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SENSING SECURITY, SENSING SAFETY

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Abstract

Security and safety are as central to prison management as their meanings are taken-for-granted. Frequently used interchangeably, their meaning elided, I explore how thinking sensorially disrupts assumptions about security and safety practices. Drawing on various pieces of prisons research, most heavily 'Sound, Order and Survival' (2024) I use three examples: locked doors indicate security, but are they experienced as safe? What of those who experience the sensory differently? Do alarms aid security as we suppose? What becomes clear when applying a sensory perspective, is the extent to which the elision of security and safety obscures understanding. This obfuscation constitutes a regime of truth which occludes processes which ostensibly seek to induce and sustain both security and safety, despite these being distinct and sometimes conflicting objectives which can work to undermine the realisation of either. How does this disrupt assumptions about practice and ask how this might influence application in the future?

Keywords: Security, Safety, Senses, Sensory Criminology, Prison

Introduction

Security, and safety, with which it is so often aligned to the point of elision, are taken-for-granted terms in the context of the prison. Charged with "protecting the public" by ensuring those in custody remain there, security is the pre-eminent concern of prison management. In other contexts, there is an intrinsic acknowledgement that "security is not and can never be an absolute state. Rather it is a relational concept whose invisibility must be continually tested against threats as yet unknown" (Zedner ,2003: p.153). In carceral spaces, where power relations are stark and movement thoroughly constrained, security takes on a particular bent to reflect its applications (Button, 2021); the processes and practices that fulfil the prison's statement of purpose. This rather makes clarity imperative, and yet, while we have a clear idea of what it is not (a high number of recorded violent incidents, attempted escapes, incidents at height) our understanding of what constitutes security is fundamentally impeded by its continual framing in terms of safety, and vice versa (e.g., HMPPS, 2024).

Research in a local prison exploring the significance of the soundscape revealed the extent to which meanings of 'order' were collapsed into other categories of social behaviour, particularly power and security (Herrity, 2024). The sensory offered a means of adding texture and distinction to how these facets of prison life are understood and experienced. The same is true for security and safety, not only separate facets of prison life but also, sometimes, working in opposition, contradiction, and tension with one another. I use three examples, drawing on various pieces of prisons research, mostly focused on sound, to illustrate this point. Foregrounding the senses, I argue reveals texture and definition to these concepts, de-articulating them from one another and disrupting assumptions about what they mean, and how that works in practice.

Happiness is door-shaped?

The locked door is an image bound with an array of sensory signifiers that encapsulate the prison imaginary. It is no coincidence that "happiness is door-shaped" is an oft-uttered prison officer statement. Officer Rose explained this as referring to:

> *when I ring that bell for that last time, get everybody behind their doors, everybody comes in and signs for their numbers, it makes you feel good … Nobody's been hurt, staff or prisoners, we've got the right number of people we're supposed to have, job done.*

Those in custody, then, are both safe and secure. The dreaded count has been performed, numbers have been rolled, and all are where they are supposed to be. As Seamus – a man I spent time talking with in the vulnerable prisoners' unit - explained to me though, this is by no means a comfort to all those in custody:

> *Banging, crying, screaming keeps us awake – they can't do their bang up you see. They should leave the doors open, and they'd be okay, it's all those hours locked up by themselves, they can't take it, does their head in, then none of us sleep. Keeps us awake all night. Big problem.*

These examples at once illustrate the distinction between staff and prisoner perspectives and amplify that between safety and security. Here, the successful operation of practices designed to ensure the prison runs smoothly and those in custody kept precisely where the prison determines they should be, works in tension with those individuals who find time behind the door interminable. This echoes Valverde's call to "excavate contestable assumptions about space and time…embedded in contemporary security arrangements" (Armstrong, 2014: p.392 on Valverde, 2012). For those "crying"

and "screaming" in distress, time behind the door stretches before them in vertiginous multitudes. The ontological insecurity of being so tightly imprisoned corrodes their wellbeing and, consequently, threatens their physical safety. The count has been successful, all are locked in – "nobody's been hurt, we've got the right number of people we're supposed to have" but what of those individual threats to safety "as yet unknown" (Zedner, 2003). Thinking about security and safety in this way raises questions about whether practices designed to sustain them operate in different spatial and temporal dimensions. Security measures are pre-emptive, those for safety responsive. Security works at the national or institutional level, safety, more frequently to mitigate damage incurred by the individual.

There are numerous ways in which time behind the door can work to undermine security practices in addition to self-harm. "Window warriors" found plenty of opportunity to shout and bully occupants of other cells, a habit more common amongst younger prisoners. In an environment where so much of life is conducted beyond the limited, or occluded peripheries of vision, sound and the activities it signifies offers an array of opportunities for 'sousveillance' for those sufficiently adept to interpret them (Herrity, 2020). 'Sousveillance' refers to practices of surveillance from below. Those held in custody frequently possess sophisticated attunement to activity around the prison, the knowledge of which can work to undermine its stability. At HMP Midtown, Stretch informed me he could "feel" vibrations of violence through the walls of his cell, and gained additional information from observing staff habits as well as listening to radio announcements. His safety and survival were therefore bound up with acquisition of elicit information that, at least theoretically, conversely undermined prison security.

"I have been forgotten"

While visiting a category 'C' prison (often referred to as "training" prisons in the jurisdiction of England and Wales) I talked with Ted, a prisoner who was profoundly deaf, about his experiences inside. His first sentence, he spoke (through the less-than-ideal medium of an interpreter) of the difficulty discerning what was going on when locked behind the door, because he could not hear shouts or doors unlocking. He had been forgotten despite clear signage indicating he could not hear, missing meals and exercise. As a consequence, he would try his door repeatedly, using his TV as an indicator of when unlock might occur. For this man, systems designed to underscore security – timed unlock and a fixed regime – worked to profoundly undermine his sense of safety. He had no confidence his basic needs would be met, and simple accommodations for his deafness were routinely ignored – either because he was not unlocked or received no indication that he had been. For Ted, a commonplace example of institutional thoughtlessness had profound implications on his feelings of being safe.

As the work of Kelly-Corless on d/Deaf people in prison (e.g., 2017) illustrates, security practices (e.g., timed unlock, regime organisation) can have profoundly different implications for the sensorially impaired. This works both in terms of safety for individuals and, potentially, security. Systematic failure to adequately adjust for the needs of the sensorially impaired can render prisoners and the prison vulnerable (e.g., by inappropriately using other prisoners for interpreting or to provide care and support). Sensory overwhelm and overstimulation are facets of a host of differences present in considerably greater numbers amongst those held in prison than the general population. Sound sensitivity is broadly associated with these conditions – neurodivergence, trauma, posttraumatic stress - and can have drastic implications for outcomes (Anwar et al., 2025, Stickney et al., 2023).

Prisons are sensorially distinct places, often particularly noisy for considerable portions of the day. This can present a profound challenge for those in whom loud and/or unexpected noise can induce feelings of distress, aggravation, disorientation, and discomfort (Herrity, 2024). Security practices work at national, regional, and institutional levels in ways which obfuscate the challenges to shoring up personal safety, to which those individuals identifying outside the narrow parameters of "young, white, able-bodied, hearing males" are subject (Kelly-Corless & McCarthy, 2025). Banging gates, mass-movement, shouting, radios, unpleasant textures and smells, unwanted or unexpected touch can all induce sufficient discomfort and/or distress to prompt undesirable response. As someone identifying as autistic held at HMP Midtown explained:

> *'Sound, you say sound? Only the keys and banging, they're difficult to cope with. They draw, they draw ... hang heavy on my shoulders. When I hear the keys coming it makes me anxious. It makes me really anxious. If they could put me somewhere quiet, away from the noises?'*

Attending to the soundscape allows for a consideration of different levels of experience simultaneously. Listening to security practices enables us to hear both institutionally established routines - banging of gates and jangling of keys - and how these effect individuals in profoundly different and sometimes deleterious ways, hanging 'heavy on' their 'shoulders'.

"It's designed to put you on the floor"

In prison the purpose of security alarms is straight-forward and self-explanatory though their effect arguably less so. Institutionally emanating sensory signifiers were often viewed as additional dimensions of punishment by those with whom I spoke. Both prison staff and those held there spoke of the need to extract the prison smell and sonic afterlife from their heads and clothing. The soundscape was consistently identified both as a site for contestations of power (e.g., loud music), and source of additional sanction, though it was sometimes difficult to extricate intention from the limits of practical consciousness. Banging gates and the use of hand dryers in the wing staff toilets at unsociable hours were sometimes viewed as deliberate provocations, designed to disturb the quality of precious, fragile sleep. Sleep, of course, can prove instrumental to health and wellbeing in institutional settings where you 'Wake up sore, you wake up angry' (O'Mara & Bonser, 2025). The piercing security alarm, which sounded frequently when I arrived at HMP Midtown but was used less often as time went by, was a specific source of ill-feeling. Different prisoners held the opinion the security alarm had been designed to incapacitate them. It did not seem to occur that this would also, presumably, be true for everyone who worked there. *'You know that's made to put you on the floor?'* (Lugs). 'Sonic warfare' is increasingly recognised as comprising a suite of technologies to impose dread, uncertainty, and confusion in opponents. In the prison, where those living and working in its spaces had little ability to curate their sensory environment, the regular, piercing indication that somewhere, something was 'kicking off' was an unwelcome intrusion on the person and day. The implications for erosion of perception of legitimacy as well as conflict between safety and security require little expansion here.

However, what was interesting at Midtown was the extent of a focus on the impact of the security alarm revealed it was negatively affecting wellbeing and was implicated in erosion of the sustenance of a sense of stability. The very thing the alarm was designed to do. In the context of Midtown at least – an unusually small, local prison, the significance of which should not be understated – the alarm was increasingly recognised as heightening a sense of precarity. In a prison space small

enough to ensure other means of signalling the need for additional staff back-up, the disruption and signalling 'trouble' the alarm represented outweighed its usefulness. Diane, a relatively recent addition to the resettlement team, identified the decline in use as a direct and systematic result of a change in leadership. This heralded a notably stable period for the prison which endured for much of my year-long research but was profoundly impacted by a variety of external pressures, amongst them the nationally enforced tobacco ban. Centring the sensory, specifically sound, as a means of scrutinising this relatively simplistic, but deeply ingrained, security measure revealed the intrinsically contradictory impact of this taken-for-granted aspect of prison life. Doing so uncovered the extent to which this could be viewed as deliberately damaging, but also how security measures themselves demand persistent analytical enquiry to guard against counter-productivity. Many factors came together to ensure a period of relative stability at HMP Midtown, and it would be a gross over-simplification to suggest the broad cessation of security alarms was more than a symptom. Nevertheless, in the case of HMP Midtown, at this specific point in time, the use of security alarms was surprisingly counter-intuitive.

Prison life is characterised by the predictably messy, multifarious complexities of humanity lived in the round. Added to this are the convolutions and contradictions presented by both constraining a group of people with complex needs and meeting them, of "looking after them with humanity". I have spoken at length about the murkiness and co-governance of a prison humming with the everyday give-and-take that characterises a "good" day. Absolute security, whatever that means, would be as undesirably oppressive as unrealistically attainable – a "chimera" (Zedner, 2003). What becomes clear when applying a sensory perspective though, is the extent to which the elision of security and safety obscures understanding. This obfuscation constitutes a regime of truth which occludes processes which ostensibly seek to induce and sustain both security and safety, despite these being distinct and sometimes conflicting objectives which can work to undermine the realisation of either. What I have aimed to do in this piece is offer a provocation to disrupt assumptions about how these concepts are operationalised, what acknowledging the competing and sometimes conflicting reality of how they are experienced does for our understanding and how we might apply this in future practice.

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Kate Herrity is a research fellow at Kings, Cambridge. A criminologist, she works at the boundaries and meeting places between fields and disciplines with a particular interest in sound and the sensory. The monograph of her PhD, an aural ethnography of a local men's prison: *Sound, Order and Survival in Prison* (Bristol University Press), won the BSC annual book prize and she has new co-edited volumes in production on *Sound and Detention* (Bloomsbury) and the *Routledge International Handbook on Sensory Criminology*.