Chapter nine.

experiencing imprisonment.

As we saw in chapter 1, many criminal psychologists work within prisons where they will assess, manage and treat offenders in their care with the aim of reducing their likelihood of reoffending on release from prison. In addition to these responsibilities, prison psychologists also conduct research related to imprisonment. Such research can aim to increase our understanding of what imprisonment is like with a view to enhancing rehabilitative efforts or it may focus on the evaluation of the effectiveness of psychological interventions in place. Academic criminal psychologists working in universities have also been conducting such research.

While chapter 10 outlines the research on the rehabilitation of offenders, this chapter will introduce you to the research con- ducted on how being imprisoned can affect prisoners and how they cope with this experience.

So, when considering the numbers of people affected by imprisonment, how many are we actually talking about? According to the International Centre for Prison Studies there are over 8.5 million people imprisoned worldwide. Although this is a very high number, should we really be concerned about how imprisonment affects these people? Some newspaper reports would suggest not. I am sure you have seen newspaper reports stating that prison is ‘too easy’ and is more like a ‘holiday camp’ than a prison. In contrast, there have been numerous documentaries and television series which have shown a more unpleasant and distressing side to imprisonment. Unless we have visited a prison or have been imprisoned ourselves, most of what we know of imprisonment comes from the television or other media. But with these conflicting reports of what prison is like it is difficult to know whether we should be concerned about the 8.5 million people currently imprisoned.

Psychologists and other social scientists have been researching the effects of imprisonment for some time. Much of this research has been conducted in the West: its findings might not apply so readily to prisons in other parts of the world and it is important to bear this in mind. The research that has been conducted has found that imprisonment can have very negative effects for some prisoners. This can result from the actual experience of being imprisoned or it can be related to a person’s encounters with others whilst imprisoned.

characteristics of the prison environment.

When some newspaper reports condemn prisons for being more like holiday camps and state that life in prison is too easy, they are contrasting what they believe prison to be like with the perceived goals of imprisonment. Specifically, they are focusing on the goals of punishment and deterrence. For prison to be a punishment it must be an uncomfortable experience. Another goal of imprisonment is deterrence. We often hear about the supposed deterrent effect of imprisonment when we hear politicians talking about ‘getting tough on crime’. If the threat of imprisonment is to deter prisoners from reoffending or to deter otherwise law-abiding citizens from committing crime, imprisonment must be an unpleasant experience. But how unpleasant should it be? Some theorists have expressed their concerns that if the discomfort of imprisonment is too great, it can be counterproductive.

the physical environment.

The prison environment is stressful by its very nature and several researchers have examined the stressors operating in prisons. Just being imprisoned results in a loss of freedom and a loss of autonomy. Your daily routine is dictated by the prison routine, and choices, such as what you will have for your dinner or what time you will get up in the morning, are no longer available. Because male and female prisoners are held separately, imprisonment also results in the loss of heterosexual relationships. Depending on the volume of prisoners being held in one institution, prisons can also be very noisy and overcrowded. Sharing a cell with another prisoner means you have little privacy, as can the physical design of the prison. In some prisons, the front of a cell is composed of open bars which denies the prisoner any privacy at all. Depending on the resources in the prison and the prison routine, inmates might spend a great deal of time in their cells and some can find this enforced inactivity stressful. It is therefore quite easy to understand why the prison environment itself can result in prisoners experiencing stress.

At this point, it is important to make a distinction between sentenced and remand prisoners, and consider how their status can affect their experience of imprisonment. Remand prisoners have yet to be convicted of the crime they are alleged to have committed and therefore they have the additional concerns of their forthcoming trial and legal representation. In the UK remand and sentenced prisoners are held in the same institutions, whereas in the US prisoners who are waiting for their case to be tried are located not in prisons but in jails. In comparison to prisons in the US, jails are notoriously poorly resourced, with inactivity and crowding being particular problems.

the social environment.

As well as these stressors of the physical prison environment, there are additional stressors that prisoners must endure; those associated with the experience of imprisonment and the social environment. Some of these relate to the outside world whereas others relate to the internal world of the prison.

In relation to stressors in the outside world, prisoners can be concerned about the loss of their employment and their relation- ships with their families, and how these will be affected by their imprisonment. This would particularly be the case for prisoners with longer sentences.

The enforced removal of prisoners from their social network and from intimate relationships with others can result in loneliness. Loneliness can be separated into two types: emotional loneliness is experienced when you do not have a close, intimate attachment with another person. Prisoners who are separated from partners might experience such loneliness. Social loneliness, on the other hand, is where you are not part of an engaging social network. On being imprisoned, you no longer have access to your friends and work colleagues and may find yourself in the company of strangers. It is quite likely that partners and families of prisoners will also experience both emotional and social loneliness. However, not all prisoners will experience loneliness on imprisonment. For example, prisoners who are part of an established criminal network may find it easier to integrate into the prison social network if they have co- offenders imprisoned with them at the same time. Also some prisoners might experience one type of loneliness but not the other.

With regard to stressors within the prison, the social environment of prisons can be a source of stress. A subculture of violence exists within some prisons, with physical violence being approved by some prisoners. For some prisoners prison might therefore be a very different environment from what they were used to in the outside world and therefore being imprisoned can require a lot of adjustment. The social environment among prisoners can be viewed as a hierarchy. Because violence and being able to protect yourself is valued within prison, violent prisoners may have the greatest status and sit at the top of the hierarchy. Being imprisoned can therefore quite reasonably result in fears about experiencing violence at the hands of other inmates. Prisoners might also feel they have to change the way they would normally behave in the outside world to ensure they do not end up at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Bullying amongst prisoners or victimization, as other researchers refer to it, has been well researched by criminal psychologists and other social scientists such as Jane Ireland and Kimmett Edgar. The types of bullying behaviours that occur in prison include direct and indirect forms of victimization. Direct forms are those where the aggressors inflict the aggressive act directly on the victims, for example, by hitting them, whereas indirect victimization is where the aggression is delivered in such a way that the aggressors cannot be associated with it. It could include encouraging others to exclude the victims from some activity. In addition, bullying behaviours can be physical or verbal, and hence targeted at the victim, or the victim’s property might be the target.

The research literature has suggested that the types of bullying behaviour displayed varies depending on the bully’s age, with direct forms of bullying being associated with younger offenders. In relation to gender, some research studies have found that male prisoners more often use direct forms of bullying than females do, whereas other studies have found no evidence of this.

The types of bullying behaviours experienced also seem to vary with culture. In prisons in the US, prisoners more frequently report sexual violence in comparison to their counterparts in UK prisons. It has been suggested that these differences could be due to the higher incidence of lethal violence in US society, racial tension within US prisons and staff’s supportive attitudes to prison rape.

Bullying others and the experience of being bullied seems quite prevalent in prisons. Drawing comparisons between studies can, however, be problematic since the definitions used by different researchers have varied. It is therefore important to bear this in mind when considering the research that has been conducted. Using a timescale of the previous week, UK researchers found that forty-five per cent of their male adult and young offenders reported behaving in ways that were considered indicative of bullying others and forty per cent of prisoners reported experiencing such behaviours. Very similar percentages were found by Susie Grennan and Jessica Woodhams with their sample of young offenders. Using a different definition and a different approach, researchers in the US found that, on average, their male inmates were victimized once a month. From just these few statistics, it seems that being imprisoned brings with it a substantial risk of being victimized.

This raises the question of whether all prisoners are at equal risk of victimization. Some studies have found that both prison staff and prisoners reported that the prisoners who are more at risk were those that broke the inmate code. This code forbids the reporting of other prisoners to prison staff. Other studies have found that prisoners perceived as weaker, less experienced or socially isolated were more often targeted, as were those serving a sentence for a controversial crime, such as child sexual abuse. It also seems possible that the risk of being victimized varies depending on the security rating of the prison. For example, Jessica Woodhams found only two per cent of prisoners in a low security prison reported being bullied in the previous month.