

Bullying in

When I first came in I gave out tobacco and Rizlas to people who asked me. I found I was short at the end of the week. This last week I refused and my life has been made hell. I've been continually harassed for my canteen day and night, usually by the hardcore people I shared the dormitory with; if not them they have been getting other people to ask me on their behalf and when I refuse abuse me verbally and lie about me. When in the dormitory I made the mistake of saying I was gay and have been ostracised by the very couple who have been sleeping together in bed. I have come off my medication to get out of here – not sleeping much, around three hours per night. I just want to be left alone to serve my time and leave prison never to return. I cannot relate well to people and need medication; going through hell yet I have tried very hard to fit in and appear normal. I don't want to cause trouble but it's very difficult not to retaliate verbally and I feel like I'm near to cracking up.

(Adult female prisoner: Ireland, in press)

BULLYING behaviour among prisoners has only recently been the subject of systematic academic research. The first study on prison bullying was carried out in 1986 by McGurk and McDougall but remained unpublished until 1991. No further studies were conducted until 1992 (e.g. Beck, 1992). Since then there have been 36 studies that I am aware of addressing bullying among prisoners (e.g. Power *et al.*, 1997) and 13 discussions of studies, reviews of the research field or descriptions of anti-bullying strategies (e.g. Ireland, 2000). However, the majority of papers have either been presented in 'in-house' professional journals or represent surveys designed for use solely within prisons; only 16 have been published in academic peer-reviewed journals, the first appearing in 1996 (Connell & Farrington, 1996; Ireland & Archer, 1996). Reflecting the recent academic interest in prison bullying, HM Prison Service published



JANE L. IRELAND describes the causes and consequences of bullying behind bars, and how it can be tackled.

an anti-bullying strategy in 1993 (Home Office Prison Service, 1993), and the requirement that all prisons should have an anti-bullying strategy become mandatory in 1999 (Home Office Prison Service, 1999).

Why study bullying among prisoners?

Bullying among prisoners is undoubtedly an important issue, and it is a behaviour that occurs among all types of prisoners – men, women, juvenile, young and adult offenders (Ireland, 1999a). Estimates of the extent of bullying vary across studies; one of my reviews of the literature (Ireland *et al.*, 1999) reported estimates of self-reported bullying in the range of 20 to 70 per cent for young offenders, compared with a range of 0 to 62 per cent for adult offenders. The range for self-reported victims of bullying was 30–75 per cent for young offenders compared with a range of 8–57 per cent for adult offenders. As these figures demonstrate, it is difficult to generate definitive estimates of bullying: different methods and different definitions are employed by different researchers (Ireland, in press).

The types of bullying that prisoners are subjected to can be severe. Examples taken from McGurk & McDougall (1986), Swift (1995), and Ireland and Archer (1996) include:

- physical abuse, such as throwing a blanket over a prisoner's head and kicking them, or placing a mop on a prisoner's head and setting fire to it;
- practical jokes, such as placing a cup of water on the pillow of a sleeping prisoner and then throwing a boot at them so that they awake, startled, thus spilling the water on their pillow;
- intimidation or threats, such as pouring petrol over a prisoner's feet and

threatening to set fire to them;

- sexual abuse, such as masturbating another prisoner or shaving a prisoner's pubic hair while they were tied to a bed;
- verbal abuse, including encouraging prisoners to hang themselves;
- more subtle forms of bullying, such as gossiping, spreading rumours and ostracising.

The effects of such behaviours on victims, other prisoners and the prison as a whole can be serious. The Home Office Prison Service (1999) notes how prisoners who are bullied can experience fear and tension, isolation, depression, injuries, debt, difficulty in settling and making use of facilities, material deprivation and illness. Some victims may request to be segregated from other prisoners for their own protection, they may abscond or escape, and in some instances self-injure or commit suicide.

The consequences of being caught bullying others can also be severe. The official response can include a withdrawal of privileges from the bully, segregation from their peers and, in cases of serious bullying, extra days added to their sentence and transfer to another establishment. In addition, if bullies remain unchallenged about their behaviour and learn that exploitation is an appropriate and valuable strategy to employ, it cannot be expected that they will learn to live law-abiding lives on release (Levenson, 2000).

Bullying also impacts on the prison as a whole. If it is allowed to flourish it can cause disruption, create no-go areas in the prison and allow a criminal subculture to gain power and subvert prison rules (Home Office Prison Service, 1993). It can undermine the safety of the prison and the authority of staff, raising the question of

prisons

who is in control of the prison – bullies or prison officers? It can also increase tension between staff, add to workloads, become a drain on resources (Home Office Prison Service, 1999), and reduce the likelihood that prison staff will be able to work with prisoners to address their offending behaviour and prepare them for release (Levenson, 2000).

So we know that bullying occurs in prisons and we know that the consequences of such behaviour can be serious for those involved and the prison regime as a whole. But before describing how to deal with bullying it is important to understand why it occurs in prisons, and how this may influence the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies.

Why does bullying occur in a prison?

Bullying is very much an interaction between the individual and the characteristics of the prison environment. Indeed, as stated by Beck (1995), 'the demanding aspects of the prison environment allied with the past behaviour of their prisoners provide a combination where frequent bullying should be expected' (p.55). To take environmental characteristics first, there are a number of

aspects of the physical and social environment, all inextricably linked, that encourage bullying. These include limited access to material goods, the existence of capitalist economic structures, high population density, the organisational structure of prisons, existence of inmate subcultures, attitudes of the peer group and the importance of dominance hierarchies (Ireland, in press).

Material goods, particularly tobacco and phonecards, become a valuable form of currency in a prison (Beck, 1995), and the limits placed on them by prison authorities increases competition between prisoners to acquire them. Some prisoners will resort to bullying to obtain goods either for themselves or to sell on the prisoner 'black market' for an extortionate price. Material deprivation is seen as one of the 'pains of imprisonment', and the greater the material deprivation the more profitable exploitation becomes for the aggressive prisoner (Feld, 1981). The fact that prisoners are provided with limited material resources also promotes a 'capitalist economic structure', something that increases predatory behaviour (MacDonald, 1988).

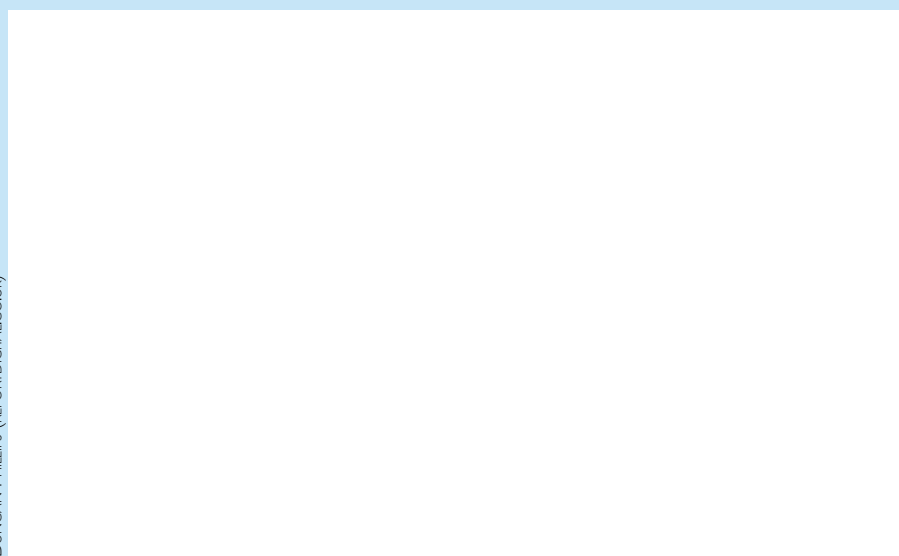
Prisons also house a large number of individuals together, and high population

density (which accentuates competition) is associated with reduced prosocial behaviour (Farrington, 1982). Because of the sheer number of prisoners housed in a single establishment the level of supervision is limited – it would be unrealistic to expect staff to monitor the behaviour of each and every prisoner 24 hours a day. Since bullying is an antisocial act that will occur away from the attention of staff, it can be expected to flourish in such circumstances.

The organisational structure of a prison can also promote bullying. Prisons are essentially authoritarian environments that enforce the importance of discipline and are based on clear and legitimate hierarchical structures (from governor through to officer). Such elements have been described as important risk factors for bullying, not only in prisons (Ireland, 2000) but also in schools (Askew, 1989) and the workplace (Leymann, 1990).

The existence of an inmate subculture is also important in explaining bullying. Subcultures represent informal social systems that include an 'inmate code' that all prisoners are expected to adhere to. This 'code' includes not informing on other prisoners, not fraternising with staff, a need to be tough and to resist exploitation, and a need to maintain one's position in the prison 'pecking order'. Violations of the inmate code are often controlled via bullying. For example, informing on another prisoner, particularly to staff, is seen as a valid justification for bullying (e.g. Ireland & Archer, 1996), and prisoners will often fail to report that they are being bullied for fear of violating this code and being subjected to further bullying.

Prisoner attitudes also play a vital role in the continuation of bullying. If bullying were not supported to some extent by the peer group, it would be unlikely to take place. There is evidence that bullying is a valued behaviour in a prison where bullies are often given a certain degree of status by both prisoners and staff (Connell & Farrington, 1996), whereas stigmas are reserved for the victims of bullying. Indeed, victims are often viewed as weak



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and referred to using derogatory terms such as 'whingers', 'fraggles' and 'muppets' (Beck, 1992). This can also be related to the dominance hierarchies that exist among prisoners, sometimes referred to as a 'prisoner caste system' or 'pecking order'. Bullies, through the status and approval that they receive from their peers, will appear at the top of these hierarchies, whereas victims are stigmatised and appear at the bottom. Such hierarchies are an important element of the prisoner subculture, where paramount importance is attached to being able to dominate others if acceptance and status are to be gained (Connell & Farrington, 1996). Bullying others becomes one way in which prisoners can achieve this.

However, the environmental characteristics of prisons are not on their own a sufficient explanation of why bullying occurs. Although they may provide conditions that both promote and reinforce bullying, the individual characteristics of prisoners are perhaps a determining factor. To a certain extent prisoners must be predisposed to be aggressive towards others if bullying is to take place. This has been supported by

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research suggesting that bullies hold more positive beliefs about the use of aggression (e.g. believing that other prisoners would respect you if you were aggressive: Ireland & Archer, in press), have more negative attitudes towards victims (Ireland, 1999b), and are more likely to respond aggressively to conflict situations involving bullying (Ireland, in press). In addition, prisoners must also be capable of bullying others in terms of possessing the social, physical or verbal skills necessary to bully successfully, and they must also possess an ability either to create or recognise an opportunity to bully others (Ireland, in press).

What can be done?

In view of the importance played by both environmental and individual factors in explaining bullying, dealing with it effectively is not an easy task. Many of the factors described are largely outside the control of prison authorities, such as population density, the existence of prisoner subcultures that reinforce bullying and the predisposition of some prisoners towards displaying aggression. Thus anti-bullying strategies should aim more towards alleviating the problem as opposed to eradicating it, and should focus more on identifying and recognising when bullying occurs with a view to dealing appropriately with the behaviour of the bully and providing support to the victim.

The first anti-bullying strategy launched in 1993 by HM Prison Service outlined

five main elements that were felt to be important if such strategies were to be successful:

- Measuring the problem by encouraging prisons to gather information about how extensive bullying is, who the bullies and victims are, and where bullying happens. Prisons were also encouraged to attend to any indirect indications of bullying such as an increase in prisoner assaults and requests for transfer.
- Changing the climate by adopting a 'whole prison approach' to bullying that fully involved staff, prisoners and visitors to the prison. It also highlighted the importance of continually reinforcing the strategy to prisoners as soon as they arrived in the establishment.
- Improving supervision and detection through identifying where in the prison bullying is most likely to happen, and employing strategies to reduce the opportunities that prisoners have to bully (e.g. by increasing the number of staff supervising high-risk areas). Other suggestions included changing aspects of the physical environment (e.g. creating smaller living units), using CCTV cameras in vulnerable areas and improving detection using prison intelligence systems (e.g. collating information about incidents, identifying trends).
- Supporting the victim in a number of ways, including providing all prisoners with a named officer with whom they have increased contact with, and

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mentioned previously, is now mandatory (Home Office Prison Service, 1999). Although similar in many ways to the 1993 strategy, the 1999 strategy was a marked improvement in terms of providing a more detailed account of the specific interventions that prisons could employ, describing examples of 'good practice' and outlining a clearer rationale behind the interventions suggested. It also recognised that a number of further issues were important to the review or introduction of anti-bullying strategies. These included:

- not focusing on the characteristics of bullies that may help identify them, concentrating instead on the specific types of bullying that were taking place;
- making the strategy meaningful to the local environment, notably recognising that different groups of prisoners will bully differently;
- recognising that bullying can be both 'open' and 'hidden';
- recognising a need to avoid stereotyping bullies and victims; and
- recognising that prisoners can be both bullies and victims.

The improvement evident in the revised strategy was probably due to a marked increase in prison-based research conducted between 1993 and 1999 that would have proved helpful in providing a literature base. For the 1993 strategy the prison service would have been forced to rely primarily on school-based research, which, although providing the impetus and ideas for the prison-based research, is of limited value when applied to a prison environment. The effectiveness of anti-

bullying strategies, however, has not yet been empirically assessed, and this is one area that future research should focus on. For example, an effective strategy is one that helps to identify when, where and how bullying takes place – it is one that ensures all incidents of bullying are investigated consistently and the findings documented and used to inform preventive strategies. Effective strategies are also those that ensure that all prisoners and staff are aware of the anti-bullying strategy and have a good understanding of how it operates.

The future

I expect that anti-bullying strategies and the impact that they have will improve over time as knowledge about bullying among prisoners' increases, and assessments of their effectiveness are conducted and published.

Moving away from viewing bullying as an 'individual phenomenon' to viewing it instead as an interaction between individuals and the environment in which they find themselves is a good start in developing effective strategies. Researchers should also be encouraged to concentrate less on the nature and extent of bullying, since we are already able to draw some conclusions about this, and more on the motivations behind bullying, the characteristics of those involved, and the long-term impact of bullying on victims.

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employing strategies that may prevent the victim being bullied in the future (such as marking their property and providing them with assertiveness programmes designed to help them cope with future bullying).

- Challenging the bully by removing them from the wing or unit to another location and offering them 'treatment' for their behaviour in the form of groupwork programmes. This element also recognised the need to identify the motivation behind the bully's behaviour before it can be effectively tackled.

This strategy was updated in 1999 and, as

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