS Headquarters requires approval from the MoJ/HMPPS National Research Committee. (NRC reference for this study was 2013 – 120). The NRC exists to ensure 1. the research applicant, MoJ and HMPPS attain best value from the research conducted; 2. the resource implications and impact of the research on operational delivery is considered; 3. the robustness and relevance of the research is adequately assessed; 4. matters of data protection/security and research ethics are dealt with in a consistent manner.

⁵ There are eight high security prisons in England and Wales that house prisoners who present a higher risk of escape and causing harm to others.

⁶ Random selection. In order to randomly select participants, each potential participant was assigned a number and a computer random number generator was used.

who had agreed to be interviewed. Forty one percent ($n=34$) of respondents described their ethnicity as being White British, 34% ($n=28$) as African/Caribbean, 14% ($n=12$) as Asian, and 11% ($n=9$) as mixed/other. Forty six percent ($n=38$) reported that they were Muslim, 29% ($n=24$) Christian and 25% ($n=21$) other/no religion. The mean age of participants was 26 years (range 19–56 years). Information on whether the respondents had been convicted of extremist or extremism related offences is not reported, as there were small numbers which could result in identification.

Seventy three members of staff were also interviewed. The sampling of staff was opportunistic, with selection based on staff who were available on the day(s) of interview, who were then randomly selected from those who had agreed to participate. They were drawn from the following disciplines: Security ($n=15$), officers ($n=20$), psychology ($n=13$), offender supervisors ($n=13$) and chaplaincy ($n=12$). Their mean age was 42 years (range 22 – 59 years). The majority of the staff described their ethnicity as being White British (88%, 64), with the remainder describing their ethnicity as Asian/Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi (7%, 5)) or Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (5%, 4). Forty eight were male and 25 were female.

2.4 Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed and piloted to ensure it was clear, concise, and able to capture all important information. Piloting allowed questions to be refined and a revised interview schedule developed. The questions included the following topics: 1. The extent of extremism in each prison; 2. The nature of the extremism and factors associated with prisoner susceptibility to extremism; and 3. Management of extremist behaviour and extremist prisoners in the establishment.

2.5 Procedure

Interviews were carried out on an individual basis, face to face and in a private setting with handwritten notes being taken. Audio-recording was not used because of the security guidelines for bringing electronic equipment into the establishments which can prohibit this type of equipment into the prisons for research purposes.

The primary author led the interviews and was independent from establishment staff. All participants were fully briefed on the aims of the study and their rights to confidentiality and anonymity before the interviews began. Informed consent was then obtained from all participants who were asked to sign a consent form. Interview length ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. In total, more than 150 hours of interview material was obtained (over 90 hours of prisoner interviews and 60 hours of staff interviews).

2.6 Analysis

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis which was both inductive and deductive (see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The thematic analysis approach was that advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). For the deductive analysis, codes were defined *a priori*. Initially, a coding frame was developed to capture expected responses on key issues that addressed the research questions. The inductive analysis allowed for themes to develop from the data which were added to the original coding frame. Interviews were analysed and responses systematically categorised to fit within the coding frame. The codes that were produced were then reviewed and collated into broader, superordinate themes and subordinate themes. Once coding was completed, themes were named and extracts from the interviews were selected to illustrate each theme.

In order to maintain consistency, coding and theme generation was carried out by the primary author. The coding and theme generation was discussed with a second member of the research team who had read all interview transcripts. In addition, the second researcher coded 20 randomly selected interviews (10 staff and 10 offender interviews) alongside the primary author, which allowed coding to be compared and any anomalies were discussed. Interview notes were entered into the QSR NVivo Version 10 data management programme, which was used to analyse the data.

2.7 Interpreting the findings

There were a number of limitations to the study which should be considered when interpreting the findings. As with all qualitative research, the findings are subjective and the views of those interviewed may not be representative of all staff and prisoners at the establishments. Because the subject under investigation is highly

topical, with much discourse in the media, there may have been some bias in the interview responses, with some respondents exaggerating the extent of extremist activity as a way to highlight the issue, while others may have moderated their responses to mask the problem and divert attention away from any activities. However, the researchers were experienced in conducting interviews with prisoners and staff and were aware of the potential for bias in responses. The large qualitative sample size also meant they were able to analyse data from a wide range of respondents and so identify if there was any suspected bias.

3. Findings

Sixteen superordinate themes and 34 subordinate themes were identified from the analysis of the interview data, which are discussed below. The themes are grouped according to the three research questions; 1. The extent of extremism. 2. The nature of extremism/ factors associated with susceptibility to extremism and 3. Management of extremism/extremist prisoners. The findings are presented under each superordinate theme, with subordinate themes highlighted in bold. Illustrative quotes are included which are identified as being made by a staff member or prisoner.

While the study aimed to examine all forms of extremism, only Islamist extremism was discussed by respondents, as this was considered to be the most prevalent extremist ideology at the time of the fieldwork. The findings presented below therefore focus on Islamist extremism. Given this focus, prisoner quotes are also identified by whether the prisoner was Muslim or non-Muslim. While the research covered three different establishments, it was interesting to note that the findings were consistent across all three prisons, with no differences observed.

3.1 Perceived Extent of Extremism

Influence of Islamist extremist prisoners in custody. Although the number of prisoners convicted of an Islamist extremist offence in each establishment was small (estimated to be less than 2% of the prison population at each establishment), they were considered, by those interviewed, to have a disproportionate impact upon prison life. They were viewed as, on the whole, being disruptive to the prison regime, exerting power and influence over other prisoners, with considerable resources being invested in their management by the establishment.

It makes the prison much harder to manage because of their influence. The prison has to carefully manage [Islamist] TACT⁷ offenders. They are dispersed across the prison estate and moved around. Here at [prison name] they are split up across the prison and across the wings. Staff.

⁷ TACT offenders are those who have been convicted under Terrorism legislation of terrorism offenders.

Gang vs. Islamist extremist motivations. Incarcerated offenders convicted of Islamist extremism offences tended to divide into two, roughly equal groups, depending upon their motivations. The first group played a central role in much of the anti-establishment, criminal activity in the prison. They tended to be the leaders of a small group of Muslim prisoners who were described by many of the respondents as a 'gang' with criminal intent and central to much of the prison unrest. They had a desire for power and status as well as criminality and would assume leadership roles. Having been convicted of a terrorist offence gave them enhanced status among their followers, although their motivations were more gang-related with an interest in criminal gain and prison disruption. That is, they were less interested in propagating extremist ideologies, than they were in obtaining control and power. They were often described as having limited understanding of Islam and world politics.

The second group were motivated by Islamist extremist ideologies and were interested in world events and external politics. They had strong sympathies with Islamist terrorist groups and would propagate their extremist views to other prisoners, sometimes forcefully. They described themselves as political activists, soldiers or political prisoners involved in a war against the West. They were also considered by many of those interviewed to have limited knowledge of Islam, but instead had adopted a distorted view that supported their beliefs, often derived from listening to radical preachers in the community.

The two groups were considered by the majority of respondents to have clear divisions and they showed little interest in each other's agendas.

Some of the [Islamist] TACT offenders don't want the gang members in the group. They don't want to have anything to do with that overt violent, anti-social element. The TACTs split into two groups – those more interested in anti-social behaviour and those more interested in extremism. Staff.

Radicalisation by Islamist extremist offenders. There was much speculation among staff and prisoners interviewed as to whether some prisoners were actually being radicalised by the incarcerated Islamist extremist offenders. Opinions were

divided. A minority thought that radicalisation was taking place because of the nature of high security prisoners both in terms of the strongly held beliefs of extremist offenders and the susceptibility of some prisoners.

Radicalisation is happening, even if to a small extent. Given the prisoners we have, we know what their beliefs are, what their offences are, it's impossible to think they haven't tried to radicalise others. Staff.

However, the majority of those interviewed thought that, whilst there were ongoing attempts by Islamist extremist to radicalise others and discussions took place and some sympathies with the rhetoric expressed, there was little to suggest they would actually act upon this on release. An important distinction was therefore made between adopting more extreme views, expressing these views whilst in prison and committing terrorist offences when released.

We have people who've converted and their views have become more radical but that doesn't mean they're going to go off and bomb somewhere. Staff.

Conversion to Islam. While more prisoners were reported to be converting to Islam while incarcerated than to any other faith, their reasons for doing so were diverse and complex. Becoming Muslim while in custody was often seen as a mechanism for surviving in prison either through the comfort and support that religion could offer, through protection, friendship and support from fellow Muslims, or as an opportunity to engage in gang behaviour by associating with the Muslim criminal gang. It was also seen as a mechanism for rehabilitation to provide a framework to elicit change in their lives. Respondents discussed how the vast majority of converts were adopting the religion for reasons other than for extremist purposes. It was generally agreed that conversion to Islam was not, in itself, indicative of future radicalisation and the two should not be conflated.

I don't think they're becoming Muslim to become terrorists, it's for security while they're in prison. Half aren't genuine and for half it's being in a gang that's important. Non-Muslim prisoner.

Fitting in. Even offenders who were seen to agree with Islamist extremist views, were often thought to be doing so to 'fit in' and show support for their fellow prisoners, rather than because they had genuinely been radicalised.

Continued support for Islamist extremism of concern. However, despite the widespread belief by staff and prisoners that prisoners were not being radicalised to commit extremist acts, there was no certainty in this. Prisoners were serving long sentences, usually progressing to lower category prisons where influences could be different and opinions become more entrenched or forgotten. It was generally thought that prisoners who continued to show support for Islamist extremism over the longer term were of greatest concern and least likely to abandon their beliefs. Respondents discussed how many of those who had been convicted of Islamist terrorist offences were continuing to show support for their cause throughout their sentence.

3.2 Perceived Nature of Extremism. Factors Associated with Susceptibility to Extremist Influences

Themes emerged around the characteristics of prisoners who were considered, by those interviewed, to be more receptive to Islamist extremist influences and therefore vulnerable to the radicalisation process.

Vulnerable prisoners. While the majority of prisoners were considered to be resilient to extremist influences, vulnerable prisoners, who were experiencing difficulties in coping with prison life, were reported to be most susceptible. They were viewed as being isolated, lost and lonely, turning to Islamist extremist offenders and their associates for friendship and support, who in turn would welcome them. Once they had begun associations, attempts to radicalise them would often begin. Prisoners vulnerable to radicalisation were typically described, by those interviewed, as having low IQ and limited education, sometimes with mental health problems. Staff discussed the importance of identifying and supporting vulnerable prisoners, which they considered to be a key part of their role.

I think we really need to look out for the weak and vulnerable prisoners the most as they're the ones who're most at risk of being radicalised. They try and radicalise all prisoners but most aren't interested or do it for fickle reasons, it's the vulnerable ones you need to look out for. Staff.

Discussing two suicides while he had been in prison, one respondent stated;

'the stresses of prison contributed to that [suicide]. It's more the stress you have here as well as being away from family. If you put that with the gang culture, you can see why you have extremists'. Muslim prisoner.

Limited knowledge of Islam. Staff and prisoners discussed how ignorance and confusion over the teachings of Islam were more likely to lead to the adoption of extremist ideologies. Radicalised prisoners had usually been influenced by extremist preachers outside of the prison setting, but because of their poor understanding of Islam they had nothing to counteract these narratives. This was considered to be more problematic among recent converts to the faith.

Some people are teaching these guys some really bad things. They've taken something good and turned it into something bad. There are some gullible idiots in here who're into it [Islamist extremism]. I stay away. I don't wanna be associated with any of them. The stuff they use from the Koran to support their beliefs was written so long ago it's out of date. It doesn't hold true in our society. There's a lot of vulnerable people in here that they target'. Muslim prisoner.

Alienation, victimisation and grievances. Prisoners who felt more alienated from society by past experiences and had grievances against society and the prison system were considered to be more at risk of adopting an extremist ideology. It was noted that there had been an increase of young adult offenders in high security prisons serving very long sentences, often their first convictions and many were struggling cope with long-term imprisonment. They had feelings of hopelessness and saw no future, facing many years in custody, which was further reinforced by a lack of education and skills, meaning prospects upon eventual release were limited.

These prisoners were channelling their anger, frustration and lack of control over their situation into supporting Islamist extremist rhetoric. They were frequently involved in prison unrest instigated by convicted Islamist extremist prisoners, who were capitalising on this anger and providing a direction for its focus, offering them something to believe in that was anti-authority.

Some people may take things out of context and some may be extreme. We're in a place with dominant men and they need something to believe in. You'll only find it in high security estates. In other places they want to go home. In here it's a way for people to live. We're going to indulge in some kind of illicit activity, especially the younger ones who don't know anything else. Muslim prisoner.

Many of the Muslim prisoners who were interviewed spoke about perceived discrimination from society and the judicial system which led to feelings of anger and resentment. It had created some divisions between prison staff and inmates, strengthening their view of Muslims being oppressed and having the potential of making them more sympathetic to extremist rhetoric.

Radicalisation does happen. The more people get oppressed, the more they start to hate people. I've only just realised there are some evil people in prison. I can easily see how people get extreme views. It's easy to become radicalised because of the hate. Muslim prisoner.

Challenges to Good Staff-Prisoner Relationships. Building a good rapport with prisoners was seen as essential in maintaining safety in the prison and reducing the risk of inmates being radicalised. If good relationships were built with prisoners, barriers could be broken down and officers could identify who needed greater support and access to appropriate interventions. However, a number of challenges to this were identified by those interviewed.

Discussions frequently centred around a 'them and us' divide between officers and some prisoners, especially Islamist extremist offenders and their associates. Certain factors appeared to have facilitated this polarisation, which included an increase in

younger Black and other minority ethnic prisoners and an increase in conversions to Islam. This meant that prisoners tended to have different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds to officers, who discussed the difficulties in understanding the new offender groups, the Islamic faith and religious practices. In addition, some Islamist extremist offenders were reported to be reluctant to engage with staff and encouraged other Muslim prisoners to avoid interactions with officers, forming self-reliant groups. This further hampered the ability of staff to support and supervise Muslim prisoners and build good relationships.

Staff stressed the need for an ongoing programme of in-depth training, delivered to all staff, to empower them to work with Muslim prisoners. There was a particular need for training around the identification of extremist activity and radicalisation. Staff felt that having a greater understanding and awareness of how to identify those at risk from extremist influences and when radicalisation was happening would give them greater confidence to support prisoners and challenge behaviours.

We need proper training in recognising when prisoners are being radicalised and are at risk of joining the group. Staff.

Muslim prisoners themselves recognised the need for improved staff training. Those who were interviewed discussed how greater understanding of their faith would help staff-prisoner relationships and dispel some of the preconceptions and suspicions.

I think officers need to be educated more in Islam to understand the differences between radical and [non]. If officers got training and were educated on what Islam is, the stereotypes would stop. Things like why people grow a beard, it's not because they're being radicalised, it's just the prophet's way. But because Islam is attached to terrorists it's difficult to get rid of the stereotypes. Muslim prisoner.

A strong theme emerged around staffing levels and a perceived change in the role of prison officers which impacted upon staff-prisoner relationships. It was thought that the primary focus of an officer's job was now regime implementation rather than supporting individual prisoners. Prisons were undergoing an efficiency saving

exercise at the time of the fieldwork, with a reduction in officer numbers, an increase in vacant posts and a loss of experienced staff through voluntary redundancies. These pressures meant that workloads had increased and officers felt more stretched, with less time to interact with prisoners and build good relationships. Officers felt they were less able to identify and intervene with vulnerable prisoners, who were at risk of turning to Islamist extremist prisoners for the support and guidance that would previously have been the role of officers.

We need to go back to when we had relationships with prisoners, when we could take time, play a game of pool with them, build up relationships.... Because of staffing cuts, no one has time anymore. Years ago when you had a prisoner who was tearful you'd get someone to speak to them, but there's no one to do that now, staff are under too much pressure. Or if someone does, it may be days later and by that time they will've already been approached to join the Muslim gang. Staff.

The impact of increased officer workloads was also noted by prisoners who reported an increase in prisoner frustration which could lead to greater tensions and unrest.

Screws just lock and unlock now. Before they used to be much more hands on... If you're younger you'd feel angry. I just give up. They've cut down on staff so they're too busy. In the old days they'd mingle, now there's none of that goes on. Their role is just to lock and unlock now. Non-Muslim prisoner.

Concerns were also raised that, if a disclosure of extremism was made, staff were perceived to lack the knowledge and training on how to protect prisoners and provide the appropriate interventions to support them.

Influence of the media. There was a strong theme around the influence of the media with continued portrayals of all Muslims as supporters of terrorism. The media, especially the tabloid press, were reported to incite 'Islamophobia' by depicting Muslims and Islam as something negative, to be feared. Among those who lacked knowledge of Islam, it was noted that media portrayals could be used to construct their view of the faith and those who followed it. These misrepresentations were

thought to incite greater fear in some staff and prisoners and encourage the stereotype that all Muslim prisoners sympathised with an extremist agenda. This in turn would be used by some Islamist extremist prisoners to create further discontentment among prisoners who were already feeling alienation and resentment towards society and the penal system which formed a theme of disenfranchisement.

The media is a lot to blame for making things worse. Especially papers like 'The Sun' that polarise opinion. They portray Muslims in a negative light, disenfranchising Muslims more and creating fear of Muslims in others. Opinions will be formed by radical preachers and what they read in the tabloids, so there will be bias. Non-Muslim prisoner.

3.3 Management of Extremist Prisoners

The prisons included in the study were employing a range of strategies to control and contain the influence that extremist prisoners may have over others. The resources directed towards the management of extremist prisoners were largely focused upon prevention strategies, to disrupt any influence they may have over other prisoners and limit their association with other convicted extremists. The strategies used were considered, by those interviewed, to be largely effective and evidenced by a limited number of incidents within the high security prisons, especially given the nature of the prisoner population.

Movement of prisoners. A key tool used by the prisons to manage problematic prisoners was to move them to different establishments. This approach was applied to Islamist extremist offenders who were seen to be having a negative influence over other prisoners and incite prison unrest. Staff and prisoners spoke about how successful this approach was and how establishments would have a settled period after key leaders had been transferred and before new power bases had had time to establish.

Staff deal with it [extremism] quite well. The staff here are the best. They are professional. They do move people around and the like. Muslim prisoner.

Some concern was expressed that the policy of moving prisoners was being manipulated by certain individuals to engineer a move to a preferred establishment. This could be by Muslim or non-Muslim prisoners and was often triggered by an allegation of bullying or violence. However, respondents generally agreed that the policy of movement of prisoners was an effective mechanism for disrupting power and influence of extremist offenders.

Use of intelligence. The importance of good intelligence in identifying and managing extremist activity was seen as fundamental to running a safe, secure prison by most staff respondents. For intelligence to function effectively, it was noted that it needed to be responded to quickly. The need for intelligence gathering to be a two-way process was also highlighted, with security and intelligence teams passing information on to other staff in the establishment, as well as staff at the 'grass roots' being encouraged to pass on any information of concern.

We control things here because staff are very much on the ball. The Governor really encourages staff to get in amongst the prisoners and get to know them, so we can gather intelligence. I think we have good intelligence here. Staff.

Staff who were interviewed generally believed their intelligence sharing systems were successful in identifying and disrupting power bases and planned unrest, which made them feel more in control and prepared for situations that may arise.

Segregation. Staff and prisoners interviewed expressed strong opinions over the segregation of prisoners (within the same establishment) especially whether the prison service should segregate prisoners who supported extremist views and tried to radicalise others. Opinions were polarised between those who thought problems would be lessened and those who thought they would be exacerbated.

Those who thought that the most dominant Islamist extremist offenders should be segregated from other prisoners thought that this would reduce their ability to influence other prisoners and reduce the potential for radicalisation. They also thought it would limit access to the pool of potential new recruits.

We shouldn't be spreading the TACT offenders around, it's just making the problem bigger, we're spreading more influence. We're making these prisons hotbeds for radicalisation. They keep in touch with each other across all Cat A prisons.⁸ It's like cancer spreading. We'll continue to move prisoners around and it'll grow and grow. It's not a good idea to mix vulnerable prisoners with Cat As. They'll be scared and lonely and be befriended by the TACTs and more susceptible to radicalisation. Staff.

However, others thought that segregation was an ineffective way of controlling the spread of Islamist extremist offenders' influence. They believed segregation was not a successful punishment and incentive to change, as Islamist extremist offenders who had been segregated emerged with an enhanced status among their peers. Segregation could also increase the power and resolve of those who sympathised with them. Their feelings of alienation and discrimination would strengthen, which would increase their anger at the system and society.

Discussions also took place whether the High Security Estate should provide separate establishments for all Muslim and all non-Muslim prisoners. It was generally felt by staff and prisoners that prisons offered a greater rehabilitative culture where prisoners were mixed.

I don't think separation of Muslims to a prison works. It needs to be mixed so people are left alone to do what they're doing. Younger new people can get coaxed in [to extremism]. Too many Muslims isn't a good idea, you need a mixture. If there's more of one group you get an imbalance and they want to take over. You need a balance so we all respect each other and no one has the upper hand. Muslim prisoner.

Role of Imams. Prison Imams were considered to be an important resource in the counter extremism work with prisoners. Imams at the establishments in the study were described by staff as being approachable, knowledgeable and a good source of

⁸ Prisons in England and Wales are divided into different categories. Category A prisons are high security prisons and house prisoners who would present the greatest danger to the public if they escaped.

information and advice, with many staff members having sought their guidance on prisoners they supervised. They were generally thought to be vigilant in identifying and challenging extremist rhetoric among prisoners and had, in some cases, taken strong action in managing situations. Many Muslim prisoners who were interviewed spoke positively about the Imams and the support and guidance they offered. They acknowledged the Imams efforts in challenging extremist behaviour and praised the actions they had taken, as it facilitated an environment that allowed them to practice their faith.

The Imam is very on the ball here with extremism. He has taken some prisoners out of Friday service because they've been circulating extremist literature. Staff.

The role of prison Imams was perceived to be challenging. They had a unique position, acting as a link between disenfranchised Muslim prisoners and staff who were distrustful and afraid. However, this was a difficult path with some prisoners viewing them to be too aligned to the prison service and some staff too aligned to prisoners. The quotes below taken from a prisoner and a staff member from the same establishment highlight the difficulties faced by prison Imams.

No one [no prisoners] listens to the Imams as they're seen as another officer. They take instructions from the officers. The Imams don't have respect inside. The prison employs them so no one trusts them. I like the Imam but most don't trust him. Prisoner, Muslim.

They're allowed to talk Arabic in Muslim service so staff don't know what they're saying. The Imams fall very much on the side of the prisoners. They will talk in Arabic too and not tell staff what they're saying. Staff.

Several staff members recognised the challenges of the Imams' role and highlighted the need for staff to understand their function and responsibilities. It was noted that their primary role was to meet the spiritual needs and provide pastoral care to Muslim prisoners, rather than acting as intelligence gatherers.

The Imams were reported to have a different cultural and ethnic background to some Muslim prisoners, especially those who had converted to the faith. These prisoners spoke about how they could not relate to the Imams and how they spoke in languages that they could not understand. Some staff noted that charismatic prisoners with extremist sympathies would exploit this by delivering their own radicalised version of Islam in a way that some prisoners could relate to.

You have an Imam there who's from Pakistan. He doesn't have the skills to articulate that they're [Islamist extremist prisoners] wrong. He doesn't understand our culture. Prisoner, Muslim.

The Imams interviewed discussed at length the difficulties they faced and the expectations that were placed upon them, which they often thought to be unrealistic. They spoke about the challenges in working with Islamist extremist prisoners to change their beliefs and behaviours. Many were involved in de-radicalisation work within the establishment. The quote below describes the nature of some of their work.

We need to offer them something. We are teaching them this and it is a slow process. It is gradual. We work on the common things we believe in and start with what we both agree with. You need to work with them, not against them. If someone is willing to die, how can you punish them? Staff, Imam.

4. Discussion

This qualitative study set out to explore the extent and nature of prisoner radicalisation in three high security prisons in England, how the establishments manage extremist prisoners and respond to the risk of prisoner radicalisation. The findings of this study support the assertion made by other authors that there is little evidence of widespread radicalisation of prisoners while in custody (Hamm, 2012; Jones, 2014) and prisons being 'hotbeds' for extremism. While some prisoners were reported to express sympathies with Islamist extremism and the Islamist extremism group, there was little evidence they would act upon this when released. In fact the majority of prisoners converting to Islam did so to help them survive in prison, which was achieved via the benefits of friendship and support. This study found that following a faith should not automatically be viewed as a threat. Religious behaviour did not typically compromise security and could be a useful aid to rehabilitation.

Prisoners who were considered to be more susceptible to Islamist radicalisation were those thought to be most vulnerable within prison, who had the strongest sense of loss, loneliness, and alienation. Indeed, research has shown that prison can be a threatening place, especially for vulnerable prisoners for whom survival can be all encompassing (Ireland, 2005). It has been suggested that the psychological strain of imprisonment, the social isolation that it causes, and the prison environment itself can all provide a radicalising pathway for vulnerable prisoners (Thompson, 2016). Specifically, this study found that those prisoners considered vulnerable were described as having little knowledge of the relevant faith and therefore considered to be more receptive to the extremist rhetoric of some of the charismatic extremist prisoners. Indeed, commentators have emphasised the importance of prisoners having a good knowledge of Islam to counter extremist messages (Hamm, 2009; Thompson, 2016). Recent converts have been shown to be at risk of radicalisation because of their poor knowledge of the faith and inability to differentiate between opposing interpretations of Islam than those born to the faith, making them more likely to accept extremist arguments without question (Awan, 2013; Brandon, 2009). In line with this assertion, staff in this study recognised that there is a role for the Prison Service to play in supporting prisoners who are particularly vulnerable, ensuring that those working with extremist prisoners are able to offer counter

arguments against extremist rhetoric. Since the fieldwork was completed, prisons in England and Wales have begun to introduce a scheme to provide all prisoners with a keyworker within days of their reception who will provide support and guidance to the prisoner throughout their custodial sentence as part of their role. This should help to identify and support prisoners who are particularly at risk of succumbing to the influence of extremist leaders and extremist messages. In addition, Separation Centres have opened in two high security prisons which provide specialist accommodation for extremist prisoners, which will allow greater separation and specialist management of the most influential extremists. Separating these individuals into specialist units is intended to disrupt the influence they have over other prisoners, especially those who may be vulnerable to radicalisation.

This study also highlighted the importance of fostering a supportive environment where staff are able to build good relationships with prisoners; a context that is necessary if staff are to provide education, training and other interventions. Staff need time to achieve this and to gain a sound understanding of the Muslim faith so they can be confident in their interactions with prisoners. While the difficulties in distinguishing between genuine practicing of faith and using religion as a mechanism to facilitate illicit activities are known, staff expressed a need to be given the tools to assist them in this complex task. This study therefore highlights the importance of high quality, ongoing, staff training to improve their understanding of the faith and their ability to identify extremism and challenge gang behaviour. Good training could help to empower staff and provide them with the skills to supervise Muslim prisoners, who in return would feel more supported and less isolated, aggrieved and misunderstood. The Prison Service has taken steps to respond to this need by delivering training to all new frontline staff in understanding Islam and identification of extremist behaviours.

The importance of the role of prison chaplains, especially prison Imams, was identified, with much praise given to their ability to meet the challenges faced in their role. They held a unique position whereby they could act as a link between Muslim prisoners and other staff. However, this position came with challenges, with some prisoners viewing them as too aligned to the Prison Service. The difficulties Imams faced was acknowledged and they were regarded as a valuable resource by staff

and prisoners, with staff often approaching them for guidance and support. Their role within the prison had expanded over time and many were not only providing spiritual care but were also playing a key role in de-radicalisation interventions. The expansion of the role of prison Imams has been identified in international research, which has highlighted that prison Imams are now expected to act as councillors, social workers, mediators between prison authorities and prisoners, experts in extremism as well as providing religious services and pastoral care (Neumann, 2010). This is clearly a large, complex remit and one they cannot be expected to fulfil without support. Careful management of their role is needed to ensure they continue to be seen as independent from the Prison Service. The neutrality of prison Imams should not be compromised by additional and potentially conflicting responsibilities and the role that prison chaplains have developed should not be undermined (Todd, 2013). Further support could be offered to Imams, given their wide-ranging remit, by use of carefully selected mentors who are from similar backgrounds to the prisoners. This would help to break down any 'them and us' divide that has been reported to be a contributory factor in prison radicalisation (Jones & Narag, 2019). Mentors would not only act as a positive influence but they may also be able to relate to the personal and psychological needs of prisoners, offering support to prisoners who are considered to be particularly vulnerable. Prisons have already begun to respond to this need by introducing culturally matched mentors and external experts in Islam to offer guidance and support and combat Islamist propaganda.

Finally, whilst importance was placed on the relationship between staff and prisoners, this study also found that these relationships were influenced by media messages received in everyday life which affected staff and prisoners' perceptions of Muslims. It was widely considered that media reporting, especially among the tabloid press, perpetuated negative stereotypes of Muslims both in prison and in the wider community. The media portrayals of Muslims increased the divisions between Muslim prisoners and staff. Staff fear and suspicion increased, and some Muslim prisoners in return felt victimised and oppressed. It has been noted by other authors that the mass media does give higher priority to news items about terrorism and extremism, including speculating whether prisons have become breeding grounds for radicalisation (Beckford et al., 2005). Strong counter arguments could be made to challenge the media stereotypes and reduce the sense of grievance and injustice felt

by some Muslim prisoners, which serve to reinforce the rhetoric used by some extremist leaders.

4.1 Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study provides a first in-depth account of prisoner and staff perspectives about faith and Islamist radicalisation in three high security prisons in England. Findings should be considered in light of the methodological limitations set out earlier in this report.

The study highlights how religion can provide a positive framework around which prisoners can structure their lives (Spalek & El-Hassan, 2007) and find support to help them survive in prison. This is in line with previous research that has shown conversion can reduce prisoner stress and increases self-esteem, self-efficacy, and autonomy (Barringer, 1998). It is therefore important to understand that prisoners who follow a faith are not automatically a threat to security. Indeed, this study further supported the idea that there is little evidence of widespread radicalisation of prisoners while accommodated in three high security establishments in England. Whilst some prisoners were reported to express sympathies with extremism, there was little evidence they would act upon this when released. However, as many of these prisoners were some years away from being released, it is possible that violence supportive beliefs can develop over time. Furthermore, findings did show that some incarcerated terrorist offenders showed little sign of decreasing their support for the cause. As the threat of terrorism, however small, should be taken seriously (Jones, 2014), these findings therefore support the need for preventative approaches in correctional settings via education for staff and prisoners, fostering good staff prisoner relationships and multi-agency working.

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