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“Do your whack”: Investigating the needs and experiences of young men imprisoned in Northern Ireland

Dr. Conor Murray

Introduction

Across the UK, reports and inspections have continuously illuminated the ongoing concerns relating to the high levels of violence, self-harm and reoffending experienced by young men in prison, particularly in comparison to their older male counterparts. These issues are exacerbated by the high levels of lock-up and overcrowding all prisoners are subjected to (MoJ, 2016; also see McGuire, 2018; Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons [HMIP], 2018).

Within Northern Ireland (NI), Hydebank Wood Secure College (hereafter Hydebank) is responsible for imprisoning young men between the ages of 18 and 24. In 2011, a Prison Review Team (PRT) report labelled Hydebank, and the young men imprisoned there, the “forgotten group in the Northern Ireland prison system” (p.70). The Criminal Justice Inspection NI (CJINI) (2013) had also raised concerns relating to prisoner safety in Hydebank due to the levels of violence, remarking that no lessons had been learnt from previous deaths in custody.

In an attempt to address some of the criticisms the NI Prison Service (NIPS) trialled a range of social enterprises; ‘Working Out’ programmes; and converted Hydebank from a Young Offender Centre into a ‘Secure College’. An unannounced inspection in 2016 found the environment within Hydebank ‘encouraging’, noting that the prison had improved in three of the four healthy prison tests (CJINI 2016). However, the report suggested that Hydebank was still some distance away from achieving its full aims. In particular, inspectors found that: more young men than previously stated that they felt unsafe within the institution; there was an increased availability of drugs and weak efforts to limit drug supply; a prevalence of bullying and intimidation; and inadequate mental health provisions. Furthermore, there had been “no recorded discussions about sexual orientation” or “recognition of the problems of homophobia” (CJINI, 2016: 33).

This briefing paper discusses the findings of in-depth research conducted in 2016 into the experiences and needs of young men aged 18-24 imprisoned in Hydebank and examines the implications for policy. It included nine months of participant observation within the institution; the researcher also participated in educational classes, recreational activities and association. Twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with young men and six interviews with prison officers and support staff.

Community context

As research has shown (see Reavis et al., 2013; Welfare and Hollin, 2015) it is often children and young people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences, such as neglect and abuse, who end up in prison. Within NI, many young men have grown up in “hostile and dangerous environments”, experienced high levels of “poverty, educational under-achievement, and social marginalization” (Ashe and Harland, 2014: 755-756). They may also have been exposed to violence and have had unwelcome interactions with paramilitaries (Harland and McCready, 2014). An estimated one third of the young men in Hydebank have literacy problems, and around half have numeracy problems as well as low levels of employability and “disappointingly high” recidivism rates (Independent Monitoring Board [IMB], 2017: 47).

NI continues to have highest rates of poverty throughout the UK (JRF, 2019) and communities remain segregated in the aftermath of conflict (Horgan, 2011). The young prisoners who participated in this study expressed concerns about marginalisation and had a lack of optimism for the future:

“[some young men] just want to stay out [of prison], but just can’t live out there you know. No job for them, no money in their pocket, so they go put money in their pocket the wrong way... there’s just no opportunities

there... it's just in and out, in and out. Some of them boys I've seen been in five, six times in the time I've been in once". (Brendy¹)

Given their marginalised community status, some of the young men considered that Hydebank was the best place for them to be: *"some people prefer it in here"* (Zack). Life in the community often meant unemployment, financial distress, homelessness, threat from paramilitary organisations and substance abuse concerns. Although their time in Hydebank could be deeply troubling, it provided a form of stability, food and a place to sleep at night. The key challenges are summarised below.

The normalisation of violence

It was evident that violence had become normalised for many of the young men in Hydebank. The history of over forty years of violent conflict has affected the everyday lives of young people, and in particular boys and young men from working-class and inner-city areas (Harland and McCready, 2015). Many of the young men in Hydebank had regular interactions with paramilitary organisations prior to entering the prison. Sixteen of the twenty-six interviewees had been victims of violent attacks from paramilitary organisations, including being shot, beaten by sewer rods, had breeze blocks dropped on them to break bones, and being violently attacked by groups of men.

These issues were exacerbated within the prison context. While there had been a 70 per cent reduction in recorded violence within Hydebank, in 2016 the CJINI reported that indicators on violence were not accurate or being monitored sufficiently; "that incidents of bullying were not being recorded" (CJINI, 2016: 23); and that "young men reported that they felt more unsafe than at the last inspection" (CJINI, 2016: 12). These issues correlated with the findings from this study. The young men spoke of regular violent encounters and the discrepancy between the high levels of violence within the institution – discussed by the young men – and reduced recorded levels of violence, suggests that certain aspects of imprisonment were not being reported.

The combination of their experiences of violence while growing up and within Hydebank resulted in

a normalisation of violence. Interviewees spoke of fighting as routine, with some saying they fought on a daily basis or more. Others spoke of being bitten, stabbed in the face and doused with boiling water and sugar in the institution:

I had my back turned to him and he chucked a flask around me... [boiling water] with sugar in it, it lifted all sorts of skin off my back... the t-shirt and all sticks [to you] and then you have to tear it off. It's bad like, I'm all scarred down there. (Noel)

The Hydebank regime

During the fieldwork period, approximately 42 per cent of the young men in Hydebank were on the 'enhanced regime'² on three residential units in Cedar: C3, C4 and C5. Young men progressed onto, and through, these landings by complying with the prisons rules and regulations, including passing regular drug tests. Each higher numerical landing provided more privileges and incentives, such as extra visits, increased weekly expenditure and longer association time. The more compliant prisoners moved to Cedar. With only two houses used to accommodate the young men, all the least compliant and drug using young men were filtered to the lowest levels of enhancement in Beech. It was extremely difficult for them to progress off these landings, as there was reportedly a higher presence of drugs there and more chance of becoming involved in altercations.

Inter-prisoner relationships and hierarchies of power within Hydebank were largely shaped by the area the young men derived from in NI. During the fieldwork period a relatively large proportion of the young men from the 'Bower' (pseudonym) estate were held on the lower landings in Beech House. While the 'Progressive Regimes and Earned Privileges Scheme' (PREPS) serves to individualise prisoners by introducing individual privileges and benefits to those who conform to the Hydebank regime, individualising prisoners is difficult to achieve if a group of individuals possess strong bonds prior to entering the institution. It was evident that the nature of the regime and institutional design of the prison were directly influencing the power dynamic within the prisoner group. The 'Bower Hoods' reportedly had

a strong control over the informal market and were collectively responsible for a lot of the bullying and intimidation within the prison.

Experiences of time

Young men regularly referred to their time in Hydebank as their ‘whack’, as in “the big whack of time you have been given” (Aaron). The research identified three key themes associated with experiences of time: ‘Heavy-whacking’; time and hierarchy; and the ‘Young-Elders’.

‘Heavy-whacking’

Many of the young men in Hydebank portrayed identities that suggested that they were not struggling with the rigours of time in prison, that it was a ‘gift’, ‘easy’ and not a problem for them. It was clear that they had learned to mask their emotions. Those that were deemed unable to ‘hack the whack’ of time they had been given, were labelled ‘heavy-whackers’ by the other young men. They were often the subjects of jokes and even bullying by other prisoners:

*B*ang, kick, whallop [their cell door], they just can’t do their time. Eejits. People are called ‘heavy-whackers’ because they can’t do their time, they’re scared [And what about someone who can hack their time?] Kick their feet back, put the TV on, watch TV, smoke a few rollies. (Charles)

Some young men were also subject to what was called ‘smoking the electric’. This appeared to be a regular occurrence in Hydebank, whereby a few young men would clandestinely enter into the victim’s room while it was unattended and cover one of their plugs (usually the TV plug), with shower gel, plug it into the wall and turn the switch on. This act usually certified that all the electricity in the victim’s cell went off for around 24 hours until the prison fixed it. On some occasions, the blown fuse could cause the electricity on the whole landing to go out. For the perpetrators, the motivation was supposedly entertainment; the victim was usually targeted for their perceived vulnerability and the perpetrators would find it amusing listening to the victim crying or calling for staff throughout the night. On the occasions where the electricity went out on the whole landing it served as a method of certifying

the perpetrator’s dominant position amongst the young men, as it highlighted the contrast between how the more dominant perpetrators could cope easily locked in their cells without electricity and the ‘heavy-whackers’ struggled.

Time and hierarchy

The length of time spent in the prison represented how serious an offender an individual was: the longer a young man had been in prison the more serious his crime; and the amount of times he had been in prison indicated how committed a ‘criminal’ he was perceived to be. In many circumstances, this was synonymous with the respect the young men held among the other inmates and as a result contributed to their position within the prisoner hierarchy. There were various avenues for reaffirming this status or promoting it to the other young men. In terms of Hydebank as an institution’s contribution to this, all the young men possessed identity cards detailing their name and prisoner number. These identity cards were kept on lanyards and were used for identification for workshops, education, the gym and so on. The significance was the public display of the young men’s prisoner numbers, which were discussed frequently. The lower the number, the longer the young men had been in the institution. Some of the young men were proud of this, and talked about it boastfully, for the card had become a badge of honour, “when I leave here I’ll probably be the lowest number” (Leo).

Hydebank as an institution, wittingly or unwittingly, contributed to the discussions between the young men surrounding time and hierarchy. Firstly, it gave ascending prisoner numbers to the young men, and secondly, it made them visible for all young men via the lanyards. This was supported by the inclusion of prisoner numbers in graffiti throughout the prison. Through graffiti, the young men publicly displayed their accumulation of time within the institution. In most ‘mentions’/‘tags’ the young men stated their name or nickname, the area they were from, their prisoner number, entry date, exit date and the amount of times that they had been in prison.

The ‘Young-Elders’

Contrasting the filtering of the least compliant young men to the lowest levels of enhancement in

Beech (discussed earlier), a number of young men progressed to the most enhanced landing in the prison C5. They had significantly different ‘identities’ to the wider group of young men. For example, they viewed themselves primarily as ‘fathers’, ‘employees’ or ‘fiancés’ - identities that may be considered traditional in the wider social context, but were rare in Hydebank.

However, while some ‘alternative’ identities in prison can become subordinated, “largely suppressed” (Abrams et al., 2008: 22) or “excluded” (Crewe, 2014: 397); this group of young men were largely respected within Hydebank’s prisoner society. This was partly due to the discourses in the prison that associated time spent in prison with status and respect. Drawing upon the concept of prison elders, this group was labelled by the author as the ‘Young-Elders’.

It was not the case that the identities portrayed by the Young-Elders, such as father, earned respect from the prisoner society, as many of the least compliant prisoners in the institution were fathers. Nor was the kind of compliant behaviour that Young-Elders exhibited an automatic source of respect, as others who did try to comply were stigmatised. Discussions in the prison surrounding crimes committed, sentence length and time spent in prison, meant that the Young-Elders were excused from the daily tests that the other young men were subjected to. In the eyes of the other young men, the Young-Elders had progressed beyond the point of examination and their respect was unquestioned because of the nature of their crimes and/or the length of time they had spent in prison:

At the end of the day if you look at us as a group, we are in here for some serious shit, I mean if you look at this landing we have over a hundred years between us (nine on the landing) so they can’t look at us like that. (Gerard)

Sources of vulnerability

“Fear, anxiety, loneliness, trauma, depression, injustice, powerlessness, violence and uncertainty are all part of the experience of prison life” and are sources of vulnerability for prisoners (Liebling and Maruna, 2005: 3). Sources of vulnerability become

more challenging when the demonstration of emotions is seen as a sign of weakness – as was found to be the case in Hydebank – something that may be preyed upon and perceived to be associated with ‘femininity’.

Such wide ranging was the range of sources of vulnerability in Hydebank it would not be possible to cover them all within this brief and it therefore focuses on the three discussed most frequently by the young men: health, both physical and mental; self-harm, including suicide; and drugs.

Mental and physical health

Using the World Health Organisation definition of health, the majority of young men were not in good health upon entrance to the prison, 13 per cent reportedly had a physical health problem and 51 per cent reported having a mental health problem (CJINI, 2016). A large number expressed concerns in relation to homelessness, financial worries and suicidal feelings.

While the CJINI (2016) report found that GP’s could be seen within a reasonable timescale, the inspection found that only 23 per cent of the young men believed that the quality of health care was ‘good’, much less than the average UK prison comparator of 55 per cent. The CJINI concerns were reiterated in the interviews from this project:

*The health care is the biggest load of shit so it is; those doctors do nothing for you.. I have went to the doctors a few times with different problems and they have done f*** all. (Alfred)*

The issue of mental health difficulties was a significant concern for both young men and staff. The CJINI (2016) report identified that 63 per cent of the young men in Hydebank were suffering from emotional well-being or mental health problems (compared to their 26 per cent comparator). They believed support in the area was insufficient:

Put it this way I have been in here three and a half years and I still haven’t seen mental health. (Ryan)

Additionally, there was confusion amongst the young men in regards to who provided mental health support in the prison. Many believed Start 360 (a

voluntary organisation working in the prison) were the principal providers of mental health support. However, Start 360's primary role was to provide mentoring, moral and practical support (Start 360, 2018).

The CJINI (2016) reported a poor strategic approach to supporting young men with mental health issues; poor procedures in place for the recording of actions taken to combat complex longer-term problems and a failure to improve self-harm and suicide policies (CJINI, 2016).

In addition to the above difficulties, the research showed that many of the young men were reluctant to seek health support fearing that this would be seen as weak and 'unmasculine'. Some refused to contact health support for serious injuries; for example, Daniel spoke of repeatedly refusing help for a serious back injury until another young man sought it for him: *"I didn't even want to say anything. I hate being unable to do something"*. Many of the young men said that emotions could not be shared or discussed out of fear of bullying and victimisation:

Some people would probably laugh at you so they would you know try and make fun of you probably try and make you even worse. (Thomas)

Self-harm and suicide

There was a high prevalence of self-harm in Hydebank. It was often cited as a method of coping with stress, forgetting problems, and blocking emotions. The young men spoke of the relief and release self-harm provided in relation to coping with imprisonment:

It releases everything from you man, it's just like breathing out smoke whenever you smoke. Like if you smoke a roll-up, breathing it in and then letting it all out, once you cut you let it all out, it's lethal [amazing]... as soon as I cut and I see the blood coming out I know everything is alright... see whenever you feel like that, that's just your way of coping. (Adam)

Although there were no incidents of suicide within Hydebank during the study, there was one incident post-prison, where one of the interview participants tragically took his own life within the first week of release. In his interview, he discussed his need for

support for mental health, in particular depression.

Drugs

There was undoubtedly a drug problem in Hydebank. Indeed, when questioned 'what the main problems facing young men in Hydebank' were, the majority of participants responded drugs:

- *Number one is drugs.* (Craig)
- *Drugs is a big problem to tell you the truth.* (Henry)
- *Probably addiction.* (Alfred)
- *The biggest problem all round has got to be with drugs I think, drugs is a big, big thing.* (Prison Support Staff C)
- *Drugs. Drugs is a major, major issue here, mental health yes, but to me the drugs would be paramount.* (Prison Support Staff B)

Bar heroin, most illicit drugs appeared to be available in the prison, including cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis. Legal highs or psychoactive drugs were also common in the prison. Research identifies that psychoactive drugs can exacerbate existing psychopathological and social problems, increase the risk of psychotic episodes and paranoia (Wheatley et al., 2015) and can have unpredictable and life-threatening effects (CJINI, 2016). However, regardless of the health dangers associated with 'legal highs' some young men spoke about using some psychoactive substances 'strategically' as they did not show up on drugs tests:

If you fail a drugs test you go to adjudication (and) a lot of negative things can happen. Whereas legal highs actually don't show up on drugs tests... Guys would smoke legal highs as cannabis substitutes to get the same hit as cannabis... they are thinking about their consequences to their life in jail, but they are not thinking about consequences to their health. (Gerard)

Other common concerns

There were three principal sources of complaint that affected the young men's experiences of prison: the food; hygiene; and lockdowns ('firewatch').

Food: the institution had taken some measures to address the food concerns. It had worked with dieticians from a local health and social care trust to ensure that all prisoners had five portions of fruit and vegetables daily and that there was hot lunch and dinner options every day. The CJINI (2016) inspectors reported that the standard of the food had improved since the last inspection. However, only 14 per cent said the food was either 'good' or 'very good'.

The food is, I love the kitchen workers, I love the kitchen staff, but the food is rotten... It is all precooked and kept on a hotplate, like that's not good. (Aaron)

Hygiene: As well as the standard of the food, the young men also frequently complained about the cleanliness:

Dirty man, pure dirty. Cells destroyed, ruined, all the names and graffiti everywhere, rats up and down the place. Dirty place man. (Henry)

A clear product of the standard of cleanliness in the institution was the presence of mice in Hydebank. Young men who spoke of mice coming into their rooms at night, eating through wrappers of their food and other regular interactions with them. The author witnessed mice in the prison during the fieldwork period.

'Firewatch': The IMB (2017) highlight that the level of staff absences within Hydebank was consistently high and directly linked this to the number of lockdowns ('firewatch') the young men were subjected to. They regularly complained about the large amount of time they spent on 'firewatch' and the unpredictability of its implication. IMB (2017) also note the negative impact that these significant periods of lockdown had on prisoners who were unable to speak to Samaritans during these periods and that 'firewatch' "hampered the provision of, and access to, healthcare" (CJINI, 2016: 39).

Summary

These findings illuminate young men's needs and experiences of imprisonment within Hydebank. It was evident that many of these attitudes and experiences were shaped around restrictive notions of what it meant to be a man. Many attempted to

express masculinities that were characterised by violence, dominance and dismissal of emotion. This undoubtedly contributed to the level of violence within the institution with many of the young men believing that to be a man you are "expected to fight" (Carl); fighting had become a culturally approved way of achieving masculinity. Other experiences were also directly affected by these perceptions, particularly in relation to health. The perception, held by many of the young men, that health related issues – mental or physical – were a sign of weakness contributed to the levels of self-harm and drug use, as the young men attempted to cope with it themselves.

Other issues that affected young men's experiences related directly to the regime within Hydebank. The implementation of the PREPS system contributed to a gang like culture within the prison, with many of the young men coming from the same area being held on the lowest levels of enhancement in Beech house. This made it hard for them to progress away from those they were friends with in the community and contributed to bullying and intimidation of those not part of the clique. In addition, the large amount of time spent on 'firewatch' and the unpredictability of its implementation contributed to feelings of powerlessness and loneliness.

Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

The following is a listing of recommendations, and implications, for policy and practice that have derived from the research:

- Building upon comments made in the CJINI (2016), Hydebank should work towards addressing the perceived normality of violence amongst young men, implement a gender-specific strategic approach to the reduction of bullying and work towards providing a safe prison environment for the young men.
- Develop and implement mechanisms to identify prisoners that may form neighbourhood-based peer groups; identify the circumstances in which issues relating to these groups are likely to arise; and implement pre-emptive methods to reduce the number of related issues/risks.
- Contemplate the replacement of ascending prisoner numbers with randomised prisoner

numbers.

- Continue with the good practice in developing positive identities on C5.
- Use the existence of the respected positive identities found on C5 as the foundation for challenging perceptions of masculinity in the wider group of young men.
- Health promotion activities could be delivered to the young men to develop relationships with, and perceptions of, healthcare staff.
- An informative document (using images) or a video could be provided to young men upon arrival at the prison to detail the varying health (physical and mental) services that are available to the young men; and to provide clarity as to what services are offered by each organisation.
- Young men should have an increased range of therapeutic interventions available to them to cope with mental health issues.
- Hydebank should consider the introduction of 'Listeners' service.
- Consider measures to significantly reduce level of drugs within the prison.
- Consider that legal drugs – that are potentially more unpredictable and can have longer lasting adverse effects – may be being used as substitutes for cannabis.
- All living conditions should be clean, tidy and hospitable.
- Continue to work towards creating a more healthy prison menu in collaboration with the young men.
- Reduce the amount of 'firewatch' young men are subjected to; and be more consistent and informative in relation to its implementation.
- Recognise many of the gendered barriers that stop young men from talking about health (physical and mental), such as perceptions of

weakness.

- Consider the delivery of identity-focused programmes that inspire self-confidence and self-esteem but also provide an insight into masculinity and how it can affect young men's behaviour.

Footnotes:

¹ All the names of the participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

² In line with the 'Progressive Regimes and Earned Privileges Scheme' (PREPS), throughout their sentence, prisoners were on either 'basic', 'standard' or 'enhanced' regimes that offered different levels of financial incentives, visits and out of cell time. All prisoners entered the prison at 'standard' and could be reduced to 'basic' through adverse reports or could progress to 'enhanced' after 6 weeks 'good behaviour' and passing drugs tests.

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