

The Prison Survey: A Customer View of Scottish Prisons

The Prison Survey was designed and conducted to discover how staff and prisoners feel about the Scottish Prison Service. It was also conducted to assess standards, to measure the atmosphere and relationships in prison and to discover how staff and prisoners want the Scottish Prison Service to develop in the future. All staff and prisoners in all Scottish prisons were asked to participate in the survey.

The survey was undertaken to inform a wider program of change in the Scottish Prison Service, which is aimed at improving standards and the quality of service. The results, which are contained in this article, have already been fed into the management plans of each Scottish prison. Similar surveys planned for the future will monitor the progress made in implementing change and will permit adjustment and realignment where necessary. The Staff Survey: Findings Facilities and Conditions At a very basic level, prison staff expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the conditions in which they were asked to work, and with the facilities which were provided.

More than two thirds (70%) of respondents expressed strong negative views about the lack of space and privacy provided in prisons to allow them to do their job (e.g., writing reports on prisoners' progress and conducting staff appraisal interviews). Similar numbers expressed negative views about change rooms for staff (70%), eating facilities at the prison (66%) and showering facilities (66%). Just over one third (39%) felt that the standards of cleanliness in the prison were poor and that the overall state of repair of the prison estate was poor. Almost one quarter expressed dissatisfaction with the quantity of food provided for prisoners. Aspects of the Prison Officer's Job ***The Work***

The vast majority (81%) of officers enjoyed their job, and 43% enjoyed the security that the job guaranteed. However, only 54% felt that "Fresh Start" (a package of recently introduced job-related changes) had improved their job.

Almost half the uniformed staff felt that senior staff had little grasp of what went on in the prison. Forty-four percent felt that any suggestions they might make about the running of the prison would not be listened to by senior managers, further emphasizing the gulf between senior management and uniformed officers. This seemed to be part of a general discontent with communication arrangements in the Scottish Prison Service, particularly between headquarters and individual prisons.

Despite the many recently introduced developments in the Scottish Prison Service designed to allow for more interaction between staff and prisoners, just over half the staff (57%) said that prison officers were not equipped to handle prisoners' personal problems. However, staff responses to other questions in the survey indicated that they did want to deal with this area of work in the future. Before assuming such a role, they felt the need to be given adequate time and training for the task.

Family Life

An important part of any stressful job is the effect it has on personal relationships and particularly on one's family. When asked how they imagined their family felt about their job, the major concern of staff was the problem of compulsory transfer. Although they clearly recognized that when they joined the Service they had signed on as a mobile grade, have to transfer anywhere in Scotland, in practice only

43% said that they would move willingly if transferred. The problems were obviously more acute for married staff as they expressed greater concern than single staff.

More than half the respondents who had moved (45% of respondents had moved at least once during their career) had experienced severe problems - either emotional, personal or financial - as a result of the move. Current and Future Initiatives in the Scottish Prison Service Staff were broadly in favour of extending current initiatives and introducing many of the ones being discussed in Scottish Prison Service documents such as "Opportunity and Responsibility (1990)." They particularly wanted to see the introduction of integral sanitation for all prisoners (96%); the introduction of the national sentence-planning scheme for prisoners which is to be introduced shortly (92%); an extension of the personal officer scheme (79%); family visits for prisoners (74%); and increased home visits (63%).

It is encouraging that two thirds were in favour of introducing a prisoners' ombudsman, but by contrast, only 17% of staff wanted to see a system of legal representation for prisoners at grievance procedures.

Just over half (58%) wanted to see the introduction of electrical power sockets in cells. Those against it feared for their personal safety from possible electrocution, worried about the cost to prisoners' families of purchasing televisions or felt that it would lead to prisoners spending too much time "behind their door" and would detract from their participation in other programs intended for their personal development. Relationships in Prison A major aspect of the survey was to assess the quality of relationships in prison. Overall, staff felt that relationships were good between themselves and prisoners (92%) and among officers (95%). By comparison, there was greater concern about relationships with governors (wardens), although this was relative - three quarters described the relationship as good.

About three quarters also felt that relationships with specialists - psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers - working in the prison setting were good. Eighty-eight percent thought relationships with the medical officers were also good. Concern for Physical Safety Working in a prison environment presents many threats to an individual's personal and physical safety, and this is reflected in the survey results. Sixty percent of staff stated that they had worried at some point about their physical safety at work, and almost half reported that they had been assaulted at some time during their career.

Fifty-nine percent had worried at some time about contracting Hepatitis B or HIV at work. Atmosphere By any account, the Scottish Prison Service experienced an unprecedented amount of prisoner unrest in the mid to late 1980s. An important part of the survey was to determine the atmosphere of prisons at the time. Less than 10% of staff felt that there was tension in the prison. Response to Prison Where Staff is Currently Working and to the Scottish Prison Service Staff were asked a series of questions about their local management and headquarters management. The single most important observation made by staff about the way the Scottish Prison Service was run as a whole was the poor standard of communication at virtually all levels.

Staff generally agreed with those initiatives being introduced (sentence planning, home leave, etc.) but felt they should be kept better informed and, where appropriate, consulted. Only 8% of staff agreed with the statement that everyone in the Scottish Prison Service was clear about where the Service was going in the next five years. Furthermore, only 17% felt that, as an organization, the Scottish Prison Service was

good at communicating its new ideas to staff.

On a more positive note, 41% felt that the Scottish Prison Service placed a high value on staff participation. Forty-five percent agreed that the Scottish Prison Service placed a great deal of emphasis on staff development and training, while just over half agreed that the Service was constantly committed to improving its performance. Despite these latter findings, most staff (80%) felt that there was a lot of criticism among staff about the way the Service was run, and more than one third agreed that conflict between staff and management was high. Changes Staff were asked two questions about change. They were first asked what changes they would like to see in the prison where they work, and second, what changes they would like to see in the Scottish Prison Service. With respect to change in the prison where they work, the most frequent suggestion was for the introduction of integral sanitation. This was followed, but with less overall support, by suggestions for tightening regimes for prisoners and altering the management structure of the prison to reduce the number of levels of governors.

As far as changes to the Scottish Prison Service were concerned, staff wanted to see higher wages, better promotion prospects and the hiring of more staff. Large numbers of staff wanted an end to compulsory transfers, better communication between the Prison Service headquarters and prisons, and a reduction in the number of levels of governors. Staff also wanted to see changes in the prison estate with a move toward the introduction of smaller prisons and more semi-open and open prisons in the system. The Prisoner Survey: Findings The recurring and dominant theme emerging from prisoners' responses was the request for doser and improved access to family. This request took various forms among different groups of prisoners. A large number, mainly longer-term prisoners, suggested changes concerning family or conjugal visits, though there was also a demand for more home leave and weekend leave, again principally among longer-term prisoners. However, most prisoners thought that, realistically, improvements concerning family or conjugal visits were goals for the future. For the present, they felt that the current visiting facilities and arrangements were bad. Uppermost in their concerns for improvement were facilities for visiting children -three quarters saw these as poor.

Given the geographical remoteness of many Scottish prisons and the difficulty of access, it was not surprising that the length of visits was also criticized. Two thirds expressed dis-satisfaction with the arrangements. Finally, privacy during visits was severely criticized, with 78% expressing dissatisfaction. Relationships and Atmosphere As mentioned, the Scottish Prison Service experienced unprecedented prisoner unrest during much of the late 1980s with a series of rooftop demonstrations by violent prisoners and several hostage-taking incidents. Against such a background, a central part of the survey was directed at measuring the general atmosphere and quality of relationships in the prison.

The majority of prisoners (82%) felt they had a good relationship with uniform staff; 12% described it as very good. A smaller number (73%), similar to the staff figure, felt that the relationship with levels of governors was reasonable. The percentage of prisoners who felt they had a reasonable relationship with fellow prisoners was 95%.

While less than 20% of prisoners felt that they did not get on well with officers, more than one quarter felt that they did not get on well with governors.

Forty-one percent of prisoners thought that it was a good idea for prison officers and prisoners to have more contact with each other about personal problems. Since staff understand the prison environment, any problem was likely to be solved more quickly. The primary reasons for not wanting more contact were poor relationships, lack of trust and not wanting to divulge personal details for fear that they would be more widely broadcast. Physical Safety The often-made statement that prison is essentially an unsafe environment was in part supported by the survey results. Almost 20% of prisoners worried about being assaulted by a staff member, and 20% worried about the prospect of being assaulted by another prisoner. When asked if they had ever been assaulted during their present sentence, 15% said they had been assaulted by a staff member (although this includes incidents of control and restraint), 13% by another prisoner and a further 6% by a group of prisoners. Standards While the majority of prisoners were content with the general standards of cleanliness in the prison, more than one third complained about the lack of cleanliness of the prisons.

Almost half the respondents (47%) thought the food was served badly; 62% felt the choice of menu was poor; and 64% were critical about the quality of the food itself. Services Overall, relationships with the specialists (psychologists, social workers and education officers) were seen as good (less than 20% expressed negative views). However, more than one third said that they did not get along with medical officers.

Relationships aside, the standard of care provided by the specialists in the prison was seen by prisoners as variable. Of particular concern was the level of dissatisfaction with medical (57%) and psychological (54%) care. The majority of prisoners were content with the standard of both social work and dental care, but almost one third felt that social work care and advice was bad, and 35% felt that the dental care was bad. However, prisoners were more satisfied with the standard of education in the prison, with 27% describing it as either fairly good or very good and a further 43% as all right. Changes Prisoners, like staff, were asked to identify what changes they would like to see introduced in the prison where they were held and into the Scottish Prison Service. For both, the principal change that prisoners wished to see was quite clear - better access to families. Specifically, prisoners wanted better visiting arrangements in the prisons - longer, more frequent and more private visits - and some felt that consideration should be given to the introduction of family or conjugal visits in prison and the extension of home leave schemes. Conclusions There were some unexpected findings, given the prisoner unrest in Scottish prisons of the mid to late 1980s, that emerged from the survey. On the whole, staff and prisoners rated relationships positively.

Staff want to see initiatives currently in preparation or under discussion implemented, and major initiatives such as home leave are supported by staff as well as prisoners.

Prisoners want the levels of contact with family improved. Physical improvements such as integral sanitation are on the prisoners' agenda, but it is not, by a considerable margin, the priority.

However, the news from the survey is not all good - there are obvious pockets of concern. There are prisons where relations are not good and where visiting arrangements are strongly criticized. There are prisons where food delivery, food quality and variety of menu (each important concerns to the majority of the prisoner population) bother staff and prisoners alike, and are clearly in need of overhaul. Basic

items such as clothing and footwear are seen as poor by staff as well as prisoners. Some of these areas may seem trivial and mundane when compared with the prisoners' loss of freedom, but for many prisoners the true acid test of change in the Scottish Prison Service will be measured by improvements in areas such as food and laundry and not in the implementation of major policy schemes.

The fact that the Scottish Prison Service commissioned research such as the Prison Survey is, we feel, a measure of its commitment to creating change and developing a quality organization. This survey has provided a comprehensive and candid view of the task facing the Scottish Prison Service. However, without this information, the task of determining the direction in which the Service should be developed would be difficult, if not impossible.

The Prison Survey is no more than a "snapshot" in time - relationships, atmosphere and standards change with time, and sometimes change very quickly. The survey answers some questions, but it also raises more questions that need answers. We have tried through subsequent, smaller-scale pieces of work to answer some of these questions, but we recognize that many other areas need to be explored and, for particular groups of staff and prisoners, we need to develop a more sophisticated means of tapping into their needs and experiences. The survey has been valuable to the planning process, and follow-up surveys will provide some measure of the success of the change process.