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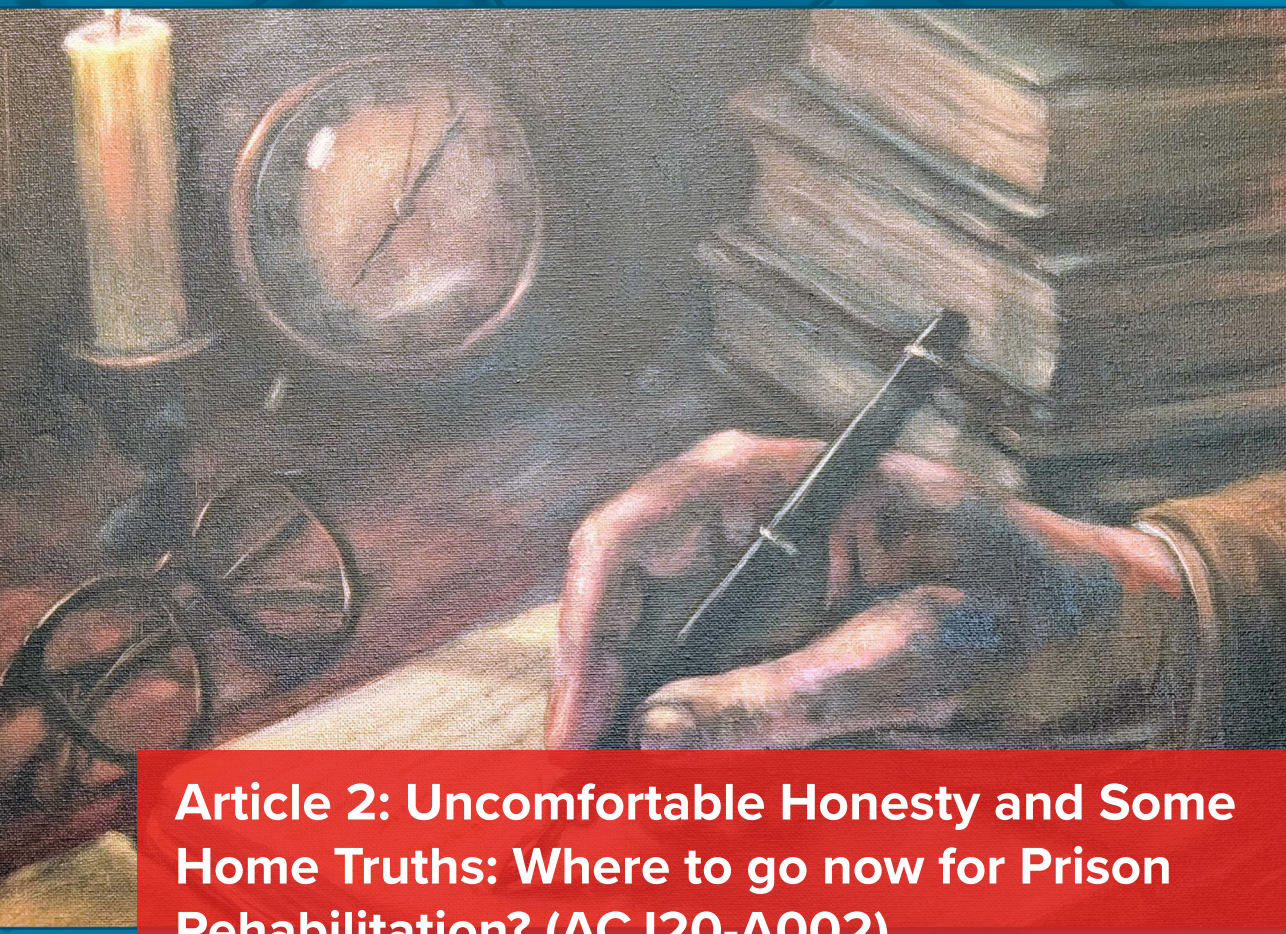

Article 2: Uncomfortable Honesty and Some Home Truths: Where to go now for Prison Rehabilitation? (ACJ20-A002)

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UNCOMFORTABLE HONESTY AND SOME HOME TRUTHS: WHERE TO GO NOW FOR PRISON REHABILITATION?

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Abstract

Recent reviews and inquiries have concluded contemporary prisons are ill-equipped to rehabilitate. These highlight just how often the conditions under which meaningful rehabilitative experiences can be provided are absent, drawing attention to the pervasive criminogenic impacts of prison conditions, cultures, and regimes. In this article I argue we should welcome these critiques, as well as do more to celebrate our successes. They serve to highlight the importance of the prison environment to rehabilitative success, as well as the need to collect better evidence about the necessary and sufficient conditions for change to take place.

Keywords: rehabilitation, prison, regimes, cultures, environments

Introduction

Some of the most pressing problems correctional agencies face in their efforts to rehabilitate have come to the fore in the most recent annual report of the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales. The Chief Inspector argued the widespread use of illicit substances makes "the possibility of rehabilitation unlikely" (Taylor, 2025 p.3), considering evidence that nearly one in three random prison drug tests had produced a positive result. It was clear to the Chief Inspector that illicit substance use destabilised prisons, resulted in increased violence, and occurred in response to regimes that were described as "impoverished". Education and work were, for example, judged to be 'not good enough' in three in every four of the thirty-eight inspected prisons, with more than two thirds found to be 'poor' or 'not sufficiently good' in terms of providing purposeful activity. Many of those who were interviewed reported they could simply not access the courses that were required as part of their sentence plans. The Chief Inspector further noted deficiencies in the quality of service provided, arguing there was 'too little' interaction between prison staff and those in custody, and many people struggled to receive assistance with even basic requests.

The Taylor (2025) report offers what can only be described as a confronting assessment of the current state of the prison service in England and Wales. It describes a system that appears ill-equipped to offer meaningful rehabilitative experiences and might even cause some to question the extent it is even serious about trying. The report has the potential to fuel cynicism about whether prison rehabilitation is even possible, let alone desirable – perhaps even offering encouragement to those who believe prisons should, first and foremost, exist to mete out harsh punishment and provide strong deterrence.

Reflections

In this article I want to share some personal reflections about the 'uncomfortable honesty' of the Chief Inspector in describing the current standing of rehabilitation in our prisons. The first of these is how strongly they resonate with my experience of prisons across Australasia, where I live and work. I was immediately reminded, for example, of a recent government review of the adult custodial correctional system in the State of Victoria in Australia (Victorian Government, 2022). This identified some similar challenges to those faced in England and Wales whilst also drawing attention to the negative culture that exists in too many prisons. It described, for example, a workforce that was divided – with some "genuinely committed to doing good case work" but others who were "resistant to or unwilling to meaningfully engage with people in custody" and "intent on dehumanising and exerting power and displaced control over people in custody" (p. 33). Numerous references were made in this report (based on consultations with over 1,500 individuals) to practices such as the excessive use of force and inappropriate strip searching which, when coupled with concerns about the transparency and fairness of prison disciplinary hearings, were identified as undermining trust and confidence in the Victorian correctional system. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Chief Ombudsman has also been critical of prison conditions, which were described as "frankly desolate and barren" (Boshier, 2022 p. 8) and how "time and again... [the Ombudsman] ... we find similar issues in prisons – long lock-up hours, lack of constructive activity, lack of access to clean bedding and clothes, lack of appropriate cultural provision, and a concerning use of force, seclusion, and restraint" (p. 9). My first reflection then is that England and Wales are certainly not alone in struggling to provide prison conditions in which rehabilitation is likely to occur.

I then started to wonder how correctional researchers, staff, and agencies might best respond to reports that highlight the shortcomings and failings of our prisons. I was reminded of the work of Stanley et al. (2024) who suggest that the most common response of government in response to critique is what they term intentional 'ignorance making', whereby their representatives actively seek to minimise and neutralise complaints, deflect criticism, and re-assert the legitimacy and goodness of the State. Stanley and colleagues illustrate how this can be achieved following investigations into abuse in State care through the use of a range of different strategies, including: i) the State claiming a lack knowledge of harms that have occurred; ii) offering only a narrow acknowledgement of survivors' identities and needs; iii) blaming others for causing harm; iv) engaging in bureaucratic and legal debates to deflect responsibility; v) presenting the problem in terms of the failings of individuals, rather than of systems; vi) confining abuse narratives to the past; vii) asserting new norms of partnership to suggest that problems have been resolved; and vii) imagining a decolonial future where harm does not occur. They argue this serves only to subvert open and honest conversation about the harms that have occurred, overlooks the needs of those who are affected, and avoids active discussion about whose duty it is to meet those needs, how things might be set right, and how to best reduce the chance of more harm occurring. In the context of prison rehabilitation my observation here is we also often fail to welcome 'uncomfortable honesty' about our shortcomings and, at times, respond by ignoring or disputing the conclusions, or perhaps even scapegoat those who are not really responsible for the conditions in which people in prison live and work. In fact, we work in a sector I would characterise as, at best, 'risk-averse' and, at worse, as enacting a culture of blame and/or a culture of silence when things go wrong that undermines accountability and, more generally, damages trust in our public institutions (see Butcher et al., under review).

One of the biggest problems with 'home truths', however, is that the pathway for improvement is rarely set out or obvious. There is also a very real risk the good work that happens every day in prisons around the world is simply discounted; we overlook the substantial progress that has been made in professionalising program delivery (Ramezani et al., 2022) and, importantly, forget to acknowledge just how much of a positive difference rehabilitation providers can and do make in the lives of so many. With some notable exceptions (see, for example, https://www.hiddenheroes.uk), it is fair to say we do not spend nearly enough time acknowledging these efforts, documenting our successes, and even learning from what has worked well. This is one area that the rehabilitation sector can clearly improve upon and would help to remind stakeholders just how ill-advised it would be to abandon rehabilitative policy and practice.

A reasonable starting point for improvement is nonetheless to acknowledge the failings of our current prison systems. There is a need here for greater honesty about the size of the task ahead which will inevitably involve acknowledging the criminogenic effects of custody - how any period of imprisonment will often only increase the risk of post-release failure (e.g., Cid, 2009). We might also engage much more critically with debates about the strength of the currently existing research evidence to show the impact of rehabilitation treatment programs on post-release success. I am thinking here about a series of recent meta-analyses (the so called 'gold standard' of evidence-based practice, see Berlin & Golub, 2014) that have examined the impact of the core Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principles on post-release outcomes. These have each concluded the current evidence-base for RNR is often either largely absent or methodologically flawed, whether this relates to prisons (Beaudry et al., 2021; Fazel et al., 2024), community corrections (Duan et al., 2022), or juvenile

settings (Bijlsma et al., 2022). While some of these meta-analyses have themselves been subject to methodological critique (e.g., Bonta & Gendreau, 2024), what transpires – at least from my reading of these studies – is the evidence is by no means as clear or as persuasive as we once thought or would like to have believed (see Day & Howells, 2002).

Well-designed criminogenic treatment programs that are delivered with high levels of integrity clearly do still have the potential to make a key contribution but are probably best viewed these days as a necessary but not sufficient condition for rehabilitative success. It is becoming increasingly apparent we need 'whole of prison' responses for rehabilitative change to occur. This is considering evidence showing how other types of programming, such as prison industries and education, will also often contribute (see Cordle & Gayle, 2025) and, to return to the observations of the Chief Inspector, prison regimes and cultures do matter when it comes to post-release success.

While we still lack the evidence needed to drive investment into those regimes, policies and operating procedures, activities, and staff training programs that can be expected to deliver optimal rehabilitation outcomes, work is underway in these areas (see Galouzis et al., 2022; 2023). van Ginneken and Palmen (2023), for example, have employed multi-level analysis methods to show how differences in the shared experiences of imprisonment are relate to rehabilitative change. They were able to show empirically how positive experiences of autonomy, peer relationships, and meaningful activities – but not prison conditions per se - were each consistently associated with lower reconviction rates in the Netherlands, with good staff-prisoner relationships (including experiences of procedural justice) also identified as important. Galouzis et al. (under review) have also recently reported Australian data showing exposure to different types of prison environment over the course of a sentence, along with stability in location (fewer movements and transfers) both make a substantive contribution to post-release success. This work nonetheless only highlights how little we currently know about the rehabilitative impacts of everyday prison management practices, such as security classification, the mixing of remand and sentenced people, the use of protection and segregation, responses to prison violence, and even the role that both families and prison officers must play. We also know far too little about the contribution of rewards and privileges systems to rehabilitative progress (Elbers et al., 2022) or even how to reliably measure positive change across the course of a sentence (Day et al., 2022). We do then need to collect data that demonstrates prison rehabilitation is possible and entirely feasible if we are to allay the concerns of both critics and cynics.

Where to now?

Correctional professionals will naturally ask 'what it is they can do now to optimise the rehabilitative potential of the prisons in which they work?' In addition to continuing to advocate for and support the implementation of high quality intensive criminogenic programs for eligible participants, the various inquiries and inspections that have been conducted consistently identify the need to provide more rehabilitative prison environments – whether this means strengthening the regime, improving the climate or culture of a prison, and/or providing basic services and better infrastructure.

We can all respond by doing what we can to put these conditions in place. This will inevitably involve reducing both the supply and the demand for illicit substances and by reducing violence (the key areas identified by the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales) and creating custodial environments that treat people "with dignity, respect, and prioritises rehabilitation and return to

community life" (Victorian Government, 2023 p. 563). This might also mean focussing our attention on improving procedural legitimacy to strengthen trust in the rehabilitative agenda (see Mann et al., 2019) and to eradicate when Narey (2019) referred to as a 'shameful culture of contempt' for the incarcerated and a 'tolerance for brutality'. Recognition of the importance of voice – or the degree to which people in prison are allowed to present their evidence, state their case, and explain their views – to better decision making is likely to be critical in this respect, as are efforts to ensure all staff understand the role that they have to play in 'assisting desistance' (De Vel Palumbo et al., 2023).

Concluding comments

In reflecting on some of the uncomfortable honesty and home truths contained in recent assessments of the rehabilitative quality of our current prison systems, there is a need to think more broadly about what a high-quality rehabilitative prison might look like. This can help to identify the prison programs and conditions required to rehabilitate. There is a need to set clear benchmarks to guide external assessment, reflection, and planning such that Cullen's (2007) vision of 'rehabilitation as the guiding paradigm for corrections' can finally be realised. To achieve this, we will need greater honesty about the limitations of our current rehabilitative efforts (to acknowledge our shortcomings and mistakes and celebrate our successes) whilst also continuing to collect the evidence to show when, where, and how rehabilitative change takes place. In this way we can at least try to earn the confidence of all stakeholders and to be seen as legitimate and authentic in our efforts to rehabilitate. A firm commitment from everyone is required in circumstances where the odds are stacked against us.

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Prof. Andrew Day (University of Melbourne; Flinders University, University of Waikato, Swinburne University, Australia) is an academic who has research interests in areas of offender rehabilitation, violent offending and youth justice. He is widely published in the fields of forensic psychology and criminal justice.