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# Exploring the Nature of Muslim Groups and Related Gang Activity in Three High Security Prisons: Findings from Qualitative Research

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# Contents

- 1. Summary 3**
- 2. Context 5**
- 3. Approach 7**
  - 3.1 Participants 7
  - 3.2 Materials 7
  - 3.3 Procedure 8
  - 3.4 Analysis 8
- 4. Results 10**
  - 4.1 Presence, nature and purpose of Muslim groups and gangs 10
  - 4.2 Gang structure and roles 11
  - 4.3 Motivations for joining a gang 13
  - 4.4 Behaviour of gang 14
  - 4.5 Impact of gangs on prisoners and staff 15
  - 4.6 Leaving the gang 16
- 5. Conclusions 17**
- References 19**

# 1. Summary

Understanding the nature and drivers of prison groups and gangs and the impact they can both have on the prison environment is important for the management of establishments, safety of staff and prisoners and also for offender rehabilitation. The few UK studies exploring prison gangs suggest there is some gang presence but perhaps not to the same extent as that found in the US, where prison gangs are highly structured and organised with considerable control over the prison. Research in an English high security prison showed that Muslim gangs, formed for criminal purposes, can present both a management challenge due to criminal behaviour and also sometimes through the risk of radicalisation. However, prisoners who form into friendship groups for support, companionship and through shared interests should not be confused with gangs formed for criminal purposes. It is therefore important to understand the differences between prison group and gangs and distinguish between them.

This study aims to further our knowledge in this area by defining and describing prisoner groups, exploring the presence and nature of prison gangs and the impact they have on prison life within three High Security prisons in England. A qualitative approach was used with interviews being conducted with 83 randomly selected adult male prisoners located on the main wings and 73 staff from a range of disciplines across the three establishments. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis that was both inductive and deductive. The findings should be viewed with a degree of cautions as the views presented may not be representative of all prisoners or staff.

The study found the main prisoner group to be a large, diverse group of prisoners who connected through a shared Muslim faith. Respondents were questioned on the presence of other prisoner groups but none were considered to be as dominant or significant when compared to the Muslim group. Membership offered many supportive benefits including friendship, support and religious familiarity. A small number of prisoners within the group were perceived by those interviewed to be operating as a gang under the guise of religion and were reported to cause a significant management issue at each establishment. The gang had clearly defined membership roles including leaders, recruiters, enforcers, followers and foot-soldiers. Violence, bullying and intimidation were prevalent with the gang, using religion as an excuse to victimise others. The gang was perceived to be responsible for the circulation of the majority of the contraband goods in the establishments. Motivations for joining the gang were varied but centred on criminality, safety, fear, protection and power. Comparisons were made with historic prison gangs and respondents acknowledged that

gang problems, especially in the high security prisons, were something staff had always had to manage and would continue to require careful supervision.

The study highlighted the complex nature of groups and gangs in high security prisons in England. This report discusses how the findings can be used to inform management approaches, such as ensuring systems are in place to identify and support prisoners who are particularly vulnerable, improve staff training and education, and the use of culturally matched mentors and external experts.

## 2. Context

Prisoners commonly form into social groups while in custody, through shared interests and/or backgrounds. Being part of a group can offer many social benefits such as increased self-esteem by being part of an 'in-group' (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), satisfying the need to belong, as well as providing friendship and peer support (Spear, Ellemers & Doosjie, 2005). These same processes can be applied to prison gang membership, offering explanations for why gangs may develop and flourish (Harris et al, 2011). However, gangs can offer further benefits to their members such as safety and protection (Egan & Beadman, 2011), social identity, social status and economic advantage (Fong & Buentello, 1991; Fleisher & Krienert, 2006); all of which are likely to be important drivers to gang membership in custody. However, unlike prison groups, prison gangs can have a negative impact on establishments, with members being associated with much of the illicit, anti-social activity (Gaes et al., 2002; Fong & Buentello, 1991; Camp & Camp, 1985). Understanding prison groups, the difference between prisoner groups and gangs and the impact they can have on the prison environment is a high priority both for the Government in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2016) and internationally. The few UK studies exploring prison gangs suggest there is some gang presence but not to the same extent as that found in the US (Wood & Adler, 2001; Wood, 2006; Phillips, 2012), where prison gangs are highly structured and organised with considerable control over the prison (Skarbek, 2014).

However, the study of gangs more generally has been hampered by the difficulties in having an agreed definition of the characteristics that constitute a gang (Ball and Curry, 1995; Klein and Maxson, 2006). The same difficulties have also been encountered when trying to form definitions of a prison gang. Despite this, researchers have attempted to coin definitions that capture the key characteristics of the groups that prison-related professionals wish to understand further, especially to measure their prevalence to inform policy and service responses. For example, Wood (2006) has produced a definition for a study of prison gangs in English prisons: '*A group of three or more prisoners whose negative behaviour has an adverse impact on the prison that holds them*' (p.3).

Prison can be a threatening environment that can promote a fear of victimisation, with some prisoners turning to gangs for protection and safety (Ireland, 2005). Imprisonment in a high security prison presents particular challenges, as prisoners are often serving long sentences and are subject to closer supervision than the prison population elsewhere. It is an environment where prisoners are likely to seek solidarity and support from groups of fellow inmates. Given the high-risk nature of prisoners retained in high security, it is unsurprising

that gangs may also flourish. Little research has been carried out into prisoner gangs in the UK. One study of an English high security prison identified a large Islamist gang that had a significant negative influence over prison life and links to extremism (Leibling et al, 2011).

International studies have observed a rise in Islamist gangs in Western prisons (Neumann, 2010; Hamm, 2009), which has raised concerns about the influence that these gangs may have over other prisoners, especially where those convicted of extremist offences are instrumental in gang recruitment and leadership. The links between prison gangs and Islamist extremist offenders have been acknowledged as a possible mechanism for transmitting extremist ideologies, although how this occurs remains poorly understood (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015).

However, the nature of Muslim groups of prisoners and the differences between Muslim groups and gangs remain poorly understood. There is a need to ensure group-related behaviour is not conflated with gang activity. This study addresses this research need by providing an exploration of the nature of prisoner groups and their relationship with gang activity in three high security establishments in England.

### 3. Approach

A qualitative approach was used for the study. Data collection took place with prisoners and staff at three male high security prisons<sup>1</sup> in England between January 2014 and January 2015.

#### 3.1 Participants

Interviews were conducted with 83 male prisoners. All prisoners located in the main wings of each establishment were invited to take part in the research. The response rate was high; 88% of the prisoners approached agreed to participate. Respondents were randomly selected<sup>2</sup> from those who agreed to take part. Of the prisoners who were interviewed 34 (41%) described their ethnicity as White British; 28 (34%) Black/African/Caribbean/Black British; 12 (14%) Asian/Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) and nine (11%) mixed/other. In terms of religious beliefs, 38 (46%) reported that they were Muslim; 24 (29%) Christian, four (5%) other religious groups and 17 (20%) no religion. The mean age of participants was 26 years old (range 19 – 56).

Interviews were also conducted with 73 members of staff from the following disciplines: Security ( $n=15$ ), officers ( $n=20$ ), psychology staff ( $n=13$ ), offender supervisors ( $n=13$ ) and chaplaincy ( $n=12$ ). The sample of staff was opportunistic, with those who had agreed to take part and were available on the day(s) of interview being included. The mean age of staff was 42 years old (range 22 – 59). The majority were White British ( $n=64$ ), with four being Black/African/Caribbean/Black British and five being Asian/Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi).

#### 3.2 Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed for the study. As there is no clear definition of a 'gang' and the term can be seen as pejorative, the researchers were careful to avoid using the term prison 'gang' when undertaking the fieldwork. Instead the expression 'group affiliation' was used. However, the term 'gang' is used in the reporting of the findings where respondents clearly identified a 'gang' and used this term themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *High Security Prisons.* 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.

<sup>2</sup> *Random selection.* In order to randomly select participants, each potential participant was assigned a number and a computer random number generator was used.



### 3.3 Procedure

Interviews were carried out by the research team on an individual basis, face to face and in a private setting. Before the interviews, participants were given an information sheet on the study to read and were briefed on the aims of the study and their rights to confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interview length ranged from 45 minutes to two hours.

### 3.4 Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis which is both an inductive and deductive technique (see Feeday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The approach to the thematic analysis advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. Interview transcripts were entered into QSR NVivo Version 10 data management programme. For the deductive analysis, codes were defined *a priori* and were based on the research questions. Initially a coding frame was developed to capture expected responses to the research questions. Interview transcripts were re-read several times and inductive codes were systematically generated from the entire dataset and added to the coding frame. The codes were then reviewed and collated into broader themes and sub-themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure only those that had enough data to support them and were pertinent to the research aims were retained. Transcripts were again reviewed to confirm that individual themes reflected the content of the dataset and that no further codes had been missed. Once this was completed, themes were named and defined, and extracts from the interviews were selected to illustrate each theme.

Coding and theme generation of the full dataset was carried out by one member of the research team for consistency. However, all interview transcripts were read by a second member of the research team who also coded 20 randomly selected interviews (10 staff and 10 offender) alongside the primary researcher. This allowed the two sets of coding to be compared and any anomalies discussed and a coding frame agreed. The second researcher was also involved in the theme development and refinement, with potential themes being reviewed by both researchers and a consensus achieved.

As with all qualitative research, the views of those interviewed were subjective and may not be representative of all staff and prisoners at the establishments. However, as sample sizes were large (for a qualitative study), and both staff and prisoners were interviewed, a wide range of viewpoints was gathered, which allows for greater representation. Because the subject under investigation is highly topical, with much discourse in the media, there may

have been some bias in the interview responses. Some members of the gang may have been instructed to mask the problem, or to give misleading information in order to divert attention from the gang, while other prisoners who may have been subjected to violence and intimidation may have embellished the threats made against them as a means to highlight the severity of the issue. The researchers were aware of these potential issues when conducting the interviews and were experienced in conducting qualitative research with offender populations and prison staff. Confidentiality, anonymity and the researchers' independence from the establishment were emphasised to ensure respondents felt able to give open and honest accounts of their experience. The large 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 in responses.

## 4. Results

The findings are presented under each theme and accompanying illustrative quotes. Data extracts from interviews are labelled as being made by a staff member or a prisoner.

Prisoner extracts are also identified by their religion (Muslim/non).

### 4.1 Presence, nature and purpose of Muslim groups and gangs

Staff and prisoners spoke about the significant presence of a Muslim prisoner group at each establishment, which was usually referred to as the Muslim 'brotherhood'.<sup>3</sup> The group was considered to dominate the prisons in numbers and influence. In fact, this was the only group mentioned by staff and prisoners; they did not consider there to be any other significant groups of prisoners. A minority of staff referred to very small groups of prisoners who had formed along geographical lines, and groups of travellers, but their numbers were considered too small and their associations too loose to be identified as a group, especially when compared to the brotherhood. The Muslim brotherhood was reported to be a heterogeneous grouping of individuals with different characteristics, behaviours and reasons for belonging. The majority wanted to practice their faith peacefully and become more immersed in the scriptures of Islam as a framework to elicit change in their life and to cope with custody. The brotherhood allowed them to surround themselves with like-minded individuals with whom they had a common interest and focus.

*Islam is a brotherhood. When you find out someone else is religious, straightaway you're friends. You have spirituality.* Muslim prisoner.

Most of those interviewed acknowledged that the majority of Muslim prisoners fell into this category. Where following the faith for genuine reasons, staff were able to recognise that this was a positive step towards rehabilitation, and prisoners spoke of converting to Islam because it offered a '*stricter life*' and a way to '*change [their] life around*'.

The Muslim brotherhood offered prisoners who felt alone a family, especially those who were new to prison or vulnerable.

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<sup>3</sup> *Brotherhood.* The term 'brotherhood' was used by respondents to describe the Muslim group in the prisons but was not part of the Society of the Muslim Brothers or Muslim Brotherhood that is a Sunni Islamist organisation.

*Prison can be a very lonely environment. Any interaction that offers a sense of belonging becomes very attractive to new receptions or those having other underlying issues... Staff.*

It was also widely discussed that a small group of Muslim prisoners was operating as a gang under the guise of religion. They were embedded within the wider Muslim brotherhood but, unlike the brotherhood, they had little interest in the faith but saw membership of the gang as an opportunity to be anti-authority, violent and intimidating.

Brotherhood members went out of their way to distance themselves from the gang. Muslim prisoners wanting to become more immersed in their faith were especially vocal in their criticism of the gang and spoke about their attempts to disassociate themselves from the violence and gang activity, as well as any extremist agenda.

*I'm headstrong. People ask why I don't defend them. If they're in the wrong, I'll tell them. Being Muslim isn't being in a gang. Muslim prisoner.*

They also tended to have been born to Islam and had a greater knowledge and understanding of the faith and the scriptures so felt confident to challenge any extremist rhetoric espoused by gang members.

*...[one of the gang members] asked me why I'm not fasting... So I then asked him to name one of the pillars of Islam and he couldn't answer. They're dangerous. It's frightening. It's ignorance. Muslim prisoner.*

Respondents were questioned about all gangs in their establishment and agreed that, at the time, the only significant gang was the Muslim gang. However, historical prison gangs became a common theme from the analysis, with many drawing comparisons between the Muslim gang, previous gang problems and politicised prisoners from Northern Ireland. It was widely stated that the Muslim gang was simply another prison gang and faith was largely irrelevant. Gang problems, especially in the high security prisons, were something staff had always had to manage and would continue to present and require careful supervision.

## **4.2 Gang structure and roles**

The Muslim gang was widely considered to have a clear structure that was hierarchical, with known leaders. The roles assumed by gang members divided into leaders, recruiters, enforcers and followers.

**Gang Leaders.** Leaders were reported to have their own hierarchy with a leader for the entire establishment, each wing and landing. They tended to be born into the faith, were often Arabic speaking and perceived to have a greater knowledge of Islam, presenting themselves as scholars to others. However, this was questioned by some prisoners with knowledge of the faith, as one Muslim prisoner stated: *'People who're leading them aren't intelligent. They read the Koran and make it fit with their life and their own beliefs. They don't fit their life around the religion.'*

Those who had committed terrorist crimes often held more senior roles in the gang, facilitated by the respect some younger prisoners gave them. Leaders had specific personal characteristics, which included being manipulative, dominant, outspoken and able to intimidate others. They were believed to be the instigators of much prison violence, despite being outwardly compliant with staff, passing down orders to gang enforcers and followers to commit violent acts. It was reported that it was often difficult to prove their involvement in prison unrest which meant they often remained unsanctioned.

One prisoner summarised the gang leaders with the following: *'The gang has known leaders. This will be someone whose offence has validity. It could be for high profile terrorism... They will either be born to the religion or converted a long time ago, before they came into prison. Prison converts wouldn't have the legitimacy to become leaders. Nothing will happen without the say so of the leader. If you can speak Arabic or learn passages of the Koran, this will allow you to get up the ranks. The leaders will be very polite to the faces of staff and won't do anything to get into trouble with the authorities themselves... It's all done though their foot-soldiers.* Non-Muslim prisoner.

While leaders were often discussed in negative terms, some clear benefits to their style of leadership were noted. They exerted control and restraint over the more volatile, aggressive gang members, with members being required to seek their permission before committing any violence.

*Leaders will keep control of the gang. If someone new comes in – who's newly converted – from a rival gang and wants to fight with you, leaders will take them aside and tell them not to fight.* Muslim prisoner.

**Recruiters.** Recruitment to the gang was considered to be fundamental to its continued influence, with certain group members assuming responsibility of broadening membership. While recruitment was relatively indiscriminate, street gang members were particularly

targeted for their propensity for violence. Vulnerable prisoners were also approached to join the gang.

There were strong themes of coercion, pressure and, in some cases, violence to increase numbers. Initially relational or indirect aggression was used in the form of psychological violence. However, there were reports of some extreme violence being enacted on those who were reluctant to convert.

*There is an underlying pressure for people to convert and join the gang. The tactic they use is to befriend someone when they come in. If they don't convert they will then start spreading rumours about them, that the person is a snitch, so that they will be ostracised. Then the beatings will follow. Non-Muslim Prisoner.*

**Followers and foot-soldiers.** Muslim gang numbers were swelled by 'followers' and 'foot-soldiers', who joined for protection and/or criminality. They were largely expected to carry out violence for the gang leaders, which they would do for approval, acceptance and allegiance to the gang. They tended to be recent converts to Islam, often having converted while in custody. Within the gang there was an in-group and an out-group based on birth right, religious knowledge and vulnerability. Some Black prisoners who had joined the gang described how they felt exploited and discriminated against by senior members, always being perceived as having lower status.

*They get Blacks to join as they can push their buttons to do things. Blacks don't get the same invitations Asians do. If you're Asian they'd be cooking for you.*  
Muslim prisoner.

**Enforcers.** Some foot-soldiers fulfilled the role of 'enforcers', to ensure other gang members were following the autocratic rules of the leaders. Rules were implemented, which included strict adherence to the teachings of Islam and, for all prisoners regardless of faith, rules included wearing underpants while showering and no cooking of bacon. The justification for these rules was ostensibly to respect their religion, but they were enforced through violence and intimidation.

### **4.3 Motivations for joining a gang**

Themes emerged around the motivations for joining the gang which focused on the perceived benefits that gang membership offered, especially criminality, safety, fear and protection, and power.

**Criminality.** The majority of gang members were driven by an anti-establishment agenda. They were mostly in-prison converts to the faith with little knowledge of Islam and little interest in adhering to the religious practices. Street gang members joined, as it offered them the familiarity of a gang and the opportunity to continue with behaviours such as bullying, violence and intimidation. They were reported to be involved in many of the prison altercations.

**Safety, fear and protection.** Joining was particularly appealing to vulnerable prisoners, and those who had received threats of harm, as the gang served a protective function. They were either vulnerable because of their younger age and their inexperience with prison, or because of their offences, such as sex offences. For those prisoners whose membership was in response to threats or intimidation, it was generally deemed that they had little knowledge and interest in the faith and would leave the faith as soon as they left prison.

**Power.** A small number of gang members wanted to develop a power base and to control the criminal activity in the prison. They were often the orchestrators of prison unrest. To a lesser extent this group was interested in propagating extremist ideologies, although this was seen as secondary to their desire for power. Some had been convicted of terrorism offences, although their motivations were more gang-related and criminal. Divisions between extremist offenders who were motivated by power and criminality within the prison and those who were motivated purely by an extremist agenda were reported. For some offenders convicted of terrorist offences (TACT), gang activity was seen as a distraction.

*A lot of it is about furthering their own interests. They want to have power and more influence. They are less bothered about the [extremist] cause and more about furthering their own criminality and violent aims. Staff.*

#### **4.4 Behaviour of gang**

The gang was seen to have a disruptive and antagonistic influence, having become a management issue. Some of the foot-soldiers were reported to be argumentative and confrontational with staff, exploiting staff's sometimes limited knowledge of Islam to dispute prison rules. As gang leaders were often outwardly compliant with staff, they were considered more difficult to understand and supervise; especially given the influence they had over other gang members, by inciting feelings of discrimination and disaffection.

Strong themes of violence and power emerged, with the majority of violent incidents being attributed to gang members by those interviewed. Revenge attacks were enacted on

prisoners who had been in conflict with a gang member. The use of religion as an excuse to engage in gang behaviour and victimise others was widely discussed. It was generally felt that being anti-authority, seeking power and violence were far greater behavioural drivers than faith, with many showing little interest in Islam.

*They are criminal offenders who want power and influence and to be disruptive, and they happen to be Muslim. Have there been incidents by Muslim prisoners?  
Yes, but this is about power, status, criminality, not faith. Staff.*

Reasons given for the gang instigating violence against prisoners was varied and included settling old scores from the outside, prisoners with a predilection for violence, young prisoners wanting to impress elders in the gang, being coerced into committing a violent act, violence to show allegiance, and violence prompted by boredom.

Gang members were reported to generally control the circulation of contraband, such as mobile phones and drugs, which they used to exert power over other prisoners. Money would be acquired by 'taxing' other prisoners.

#### **4.5 Impact of gangs on prisoners and staff**

Fear was a prominent theme in many of the interviews. Prisoners spoke about feeling intimidated by the gang and being hyper-vigilant as some members would use any slight incident to be violent. Gang members themselves spoke about how they had strength in numbers and how this created fear in other prisoners, especially fear of repercussions from altercations with a gang member:

*...other prisoners are scared of us. They know they're only going to three other jails and they know there will be brothers waiting there to stab them. Muslim Prisoner.*

There was also some fear among staff who were interviewed, largely attributed to the dominance of the Muslim gang and their limited ability to intervene in potential incidents because they could be outnumbered. A theme emerged around frontline staff's ability to distinguish gang behaviour. They discussed the importance of being able to identify the difference between Muslims who wished to practice their faith, those who wanted to operate a gang and those who were motivated by an extremist agenda. Staff recognised the need to make these distinctions and understand when behaviour should be seen as a security threat.



*Some normal innocuous behaviour can be linked to extremism. If they're Muslim and discussing their faith then they [staff] can see this as trying to convert someone. There is value in being vigilant but it can have an impact on others. There are plenty of opportunities for the Muslim faith and prison rules to clash. Things like praying together in groups. Staff.*

However, some Muslim prisoners, especially those who were keen to disassociate themselves from the gang, spoke positively about staff. They thought staff were able to differentiate between genuine Muslims and gang members and maintained good control over the gang.

#### **4.6 Leaving the gang**

Respondents discussed how some form of retaliation or punishment would be exacted on members trying to exit the gang, which ranged from being ostracised and bullied to serious violence. Repercussions would be the most severe for gang members who wanted to denounce Islam. It was reported that each high security prison had gang leaders who communicated with each other, so leaving the gang while still in high security could be difficult and tended not to happen.

*Some come in, turn to the Muslim gang, but then go back to their old ways. They get cut off from the food, money, trainers and things. People write to other jails and say not to look at these people. They'd usually be greeted and given things but they're told not to. They'll get a bit of intimidation, dirty looks. It's childish games. Muslim prisoner.*

Leaving the gang was only considered possible when they were transferred to a lower category prison, where the gang had less presence.

*Once I go to a cat B prison, I'll say goodbye to Islam. If I said I didn't want to be a Muslim, I'd need to watch out in case someone stabbed me. It's very dangerous to denounce Islam. It'll be nice to be true to myself. Muslim prisoner.*

## 5. Conclusions

The study highlighted the complex nature of groups and gangs in three high security prisons in England. A large heterogeneous group of Muslim prisoners was identified, who generally wanted to peacefully practice their faith. The group offered many benefits to members which are mirrored in other studies of Muslim prisoner groups (Pickering, 2012; Liebling et al., 2011). A smaller sub-group was operating as a gang under the guise of religion, which offered members the opportunity to engage in anti-establishment and criminal behaviours, to exert power and influence and provided protection. The findings are supported by other studies that have reported Muslim gangs operating in prisons, with similar motivations and behaviour (Brandon, 2009; Liebling et al., 2011). As with the present research, these studies have recognised the significant impact that gangs have on prison life and the need for careful management.

Social interaction and belonging to a group can help prisoners cope with the pains of incarceration. Surviving and adapting to prison life has been found to be an important motivator for turning to the Muslim group both in this study and elsewhere (Brandon, 2009; Hamm, 2009). For those who joined the brotherhood, their faith allowed them to surround themselves with like-minded individuals and offered the benefits of companionship, collective worship and a mechanism for a structured, devout life. Islam can be particularly appealing to some prisoners because the religious practices and self-discipline required to follow the faith offer a positive framework around which they can structure their lives (Spalek & El-Hassan, 2007). Affiliating to the gang also fulfilled a need to belong, which has been identified in the wider gang literature as an important driver for gang membership (Lachman et al., 2013). Understanding the need to belong and identifying pro-social means of fulfilling this may help to reduce gang involvement in custody.

The study identified a clear hierarchy in the gang with defined leaders and followers along with roles of recruiters and enforcers who served to perpetuate the gang's dominance and control, which accords with international research on prison gangs (Fleisher and Decker, 2001). The gang was considered to be a disruptive influence, being associated with much of the prison bullying, intimidation and violence. Similarities can be drawn between the Muslim gang in this study and gangs in prisons in the US, with the importance of violence being identified (Pyrooz, Decker & Fleisher, 2011).

Prison gangs were reported to be an inevitability of prison life by some staff, especially high security prisons, given the high-risk nature of the prisoners who are accommodated there

and length of sentence. Factors related to being incarcerated, such as deprivation of liberty, social isolation and need for protection, have been found to provide an environment where gangs are likely to flourish (Ireland, 2005; Rufino et al., 2012). The gang in this study was particularly attractive to some prisoners who were vulnerable and/or young street gang members. Youth and long prison sentences have been found to be an important factor in prison gang membership (Wood et al., 2009). Prison can be a threatening environment for more vulnerable prisoners, so turning to a gang for safety and protection is unsurprising (Ireland, 2005). Mechanisms should be put in place to identify and support prisoners who are particularly vulnerable, especially in high security establishments where many young prisoners are serving long prison sentences. Prisons in England and Wales are currently introducing a scheme to provide all prisoners with a keyworker within days of their reception. The keyworker will promote constructive and rehabilitative relationships with the prisoner and provide support and guidance in their journey through custody. The scheme should be able to help in identifying and supporting prisoners at risk of turning to prison gangs.

An earlier study of high security prisons in England (Liebling et al., 2011) found staff misunderstanding normal religious practice and behaviours that were intended to circumvent prison rules. Some prisoners were exploiting this lack of knowledge for their own ends. While staff awareness appeared to have considerably improved in this study, further staff education and training could be delivered to train staff in differentiating cultural and religious practice from anti-establishment behaviours. Since the fieldwork was conducted, the prison service has begun to address this by delivering training to all new frontline staff in understanding Islam and identification of extremist and other risk behaviours.

As the prison population is changing, especially high security, with an increase in relatively young prisoners serving long sentences, with a greater ethnic and cultural diversity (Liebling et al., 2011), efforts should be made to recruit a diversity of staff or make use of carefully selected mentors who are from similar backgrounds to the prisoners, which would help to break down any 'them and us' divide. 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 vulnerable prisoners. 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.

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