

Fred Emery

Freedom and Justice Within Walls

The Bristol Prison Experiment
and an Australian Sequel*

Bristol Local Prison

This experiment was carried out in the Bristol Local Prison in the period 1958–1960. The inmates were given greater opportunities to associate with each other in their leisure hours and an attempt was made to measure the effects of this change on the social atmosphere of the prison.

The Prison Commissioners invited the Tavistock Institute to participate in an experiment to test the applicability of the “Norwich scheme” to medium-sized local prisons. This invitation was accepted on the mutual understanding that the interests of both staff and inmates would be considered and that it would probably be impossible to measure the effects of the experiment on the reform or rehabilitation of the inmates.

The Norwich system involved two changes from the normal pattern of local prisons: a daily routine allowing inmates to spend most of their waking hours outside their cells in association with each other and a change in the officers’ responsibilities for inmates.

In its completed form, the study is very much like an iceberg: the part exposed to the light of day is only a fraction of the total, and is deceptively clear and pristine. The data presented could not have been interpreted and ordered but for the multitude of informal observations and conversations with staff and inmates. Methodologically, the key part in the study was played by the small randomly selected samples of officers and inmates. Long initial interviews with those men provided the orientation to, and entry into, the daily life of the

*This is a very abridged version of the book published by Tavistock Publications in 1970 under this title. It excludes the detailed discussion of the contradictions in the inmate/officer roles and summarizes the findings. Added to this is an extract from *Hope Within Walls*, a design study for a maximum security prison which explicitly sought to spell out the implications of the Bristol Experiment, and a note on what subsequently happened.

prison. Repeated interviews with the same men not only gave evidence of the psychological significance of what was going on, but also served to preserve the openness of the author's relation to the prison community. Thus, despite the considerable turnover in inmate population, it was possible to feel after a period of absence that one was returning home. Similarly, this set of relations provided the base from which one was able to explore what had, in fact, happened in disciplinary and other incidents of importance.

The sample of officers and inmates was selected with some care so that, although small, they provide a reasonably unbiased representation of what were judged to be the key groups for the purposes of this study. Amongst the uniformed staff, these are the basic grade officers who are still in the prime of their careers and, amongst the inmates, the ordinary prisoners other than those who tend to be in and out on very short sentences for such crimes as vagrancy.

In a sense these core samples are called upon to serve the various functions of a microscope, trace element and reagent. At the same time, an effort has been made to avoid basing any significant part of the argument on these data alone.

Although no conscious attempt has been made to avoid theoretical issues, this report has been overwhelmingly concerned with practical matters. It was created under the constant awareness that statements made in it might become the basis of decisions affecting real people in the here-and-now. This is not in itself unusual in the work of the Tavistock Institute. However, in this instance, I was more than ordinarily impressed with the fact that the issues involved suffering for the inmates and danger to life and limb for the staff—they were not simply those of more or less optimum conditions of welfare, profit or happiness. Of still greater import was the fact that prisons, of all present-day institutions, were felt to be notoriously lacking in those higher guiding purposes and conditions of day-to-day cooperation that normally allow a body of people to test and correct false counsel.

Insofar as the report might influence decisions made for a wide class of prisons, it has been necessary to omit those details that alone would depict Bristol Prison as a flesh-and-blood affair and to concentrate on the bare bones of oft-repeated behaviors that might tell a general story.

The study could not have been carried out unless we had been given a clear, unambiguous guarantee that neither praise nor blame would be attributed to identifiable individuals, whether staff or inmates.

Socio-Psychological Aspects of Prisons

In examining social systems, I have elsewhere (Emery, 1959) found it useful to inquire into what I have termed their "boundary conditions"—those aspects of

the institutionalized complex of men and material things that mediate between the social system and the wider setting. The key and distinctive boundary condition of a productive enterprise is its technological system. Through the technological system, the enterprise achieves those productive ends that relate it to society; through this arises the major set of independent limitations and requirements of the social system. Hence the appropriateness of the term "socio-technical system" for productive enterprises. The material apparatus of a prison clearly plays no such dominant role. Unlike a factory, the typical prison problem is not that of adapting the social system to technological modifications but of trying to adapt old material means to newly modified social systems.

The key to the difference would seem to be in the obvious and indisputable fact that one is primarily concerned with things, the other with human beings. The prison achieves its institutional ends only by doing certain things with and to its inmates. It must therefore give primary consideration to the psychological properties of the inmates, because these make some measures effective and others non-effective. These common psychological properties constitute the key boundary conditions of the prison—they are an essential part of the prison and yet they must, in large measure, be treated as a given, i.e., as existing and obeyed laws and influences that are independent of the wishes of prison administrations. The material means (cells, walls, workshops, etc.), the type of staff and the system of staff roles are devised, more or less appropriately, to achieve the institutional ends with the kind of inmates that are thrust upon them. Basically, the prison is one of the class of socio-psychological, as distinct from socio-technical, institutions. It differs, however, from hospitals—medical and mental—and from religious, educational and political institutions in that it is based on the premise of doing something against the wishes of its inmates, and usually against their interests.

If this interpretation is correct, then the key to an understanding of prisons should be the analysis of the psychological characteristics of the inmates and of the ways in which these are coped with by the staff.

The basic psychological fact about the inmates of a prison is that they are, with few exceptions, confined against their will in conditions of life not of their making and seen by them as depriving and degrading relative to the life they would be leading if free. The generality of this state of affairs arises from the social fact that the inmates (the "objects" handled by the institution) are defined by the State, not by any subordinate part of the society, as a morally inferior class of persons who constitute a cost to the society.

In all prison-like institutions there is, therefore, a body of officials concerned with confining, against their will, a much larger body of men. The staff are also impelled to maintain a detailed regulation of the internal life of the prison in order to prevent escape and carry out other institutional purposes such

as maintaining health of inmates, good order, production and rehabilitation. Even in the exceptional case where the goal of rehabilitation is a real factor in determining the ordering of internal life, one must still expect that the great majority of the inmates will be impelled by their own needs and beliefs to seek to create a different form of life. In this persisting conflict of wills over detention and the regulation of daily life, the staff can only maintain the superiority of their own wills through their possession of greater material force. Unlike moral persuasion, the influence of physical force only extends as far as the eyes and ears of its wielders and their allies, and is only as effective as the willingness of its wielders to use it. Without exception, all classes of man-made institutions for the detention of men have been unable to achieve complete power (Polanski, 1942). Except where solitary confinement is the norm, an inmate society with its own ends and culture has emerged within the interstices of the official order. In the common characteristics and interaction of these two ways of life, official and inmate, it has been possible to detect social and psychological processes of conflict and accommodation that are common to all these institutions (Abel, 1951; Adler, 1958; Foreman, 1959). The differences arise from differences in the strength of the conflicting wills and in the resources, personal and otherwise, that are available to the contending parties. In all cases, however, these institutions continue only so long as the official order of life predominates.

The study of the common psychological characteristics of prison inmates is thus, in the first instance, a study of those forces impelling the inmates towards greater control over their own affairs at the expense of staff control. While any listing of these forces must be incomplete, the following appear to be the major ones, commonly recognized in scientific studies of prisons.

By their usual standards of reference, the inmates perceive prison as relatively depriving. They see themselves as deprived of their normal freedom of access to pleasurable and interesting pursuits and to those things (alcohol, tobacco, gambling and sex) that play an important role in their culture in handling intra-personal tensions.

They are relatively deprived of the customary supports and behavioral settings for their usual living habits. In particular, they tend to find themselves with a circumscribed and impoverished "home territory" and a lack of personal possessions.

They find themselves deprived of the usual supports for their self-image. Materially, the clothes they wear are not their own and are not of their choice (although younger inmates continually seek to restyle them); they lack the supply of razor blades, brushes, cleaning materials, etc., to maintain a reasonable level of personal appearance.

Of at least equal significance, they are deprived of their usual freedom of association. Their prison associates are less likely to be acceptable as either a

private or a public definition of themselves than the men and, of course, women that they would normally seek out.

The inmates perceive the status they are accorded in prison as relatively degrading. Most are accustomed to social inferiority, but find that in prison they are treated as morally inferior to officers who are socio-economically their equals and are treated as morally no better than the other inmates (who will normally cover a wide range of criminality and depravity). The reception process for new inmates is basically conducted as a "degradation ceremony" (Garfinkel, 1955-56). If this initial lesson does not sink home, the staff can usually be counted upon to contrive further informal degradation rites until the inmate accepts, at least publicly, his inferior status. In the day-to-day life of the prison, the inmate finds himself ordered about, reprimanded and punished for the slightest misdemeanor, to a degree which is reserved in ordinary life for children and household animals.

These deprivations and degradations will tend to generate in the inmate a state of emotional tension. They will tend to see the deprivations and degradations as unjust and unwarranted. The deprivations experienced in prison are rather more complex and varied than could be legally pronounced as punishment and, hence, easily seen as more than "just desserts" for a crime committed; the degradations are not easily reconciled with the inmates' notion of the human dignity that the law is believed to protect. These tendencies will operate in the specific instance even when, as is usual, the inmate accepts that imprisonment and some deprivation are deserved. Whatever it is that characterizes the imprisoned criminals, it is not an absence of a sense of justice, not the absence of moral standards, despite the fact that in civil life they may readily commit an injustice or forget their morals. Like others, in the presence of what they consider to be injustice, the inmates will tend to experience "that sympathetic reaction of outrage, horror shock, resentment and anger" (Cahn, 1949).

While many of the deprivations and degradations of prison are not necessarily great in themselves (nor in themselves arouse strong or lasting feelings of injustice), they become significant because they occur so frequently, and in so many parts of prison life. The whole *prison milieu* assumes this character (Lewin, 1936). Even customs that are required for the inmates' own benefit acquire the connotation of alien imposed restrictions. The more these deprivations and degradations touch upon the inmate's self-image, the more the whole situation will take on this character. Where the prison milieu as a whole seems to be like this, the inmate will tend to feel tense (Sykes, 1958).

There is constant awareness that the deprivations and degradations are being imposed by men with whom they are in close daily contact. It is this sense of personally inflicted punishment that gives to the prison the character of strife and creates its pervading atmosphere of hatred. These two features in themselves induce in the inmates many of the behaviors that they customarily show

in prisons. On the one hand, “the exercise of every form of cheating and deceit occurs more readily in proportion as the situation acquires the character of strife. In such a strife, the individual may use, without hesitation, methods he would probably not employ in any but a hostile atmosphere” (Lewin, 1936). On the other hand, the hatred of officers, insofar as it emerges as a common feeling, provides a common denominator for joint inmate action that is otherwise lacking (Hoffer, 1952).

In hatred, the individual is drawn away from himself, “his weal and future.” What would be inconsistencies with respect to his own self-system may become consistent when cognition is centered upon the hated object or person. “Recentering” of the cognitive structure appears to be more effective, the more unified, unambiguous, vivid and tangible the “devil,” and is more likely to take place when there already exist tendencies to hate and reject oneself. Self-rejection may in the case of the inmates derive from social rejection. Moreover, such rejection is likely to lead the object of hatred to be seen as malevolent *vis-à-vis* the person, and the existence of a malevolent and powerful human agent will lead to efforts at alliance with others. The existence of hatred creates the psychological schism between inmates and staff that is a necessary prerequisite to the emergence and maintenance of a secret inmate world within the prison.

The above paragraphs point only to the *kinds* of pressure that may be expected to arise from the inmates of a closed prison. The *level* of inmate pressure against the staff appears to be largely influenced by the perceived gap between life “inside” and “outside” (relative deprivations and degradations).

The Prison

Bristol Prison is a Local Prison with an average population, during 1957–60, of approximately 360 men and juveniles. The only striking difference between it and other medium-sized Locals is its higher incidence of reported inmate offenses. In fact, for the four years prior to 1958, it had a rate of offenses higher than any other Local irrespective of size. This difference suggests a persistently higher level of tension between staff and inmates, but the difference is not so great as to warrant any *a priori* assumption of qualitative difference.

Overcrowding is for the inmates a primary characteristic of the Local Prison. They must expect to be more or less continuously exposed to, and forced to rub shoulders with, strangers, many of them violent and treacherous. They will find it very difficult to achieve any degree of privacy or to associate selectively with inmates of their own choosing. Persons come into Bristol Prison for all kinds of crimes—the majority for theft, burglary and similar

crimes against property, but there is always a substantial minority who have been imprisoned for fraud, violence or sexual offenses.

Regardless of crime committed, the Local Prisons hold all ordinary prisoners with sentences of less than five years, and they act as clearing-houses or temporary holding-places for all other classes of prisoner. Ordinary prisoners with sentences of more than five years spend up to the first 20 months in a Local.

At any time about half the population is serving sentences of eight months or less. Over a period of six months, about 40 percent of the original population can be expected to leave and their beds and work-places occupied by new inmates. This turnover inhibits the growth of an inmate society, but it does so rather less than would be expected of, say, a military unit with similar turnover. The Local Prison draws most of its inmates from the surrounding localities and, invariably, draws very heavily on one or two not-so-select suburbs of the major city in its catchment area. Hence, many come from the same area and know each other or have common acquaintances. Repeated and overlapping periods of imprisonment also help to maintain a core of stable inmate relations. Of at least equal importance to these personal networks is the continuity of inmate culture. The ease with which this is transmitted over time is, for the most part, due to its basic values being derived, even if in a distorted way, from the values prevalent in the working classes of the society. This culture is primarily oriented to coping with, and exploiting, the weakness of the individual staff, the more stable system of staff roles and rules, and the familiar environmental features of the prison. Unlike most cultures, the inmate culture does not arise from evaluations of men who are freely engaged in common endeavors, and consequently it does not define the characteristics and potentialities of the inmate group beyond a crude typing of inmate and staff roles and a cultural definition of inmate suffering and its conditions (i.e., ways of "doing bird"). It is a culture without heroes or villains because there are no "common causes." The features to which the inmate culture refer are fairly similar in all Local Prisons, and hence one can understand why "ordinaries," having had previous experience in another prison, are able so quickly to assimilate the local variations and relate themselves in a meaningful way to the pattern of inmate life.

"A" Hall* is largely populated by physically fit men, about 60 percent being between 25 and 40 years of age, but there are two constant minorities: one of

*"A" Hall is where the adult prisoners are kept. The adolescents are physically isolated in "D" Hall. The experiment also covered them but they are not the focus of the following analysis. It is enough to note that they experienced no transitional problems and that the general rate of incidents fell to 70 percent less than would have been expected under the old regime.

about 15 percent, of men over 50, chronically ill or physically handicapped; and the other, of similar proportion, of young men under 25. The over-forties are a very settled group with a rate of inmate offenses equal to only about one-fourth of the average, but among them are many who confront the staff with the sort of problems to be found in old men's homes. The under-twenty-fives form a marked contrast, with their sensitivity to any suggestion of being pushed around and their concern with proving their manliness. This minority tended to offend at twice the average rate for A Hall.

Thus, while relatively homogeneous with respect to classification, A Hall shows major differences according to age. It is believed that the age differential is the most significant of the ecological variables affecting the life of the inmates and staff control. Previous crime shows no major relation, and differences in prison experience tend to be related to age.

The Experiment

The aim was simple: to introduce periods of free association where no such periods had existed. The experimental aspect was how to do this without endangering security and good order.

The prison officers were overwhelmingly of the view that the prisoners would abuse any such reduction in close personal supervision. Detailed analysis of the records for the 60 weeks before the start of the experiment supported their views. Over that period there was a strong correlation between the frequency of incidents of indiscipline and looseness of supervision. Amongst inmates the majority view was that the association periods would increase their exposure to predatory and violent inmates and to arbitrary acts of spite by the officers.

The prison had been designed for living in the cells, not for association or communal eating. The lack of space meant that association could be provided for only half the inmates at a time, on alternate days. Nevertheless, the changes constituted a substantial increase in the space of free movement for the great majority of inmates. They were as follows:

- The narrow confines of the cells ceased to be the dominant feature of every day (assuming a 6:30 am to 9:30 pm day), 60 percent of an ordinary week would be spent in the cells. On association days under the new scheme the time spent in cells was reduced from 60 to 25 percent.
- Almost four hours were available every second day in which to mix with other inmates, with complete freedom of conversation and opportunities for engaging in leisure pursuits.
- The conditions also enabled men to form a wider range of friendships and

to sustain them with frequent open contact and joint participation in games.

- The environment itself changes its appearance for inmates, not simply representing an increase of something already offered. Association emerges as a farther area inside the prison, alongside the cell, the exercise yard and the work-places. Hence the psychological environment is more varied and less boring. With association, the range of behavioral settings in the prison more closely corresponds to that existing outside and hence should tend to reduce initial suffering.

The change also affected the inmate-officer relation. To a much greater extent those relations are open to the public view of other officers and inmates, and to a lesser degree private relationships handled at the cell door. During association the officer's role is reduced to that of a policeman assuring good order and the inmate does not have to be continually looking over his shoulder, as he would on exercise or in the workshop, to see that he is not "going too slow or too fast, idling, talking out of turn," etc. Although association is carried out under the eyes of the officers, there are fewer official requirements to trip up the incautious or indiscreet inmate and less possibility of an officer unjustly charging an inmate.

Results

The process of settling down took eight weeks after the introduction of the new system. A lot of organizational snags had to be ironed out, particularly with respect to communal eating arrangements and the different patterns of movement around the prison. The incident rate went up quite alarmingly. As one officer observed, "everything that was not nailed down was changing hands illegally." The senior staff were patient because there was a striking absence of serious incidents, i.e., those involving a challenge to the authority of an officer.

For purposes of analysis comparison was confined to the 64 weeks prior to the transitional period and the 64 weeks after. Before the change only 40 percent of inmates thought it was a good idea. After the change only 15 percent chose to remain in their cells. As one old recidivist said of that minority, "some queer ones and some real old jailbirds do their time behind locked doors because they don't know any other way. They have had too much of the old system." The association periods were periods of social activity. On average, about two-thirds of the inmates engaged in games they organized for darts, table tennis, dominoes and chess at both the noon and evening association. The older men tended to watch the games, read papers or listen to radio (there was no TV). Idle brooding or gossiping was minimal.

TABLE I Approximation to Poisson distribution of incidents/week

	<i>Before (64 weeks)</i>	<i>After (64 weeks)</i>
Domestic sector	$\chi^2 = 14.25, p < .02$	$\chi^2 = 2.62$ n.s.
Work sector	$\chi^2 = 6.49, p < .05$	$\chi^2 = 1.29$ n.s.

The changes in staff attitudes were even more striking. Before the change none of the officers thought that the other officers wanted association introduced. After the change only five percent thought that the others wanted to go back to the old system. (This was despite the fact that privately some 30 percent preferred the old system.)

Before the change only 30 percent of the officers thought that association would be good for the inmates (regardless of whether the inmates liked it or not). After the change there were no officers who thought that association was bad for the inmates. Before the change half of the officers thought that association would, as in the big American prisons, increase the power of "barons" and "toughs." After the change only five percent thought this had happened.

The most significant change was in the reduction of serious incidents in the domestic sector of prison life. Before the change one in three of all incidents could be expected to flare into a challenge to the authority of the officer involved (or be seen as such). After the change only one in seven did so. In the

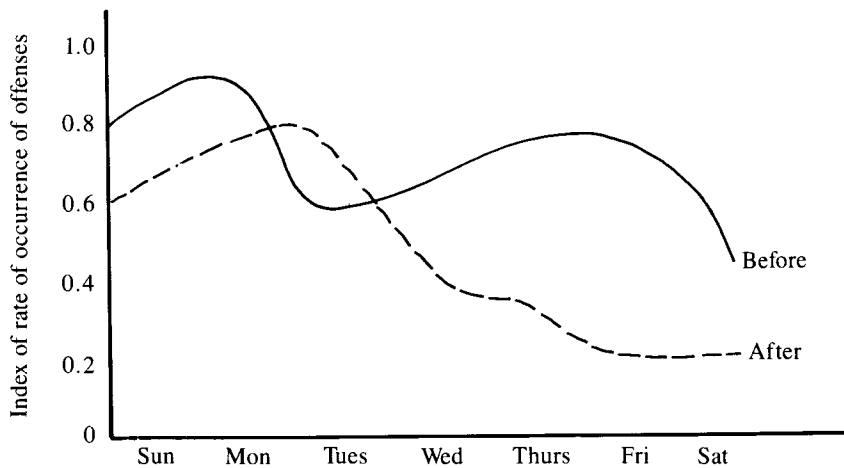


Figure 1. Weekly pattern of offenses—domestic sector. For both periods, a statistical comparison of the first and last half showed no significant difference.

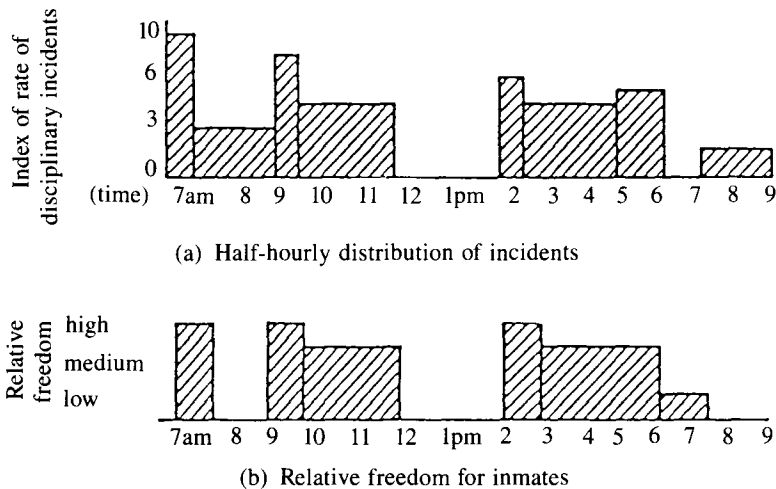


Figure 2. Half-hourly distribution of incidents and opportunities for inmate interaction before change, averaged for all weekdays in the “before” period. The pattern did not differ significantly between the first and last half of the “before” period, or among the days of the week for the entire period.

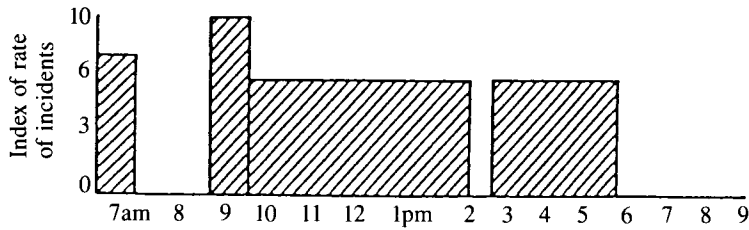
other part of prison life, the workshops, there was no change in what, in any case, was a relatively low rate of incidents (Table 1).

For incidents of all kinds, petty as well as serious, for the prison as a whole, work plus domestic sector, the rate declined (Figure 1). It was calculated that if incidents had occurred at the same rate as before there would have been 44 percent more than actually occurred.

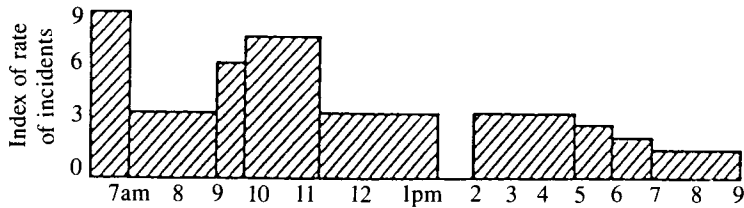
These outcomes were welcome but would not, in themselves, have led to the change in the attitudes of the officers and inmates toward extended association. They could have been interpreted as a relaxation of standards. As mentioned previously, officers had opposed the introduction of association because their experience was that “if you give the inmates an inch, they will take a mile.” Comparison of graphs (a) and (b) in Figure 2 shows that before the change the evidence supported the officers’ view. The level of incidents closely followed the occurrence of opportunities—the more freedom for inmate interaction, the higher the rate of incidents.

Our contention was that this connection was due to the level of tension in the prison, not to innate inmate propensities (nor, as some inmates alleged, innate officer propensities). As shown in Figure 3, the introduction of association eventually broke the nexus between “opportunities” and incidents.

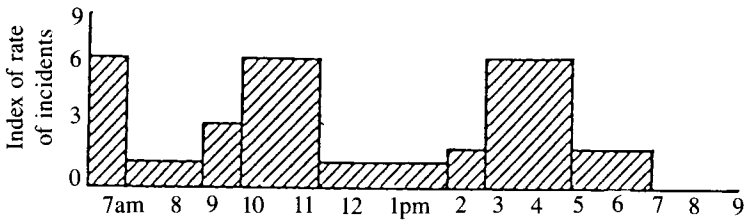
After the transition period the rate of occurrence of disciplinary incidents



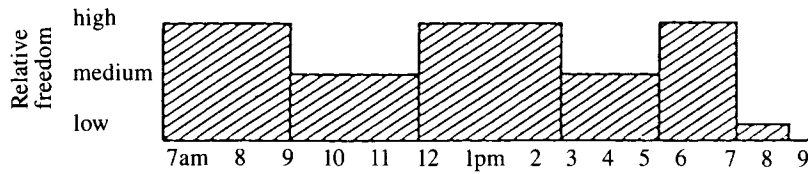
(a) Transition period



(b) First 14 weeks of "after" period



(c) Last 50 weeks of "after" period



(d) Relative freedom for inmates throughout transition and "after" period

Figure 3. Half-hourly distribution of disciplinary incidents and opportunities for inmate interaction after the changeover, averaged for all weekdays in each period. Only the 50-week period was long enough to permit a statistical test of the stability of the pattern. No significant difference was found between the first and last half of this period, nor between weekdays for the entire period.

ceased to correspond to the degree of freedom for the inmates (graphs [b] and [c] compared with [d]). Association was marked by a low level of incidents, exercise ceased to be a focal point and, apart from the early morning “slopping out,” most incidents occurred during work.

Supporting the evidence presented in the graphs is the absence of pilfering and vandalism of association materials. Up to January 1960, there were no signs of deliberate destruction or damage to tables, chairs, etc., and the games material was still completely intact. The only noticeable wear was no more than could be expected with continual, normal use. Similarly, there were no noticed cases of premeditated violence between prisoners.

One further finding needs reporting. At the time of the changeover, Bristol was the most tightly “screwed down” Local Prison in England. It had been so ever since it was called upon to hold the overflow from the big military prison to the south of it in 1945. This tradition was carried by a core of the officers. As a result, the patterns of officer reporting rates and of particular officers reporting particular inmates deviated markedly from the “poissonian distribution” one would expect if it was just a matter of chance which officer was on duty at the time and place of an offense. After the change, the patterns were not significantly different from a poissonian distribution: the game, known to inmates and staff alike as “chasey,” was over. Despite its name, that game was neither playful nor trivial. It was a potent and rather frightening process of enforcing informal sanctions.

The experiment was judged successful in increasing the space of free movement for inmates, despite the level of over-crowding that then prevailed. It was also successful in reducing the injustices to which inmates were exposed, and it significantly reduced the danger and stress in the working life of the officers. Bristol lost the dubious honor of being the tightest Local in England, and even ten years later could only make fifth or sixth place.

An Australian Design for a Maximum Security Prison: Hope Within Walls

(with Merrelyn Emery and Cy de Jago)

When the Western Australian government decided that a new maximum security prison was needed the Director of the Corrective Services Department and the architect did a world tour of modern maximum security prisons. This revealed several disquieting facts: