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'Covid-19 has caused a dramatic change to prison life'. Analysing the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the pains of imprisonment in the Scottish Prison Estate

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The purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the impact of COVID-19 in the Scottish Prison Estate. During the 2020 lockdown in prison in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all face-to-face research was paused. In response to this methodological challenge, a participatory correspondence methodology was designed, enabling project participants to influence the direction of this project through suggesting research questions. The main project findings relate to the analysis of ways in which the COVID-19 enhanced the pains of imprisonment for participants, exploring the challenges that the participants faced in relation to communication, feelings of heightened isolation and detachment from family, friends and the normal rhythms of life in prison. Analysis of the letters received as part of this study provides unique insights into the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic in custody has added an additional layer or enhancement to pre-pandemic pains of imprisonment, increasing the 'tightness' 'depth' and 'weight' of participants time in custody.

Key Words: COVID-19 in prison, the pains of imprisonment, everyday life in prison, institutionalization, Scotland, correspondence methodology

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses finding from a novel project providing insights into the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of people in custody (Maycock and Dickson 2021). It is hoped that this project constitutes a meaningful way for people in custody to share their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, complementing emerging research relating to the impacts of COVID-19 within prison settings (e.g. the Scotland in Lockdown study [https://scotlandinlockdown. co.uk/] and the Prison Reform Trust CAPPTIVE project). The study used a correspondence (letter writing) method for data collection, with data subsequently analysed in Nvivo 12. Correspondence methods are a relatively underused form of data collection, well suited to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic where face-to-face research was impossible in the Scottish and many other prison jurisdictions.

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This paper explores the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the pains of imprisonment for the participants in this study. Sykes outlined five deprivations constituting the 'pains of imprisonment', later developed by Cohen and Taylor (1972), Goffman (1961) and others to analyse multiple, overlapping and painful implications of imprisonment. Exploring responses to the letters, there emerges a further deepening of the pains of imprisonment through the COVID-19 pandemic in prison through increased detachment from life on the 'outside' and associations with staff and other prisoners on the 'inside'. Alongside considering the COVID-19 pandemic as a deepening of the pre-pandemic pains of imprisonment, this paper also considers the ways in which the pandemic and the associated lockdown in prison constitute a further 'tightness', 'depth' and 'weight' associated with imprisonment, expanding Sykes initial analysis. The study is contextualized within the literature relating to the pains of imprisonment and the impacts of COVID-19 in prison and concludes by considering the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a new and/or additional layer or manifestation of the pains of imprisonment originally outlined by Sykes and the extent to which the current pandemic might continue to influence everyday life in prison.

The Scottish Penal Context and the COVID-19 pandemic in Scottish prisons

The prison system in Scotland is distinct and devolved from the system in England and Wales. The Scottish prison estate is composed of 15 prisons located across Scotland, all run as a uniformed service, two of which are privately run. According to the latest Scottish Prison Service (SPS) figures, the prison population in 2017–18 was 7,464, which equates to 135 per 100,000, the second highest imprisonment rate in western Europe (only just behind England and Wales). Penal policy and criminal justice policy more widely have been led by the Scottish Government since devolution in 1999 (McNeill 2016; Morrison 2016; Maycock *et al.* 2018; Brangan 2019). There have been some reports of both cases and deaths due to COVID-19 amongst both staff and inmates and outbreaks in particular prisons (such as HMP Barlinnie). Similar to many other jurisdictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Scottish prisons went into lockdown in March 2020. The lockdown in Scottish prisons has resulted in many aspects of prison life being paused at this point, such as prison gyms and education department, chaplaincies being closed and all family visits stopped, although subsequently virtual visits have been taking place. Aspects of the lockdown have been eased and reintroduced from March until the time of submission (February 2021), when many elements of the lockdown introduced in March 2020 have remained.

The pains of imprisonment

Sykes (1958) famously outlined five deprivations constituting the 'pains of imprisonment', later developed by Goffman (1961), Cohen and Taylor (1972) and others to analyse multiple painful implications of imprisonment. In relation to the five deprivations outlined by Sykes,

> I have argued, five in number and involve deprivation or frustration in the areas of social acceptance, material possessions, heterosexual relationships, personal autonomy, and personal security. From the viewpoint of particular inmates, some of these problems may bite more deeply than others, but in general these problems constitute a common set of pains or rigors of confinement to which almost all prisoners must respond or adapt themselves. (Sykes 1958: 106)

Of these five pains, or deprivations, personal autonomy emerges as further subverted by the COVID-19 lockdown in Scottish prisons. More recently, a number of studies have suggested an evolution of the pains of imprisonment, including elements of 'softening' and 'deepening'

of the experience of imprisonment (Crewe 2007; 2009; 2011), alongside the continuation of many of the pains that Sykes originally identified (Crawley 2005; Ugelvik 2014). Sykes work has been used to analyse the particular experiences of diverse groups of people within prison, including women (Crewe *et al.* 2017) and transgender people (Maycock 2020), but until now this has not been used to analyse the influence of the COVID-19 or any other pandemic. In a recent paper analysing the wide influence of Sykes's theory, Haggerty and Bucerius state:

> The 'pains of imprisonment' is a central analytical contribution from what is one of the most influential scholarly monographs ever written on prisons. (Haggerty and Bucerius 2020: 1)

The pains of imprisonment Sykes and many others have subsequently explored is a means of exploring the 'deprivations or frustrations of prison life' (Sykes 1958: 64). This paper is unique in using this analytical lens to consider the particular deprivations or frustrations that people in custody have experienced as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic within prison settings. Across themes emerging in the letters analysed in this study, around increased isolation, increased deficits in information and reflections of lockdown, it is evident that COVID-19 has enhanced the pains of imprisonment for the participants in this study. Within the context of reforming Sykes' concept of the pains of imprisonment for the contemporary prison experience, Crewe (2011a) developed the linked concepts of 'tightness', 'depth' and 'weight'. These emerged as recurring themes in the letters analysed, although participants view such concepts as taking new forms and reaching new depths during the COVID-19 lockdown.

COVID-19 in prison settings

Currently, the literature relating to the impact of COVID-19 in prison settings is largely health related; until now, the literature largely has not attended to the implications of the pandemic on those living and working within prison settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has been called the worst public health crisis for a generation (Gatera and Pavarini 2020; Heymann and Shindo 2020; Lai *et al.* 2020), which has resulted in a number of measures, including social distancing and a lockdown measures within prison settings. The literature on COVID-19 in prison settings is emerging at the time of writing, with new studies published all the time, a review of the available studies resonates with issues impacting on wider prison research, within which research has tended to happen *to* and not *with* people in working and living custody (Fine *et al.* 2003; Fine and Torre 2006).

The current state of the emerging literature around COVID-19 within the prison setting largely repeats a recurring narrative. Mostly discussed in the context of the United States or China, much of the literature focuses on the key messages and themes that COVID-19 represents in the carceral setting, namely, that the virus presents a threat to prison populations because of the inescapable proximity of those within the 'total institution' of prison (Okano and Blower 2020; Vose *et al.* 2020). As prisoners, and staff, are in close proximity for the majority of their daily routines—a feature of Goffman's (1968) 'total institution' concept—the transmission of the disease is much harder to prevent in these settings.[1] The closed environment is a major factor in the spread and rapid transmission of the disease, the outbreak on the Japanese cruise ship Diamond Princess in February perhaps representing the first example of

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1 It is important to note that there have been a wide range of critiques of Goffman's conceptualization of the 'total institution' exploring aspects of the porousness of contemporary prisons; however, these critiques are not explored by the authors using the theory cited here.

how COVID-19 could quickly move through a population who had no option but to share the same living space (Kakimoto *et al.* 2020).

To combat this, much of the literature focuses on different protocols and precautions that can, should, and have been, utilized to minimize the transmission of the virus in the prison setting (SSHAP 2020; Montoya-Barthelemy *et al.* 2020; Solis *et al.* 2020; Wang *et al.* 2020). Whereas these messages occupy the majority of the literature emerging in response to the spread of COVID-19, other authors have gone further to explore more of the hidden costs, issues and themes associated with the control of the virus in the prison setting.

Assessing the risks of infection and transmission alongside the needs of the prisoners that are to be subject to new procedures and policies has been advocated by Vose *et al.* (2020) and their recommendation for the early release of prisoner dictated by a Risk-Needs-Responsivity model. This model enables prison service to assess the risk of individuals, both in relation to the threat to impose on the community and the risk that the virus poses to them whilst incarcerated. It allows for the needs of the individual to be at the centre of the decision-making process to ensure that they are taken care of at every stage, which is not a straightforward process for those returning to the community. To minimize these impacts further, some authors have highlighted the additional use of technologies, which can reduce the social distance between individuals, particularly through virtual methods of communication. Prisons across the United Kingdom, in response to the minimal outside contact and suspension of visits, which accompanied the pandemic, adopted virtual or video visits from family members and for prisoners to meet their legal counsel when visits were suspended or limited. Robinson *et al.* (2020) have highlighted the impacts of digital inequalities in the face of COVID-19's outbreak, and prisoners and those held in detention centres, as they discuss, are at higher risk of experiencing the impacts of these digital inequalities.

In summary, the current literature around COVID-19 and prisons focuses in the main around health issues and the risks associated with COVID-19 from a transmission and containment perspective. However, beyond those inherent risks of prison as a 'total institution' dealing with the pandemic are further, less common, discussions about the impact of disadvantages and inequalities experiences by the prison population, which adds additional layers of inequality and risk. The literature and research—and indeed, the pandemic—may be too new or too novel to have produced a robust field of knowledge around it at the current time, but it is important to acknowledge that prisoners, as a population at heightened risk in the face of COVID-19, should not simply be viewed as a transmission vector but as a group that require integrated and dynamic support to shield them from the dangers and risks associated with this global health crisis. The core message of this new piece of literature is perhaps the relatively older message that prison health is public health and ensuring that those in custody are protected from the virus—both internally and at the point of release—then improvements can be made to both the prison and community populations who are continuing to combat COVID-19. Despite this emerging literature, there are very few or no current studies entailing face-to-face research with people in custody. There are a small number of studies being administered via correspondence or surveys administered by prison staff to understand their experiences of the pandemic in custody, their insights into the pandemic and what social distancing is like within prison, including the Scotland in Lockdown study (https://scotlandinlockdown.co.uk/). Furthermore, methodologically, this project is innovative in so far as it places the concerns and questions that the participants had at the core of the project and research questions were framed by the participants themselves through a participatory correspondence method (Maycock and Dickson 2021; Maycock 2021).

METHODS AND ETHICS

While letters in general have been extensively used as data source in historical, sociological and literary research for centuries (Harris 2002), researchers have only recently started to use letter writing between a researcher and a research participant as a way to generate self-reflexive data on people's lived experiences (Kralik et al. 2000; Ahearn 2001; Rautio 2009). Letter writing is a methodology that has been used in a range of studies to enable research participants to participate in research projects that their circumstances for whatever reason do not allow them to participate in person.

The correspondence method is particularly well suited for exploring sensitive issues and the experiences of stigmatized individuals and social groups. It has been successfully employed to examine women's experiences of body image (particularly of being overweight) and of infertility and involuntary childlessness (Letherby and Zdrodowski 1995) and women's experiences of self-harm (Harris 2002). Correspondence method is better suited than other methods (such as face-to-face interviewing) for collecting the data on the phenomena associated with social stigma and/or intensely personal circumstances as they allow to circumvent the embarrassment that participants may otherwise experience in describing stigmatized practices or experiences (Harris 2002: 8). Correspondence method also entails 'the facility for reflection' that renders it 'superior to face-to-face interviewing in terms of accuracy of description' (Harris 2002: 7).

Within prison settings, correspondence methods have been very rarely used (Brown 2014; Walker *et al.* 2017; Ford and Berg 2018), as the normative approach to prison research is through face-to-face methodologies with telephone or email methods used even more infrequently. However, correspondence methodologies are currently being used in a study in prisons in England and Wales, *Transcending the bars: Transgender and non-binary prisoners' experiences in England and Wales*, led by Dr Olga Suhomlinova from the University of Leicester. Within research context shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, correspondence methods were the only means through which it was possible to engage with a group of people in custody in order for them to share their views on the COVID-19 pandemic in prison. Within Scotland, there are currently the following restrictions in place relating to data collection:

> The Office of the Chief Statistician is now stopping all face to face survey fieldwork for the big surveys (Scottish Household Survey, The Crime and Justice Survey and the Scottish Health Survey) and the Office of National Statistic has also stopped all face to face survey work. To keep us in line the Chief Researcher now requests all face to face research to also stop immediately.

This created issues for people in custody in relation to equivalence in the participation in research projects on COVID-19 that people in the community can freely participate in, through online survey platforms for example. Critically, for the progression of this project at a time of significant operational pressure within the prison estate, the correspondence method of data collection placed no demands on time or resources of operational prison staff, other than the scanning of the letters coming in through the post.

Following approval by the SPS Research Access and Ethics Committee, this project used a participatory correspondence methodology using the postal service in order to engage with a group of people in custody. Despite many services being paused (such as education, religious services, prison gyms and prison programmes), post was delivered like normal through the pandemic, so using the postal system was the only means of undertaking research safely, respecting social distancing measures at all times. The participants selected to take part in this study were

participants in a pilot participatory action research (PAR) project (Maycock 2021), building on PAR projects developed in prisons in the United States (Fine *et al.* 2003; Fine and Torre 2006). Thirteen prisoners signed up to the PAR pilot, and this group got to Week 7 of the pilot, so they are aware of the importance of ethics in research and a range of research methods. Continuing to engage with this group through this research project has wider benefits for the original pilot when face-to-face research resumes. Given that the participants were previously working on a PAR pilot project, it was important that participants were able to influence the direction of this project from its initiation. Research participants shaping research questions is not an overly common approach and seems relatively rare in criminology, but this does occur in some participatory research projects (Baum *et al.* 2006; Agee 2009; Stringer 2013). PAR projects have been implemented in prison settings where participants have contributed to the design of research questions (Fine *et al.* 2003; Fine and Torre 2006; Payne and Bryant 2018; Haverkate *et al.* 2020); this project builds on these approaches.

In this study, enabling participants to shape the research questions that formed the focus of each of the letters has resulted in at times difficult and unexpected questions to be asked throughout the letters that constitute the data analysed in this paper. Through participants suggestions and topics of focus in relation to Covid-19, shaping all subsequent correspondence, it is hoped that this project as much as is possible within the context of the Covid-19, is as participatory as possible. It is critical that people in custody are able to reflect on their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and able to influence associated research agendas, something that has not happened until this project as, without this, the evidence base on the impacts of COVID-19 in prisons will be significantly lacking.

Of the 13 participants invited to take part in the study, 8 gave their informed consent after having been sent the project information sheet and consent form in the post. The participants were all male, serving a long-term sentence[2], identified as white and were living in single-cell accommodation. Eight participants equates to a 0.1 per cent sample of the entire Scottish prison population (official figures indicate that the average prison population in Scotland was around 8,200 in 2019–20; Scottish_Government 2020). Consequently, this study makes no claims to be able to account for or to represent the many diverse experiences of lockdown across the Scottish prison estate. It is hoped that this paper illuminates and sensitively analyses the views of the eight men who chose to participate. This sample was pragmatic as the SPS ethics committee gave approval to correspond to potential participants in the previous PAR study and no one else either living or working in Scottish prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each of the eight participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity and all 8 were sent a copy of this paper before submission for publication and given a month to comment or ask any questions about how their correspondence has been analysed, what Lincoln and Guba refer to as 'member checking' (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Postal contact details of the researcher were provided and a commitment to discuss any concerns in relation to any aspect of the paper was given to all participants. At the time of submission, no participants have responded with any concerns about this paper.

While there are recurring concerns about the literacy levels of people in custody (Morgan and Kett 2003; Vacca 2004; Creese 2016), given that the PI for this study knew all the participants from a previous project, these issues were relatively minimal given the relatively high levels of literacy amongst this group of participants. At all times, letters were written in plain English to further enhance the accessibility of the study.

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2 This is a sentence of over 4 years in Scotland.

All letters were sent with a stamped addressed envelope with the name and workplace address of the PI to enable all participants to respond to any letters without having to pay themselves for an envelope or stamp. All participants were encouraged to write at any time about their experiences of the pandemic, and two did this not in response to a letter from the PI. In total, 19 letters were received constituting a 30 per cent response rate with two additional letters returned that were not direct responses to one of the letters send by the PI. Two drawings were also received. All responses were entered into a spreadsheet and then analysed in Nvivo 12 using an inductive thematic analysis (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). Analysis of the letters sought to identify and consolidate themes emerging across the letters and to make connections with relevant literature. Themes and aspects of this study not analysed in this paper are reported elsewhere (Maycock and Dickson 2021).

Methodological issues

In a number of the later letters, it was evident that letters either outgoing or incoming had gone missing; the implications of this are explored in an associated paper (Maycock and Dickson 2021). Two responses to the last letter stated that they had not received Letters 4–7, suggesting issues with the delivery of letters during the project. This will have had an impact on the response rate, although it is impossible to know the extent of this problem.

FINDINGS

Findings are clustered around responses to letters received from participants; themes analysed within these responses enable both connections and tensions with the pains of incarceration as outlined by Sykes to be explored. The project started with a letter asking participants what they felt the important questions were to ask, and it was these initial responses that shaped all subsequent letters and the analysis that follows. One of the letters used a series of text boxes covering a range of areas, including the implications of COVID-19 on life in prison, including communication issues and relationships. These areas were derived from the questions suggested in a previous letter, and this letter had five responses (a 63 per cent response rate), which are organized around the text boxes, starting with the implications of COVID-19 on life in prison. A subsequent letter focused on what lockdown and subsequent easing felt like in custody; there were five responses or a 62 per cent response rate to this letter.

The impacts of COVID-19 on 'everyday' life prison and increased feelings of isolation

The everyday rhythms of life in prison have been a consistent focus of prison sociology (Sykes 1958; Crewe 2009; Fassin 2017); this part of the paper analyses the ways in which COVID-19 has disrupted what participants had previously taken for granted as the 'everyday'. There were profound changes to the prison regime as a consequence of the COVID-19 lockdown in prison. This impacted on the everyday routines and rhythms in prison, with family visits, library, programmes, most work sheds, education and gyms all closed or cancelled, and participants reported being locked up for 23 hours a day. James in particular found these changes hard and wanted a return to the pre-lockdown regime as soon as possible.

> Our whole regime has changed, there are no more work parties. We are kept in smaller numbers, [there is] no gym. (James)

There was a recurring sense that, while this was a high-security prison, the pre-lockdown life was missed, and the pre-lockdown regime and associated routine was something that a number

of participants wanted to get back to. While there were pains associated with pre-pandemic life within prison, to an extent pre-pandemic prison life was missed with some letters including positive reflections of pre-pandemic life, contrasted to the pains associated with the Covid-19 lockdown. This suggests a degree of institutionalization, 'i.e. excessively accustomed to life in prison' (Crewe *et al.* 2020: 312), amongst the participants in this study. Schinkel (2014) has suggested that the extent to which a person is institutionalized may become clearer when a person has been released as opposed to during their sentence. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic within prison is influencing these insights into a person's sentence and the extent to which they become aware of the extent of their personal institutionalization. James went onto comment on the pre-lockdown regime being cut to nothing:

> The regime is cut to nothing and all distractions have been removed, no gym or meeting of others outside of the half of your section. (James)

The paradigmatic shifts in prison life as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought into sharp focus the degree to which the participants (all serving long-term sentences) writing letters in this project had become accustomed to and to an extent missed the pre-lockdown regime. This is not to say that the pre-prison regime was not associated with pain but that the lockdown within prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes new and increased pain associated with being in prison. Peter sums up the sentiments in the letters about lockdown below that despite spending significant time within his cell prior to the lockdown, his cell felt more like a cage than ever:

> Eating/Sleeping/toilet all in your cell - very cage like. (Peter)

Extended periods within their cells fostered feelings of boredom, frustration and stress amongst the participants in this study, feelings more often reported by prisoners in segregation units of prisons (Brown 2020). Time in segregation units tend to be particularly painful parts of a prison sentence (Brown 2020); it is evident from responses to these letters that the COVID-19 lockdown was associated with a similar particularly painful experience of prison. Steve below was trying to find ways of occupying himself in his cell but was finding this increasingly challenging as lockdown continued:

> It is very lonely and boring reading and television. My daughter sent me a 1000-piece jigsaw that is doing my head in. It's hard; very hard. (Steve)

He went onto reflect more widely on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic atmosphere in this prison, indicating that cumulatively the pandemic and the associated lockdown were increasing underlying tensions:

> Prisoners are stressed and some have smashed cells and caused trouble. Most are accepting but there is a tense atmosphere. (Steve)

Responses to questions about the impacts of COVID-19 in prison focused on people in custody struggling with lockdown, in particular struggling with being locked up 23 hours a day and feeling isolated as a consequence. While participants reported getting around 30 minutes of exercise outside of their cell a day, some felt even this was problematic due to a lack of social distancing between prisoners when they were out of cell. For example, John did not like being in his cell for 23 hours a day but did not feel overly safe when he was out of his cell:

> We don't see as many people. 1/2 hour exercise every day, there is no social distancing among prisoners. (John)

Feelings of isolation were deepened by many participants struggling due to the lack of family contact through visits and a deepening of feelings of detachment from life 'outside':

> I have had breakdown in my family life with less contact with outside world. (Steve)

Experiences of contemporary prisons have been analysed through the prisms depth, weight and tightness (Crewe 2011a) as an extension of Sykes initial analysis. Here, we see the implications of the COVID-19 lockdown in enhancing and further deepening and tightening the experience of prison. The lack of visits and limited opportunities to call family intensified feelings of guilt for some participants, with Steve going onto say:

> This causes problems at home when you have promised your daughter you will be seeing her soon. It's as if you are lying to them. (Steve)

For Steve in particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown were having profound implications for his family relationships. Steve felt that family contact was challenging during pre-lockdown times but that the pandemic had increased the distance between him and his family:

> This situation is destroying my relationship with my partner and I feel my daughter is becoming slightly cold with me. Family contact is cut to these options. Contact with family is difficult in prison at the best of times, this has made it harder. (Steve)

James went further to reflect on the reasons why he did not want to use the phone in prison as much as he could as he felt that it was not cleaned enough, therefore, increasing the chance of infection spreading:

> Not as much due to lack of cleaning of the phones in the sections and no hand sanitiser around. Once/Twice per month a call to one person in case I catch the virus. (James)

This was particularly significant given that the telephone was the main means of staying in touch with family for the participants in this study, while visits were cancelled. These apprehensions relating to the risk of infection within prison were challenging for the participants given that, by definition, their options for getting out of what they felt were risky situations were limited. Graeme was particularly concerned about the consequences of the pandemic getting into prison:

> Let's hope it doesn't get into prison, god help us if it does!! (Graeme)

This deepened feelings of isolation and detachment from life on the outside of the prison walls, and there was concern by a number of participants about their families in the community. For James below this related to the ways in which him being in prison lockdown meant that he could not protect and support his family in the context of the lockdown:

> Personally, am incredibly worried about progression so I can be back with my family supporting them at such hard times. (James)

This relates to problems that many men report while in custody during 'normal' times, of collapsing the breadwinner, protective role that many play within their families, which is a consistent problem for men while in prison (Hairston 2002; Arditti *et al.* 2005; Dyer 2005). Here, we see the COVID-19 pandemic further undermining of these aspects of male roles in some families.

Communication issues

Alongside and compounding these impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in prison, communication issues were a recurring theme across all letters received, although this was a particular focus within a particular letter. There was a recurring narrative emerging around a lack of communication and not knowing what was going to happen or when things would get back to normal:

> It is difficult, as at the time of writing [May 2020], we are in our cells 23 hours per day, it is becoming harder with very little communication from SPS. (Peter)

A number of participants reflected that a lack of and poor communication from prison staff about the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown and prison rule changes were increasing stress and anxiety levels. As Crewe states, deficits in information are to an extent part of the prison experience:

> In an [prison] environment where deficits in information, control and personal autonomy are inherent, it is natural for prisoners to complain about not knowing 'where they stand'. (Crewe 2011b: 458)

Therefore, the lack of information relating to the lockdown and limited opportunities to get information about what was going on from other prisoners were enhancements of pre-pandemic deficits of information. Additionally, James below was very sceptical about prison staff and questioned much of what was promised during the lockdown:

> I think they are just making it up as they go along, it's been weeks since the outbreak, now they are going to provide a personal phone to each person - what does that tell you? (James)

Despite James's scepticism, Paul outlines below some of the ways that the prison had informed him of some of the changes that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> Sheets were handed out with info about regime changes. Recreation and exercise periods were restricted further. The information channel had some info also. (Paul)

The information channel relates to a channel of the television through which prison authorities conveyed certain information. Given the restrictions on movement and the lack of access to daily newspapers, television emerged as a critical source of information. There has been wider analysis of the significance of televisions in prison settings (Knight 2017), which suggests that television is central to everyday life in prison and normalization of the prison cell. With limited access to other sources of information, televisions seem to have had an even greater significance during the COVID-19 lockdown. Peter reflects on this below:

> Not had any information for weeks now, mainly the news on TV. Info channel if we hear a new thing. Television News. No info about the wider community is offered. (Peter)

Here Peter highlights to one of the limits of this source of information, in so far as there was often little information about the local level, either relating to his community within prison or outside of the prison walls. With limited interactions with other people in custody and prison staff, this was a major deficit in the information about the pandemic available to participants in this study. Additionally, Graeme was quite critical of the information channel:

> The communication appears to be outdated there is an information channel on television that you check on a regular basis only to find out that it is weeks out of date, with the same outdated being played on a loop, that drives you nuts!!! (Graeme)

This section has shown a range of issues relating to what emerges as a transformative impact of COVID-19 on pre-pandemic pains and deficits in information within prison with participants struggling to get the information that wanted and needed. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic response by prison administrators in relation to communication has resulted in feelings of isolation and the enhanced 'weight' and 'deepening' and pain associated with experiences of custody.

Experiences of lockdown and lockdown easing

Five letters were received that explicitly focused on the lockdown in prison, these letters illustrate a growing cynicism about the lockdown and communication associated with it. There was a sense that some things had changed, but these were only very marginal changes and conditions were still a long way from pre-lockdown regime. For John below, while the lockdown had been eased, this still felt similar to the complete lockdown that had been implemented within this prison:

> Still very similar to it was in the beginning. Now we get 2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon open association with the 32 people in our sections. We now get 1 hour outside exercise per day. Still no gym or sheds. (John)

Graeme had similar views in considering there to have been limited change, with the repetitive and restrictive nature of the lockdown regime still weighing down heavily on him:

> There has not been much change. The only thing to have changed is the daily cell opening hours. Yes, we are open more but with very little on the landing to pass time. It feels like a never-ending repeat with no sign off progression at all. (Graeme)

The sense of a never-ending repetition with limited chance or hope of getting out of the prison he was in is suggestive of a Kafkaesque feeling of disaffection as a consequence of the lockdown. Jack below once more points to the negative consequences of lockdown on the mental health of those in custody and refers to getting back to the pattern or rhythm of normal pre-lockdown life in custody:

> This has been immensely hard on people's mental health. Also if things like the sheds, education and programmes would come back you could start to get a better pattern and see that there is light at the end of the tunnel. (Jack)

Communication issues once again emerged within the responses about both lockdown and how lockdown was to be eased within custody:

> There has been very little [communication] indeed. (Jack)
>> We ask questions all the time and get the response 'we will know when they know' (Peter)
>> None, we just wake up and hope for the best. (Graeme)

Graeme went onto to discuss the negative consequences of not getting any information about lockdown or the easing of lockdown as this gave him no hope of progressing:

> At present we are not being given any information on this at all, thus making life very demoralising as we see no way of progressing from said location. (Graeme)

Again, this is an instance of the COVID-19 pandemic eroding the hope of people in custody. There was a sense that not knowing about what will happen when in relation to lockdown in prison was in effect the use of a kind of 'soft power' by staff over people in custody. This is something that has been explored by Crewe (2011b: 458) where prisoners 'do not know where they stand' as an expression of staff authority in prison. John below illustrates that information about COVID-19 and the lockdown might have become part of the exercise of soft power by prison staff:

> We get no info about what changes will be made and when. (John)

Graeme went onto explore aspects of the ways in which he felt prison staff were using COVID-19 as an excuse to not engage:

> Covid is used as an excuse too much by officers and they don't communicate new rules prior to implementation causing tensions.

Despite these negative comments and tensions about lockdown and lockdown easing, there were some positive comments in these letters about virtual visits. Virtual visits enabled people in custody to speak to their friends and family via video link:

> I have had several virtual visits. I think they are excellent, especially for people like myself who have children. (James)

However, a smaller number of participants had issues using the system:

> None of my visitors can seem to get verified on the system. (John)

This ultimately meant that John was unable to use virtual visits. Reponses to the final letter included in this paper point to elements of the use of soft power and a type of authority by prison staff. Information about the lockdown and lockdown easing in custody become part of the experience of punishment and feelings of a lack of agency and hopelessness for the respondents to this letter.

CONCLUSION—THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS AN ENHANCEMENT OF THE PAINS OF IMPRISONMENT

This project has shown that correspondence methods are well suited to situations where face-to-face data collection is not possible, although this is a method not without its problems in a context where literacy levels can be challenging. The responses to one of the initial letters shaped later correspondence between the PI and participants, and it is hoped that the letters

that came after this letter were ones that resonated with areas that the participants felt were important.

This study provides unique insights into the impacts of COVID-19 in prison settings and foregrounds the written narratives of eight male participants in this study. These narratives challenge prevailing discourses about the successful management of COVID-19 in prison settings and provide insights into the challenges and difficulties that the lockdown has posed for people in custody. For many participants, the pre-lockdown regime was missed and the COVID-19 lockdown was particularly challenging. Particular issues emerge in relation to communication in a number of regards. Communication emerges as problematic between people in custody and prison staff. Additionally, communication was problematic with family and friends, increasing feelings of isolation and detachment from both 'ordinary' life within and outside of the prison walls with increasing distance from family. These feelings of isolation causing increased tensions between prisoners and prisoners and prison staff resonate with studies on segregation within prison, and there is a recurring sense that the COVID-19 lockdown feels like a punishment to the participants in this study. A number of studies have considered the ways in which being in prison acts as a kind of suspension or freezing of time (Cope 2003; Crewe *et al.* 2020); this study adds a new layer to these previous studies. As Peter reflects below, to an extent, he has adapted to the new *rhythm* associated with the lockdown within which life is paused within custody as well as outside of custody. This is perhaps a unique impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in pausing or freezing life within the prison walls as well as the community. Peter indicates that he will need time to adjust to things getting back to normal when lockdown is eased and the pre-lockdown regime is reinstated:

> It is in a rhythm now and will be strange when life here starts back up again. (Peter)

Reflecting on the letters received as part of this project, it is difficult to conceive of the COVID-19 pandemic as anything other than transformative for everyday prison life, and this was causing the participants in this study significant issues, as well as highlighting investments in the previous regime as a manifestation of institutionalization. Of the five pains that Sykes identified, personal autonomy seems to be particularly negatively impacted as a consequence of the COVID-19 lockdown as potential expressions to autonomy are severely constrained within such an oppressive and constrained regime. Additionally, in relation to deficits in communication about the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the participants in this study seemed to know very little about what was happening, constituting a deepening of similar deficits in pre-pandemic conditions. It is hoped that through highlighting the challenges that people in custody have faced in relation to the COVID-19 lockdown, this study will encourage prison administrators to return as soon as is safely possible to pre-lockdown routines and regimes.

The findings section highlights enhancements in the pains of imprisonment across a wide range of areas, complementing and extending Sykes initial formulation to the five pains of imprisonment. The letters received as part of this study illuminate a particular intensification of pre-pandemic 'tightness', 'depth' and 'weight' of imprisonment explored in studies undertaken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which reframed Sykes initial analysis (Crewe 2011a). It is too early to know if the Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a distinct and lasting aspect of the pains of imprisonment or, as this paper suggests, enhances and deepens pre-pandemic pains. Further research is required as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to influence life in prison in different ways at different stages in the pandemic. Ultimately, the extent to which pre-lockdown conditions can be returned to will determine the extent to which the particular pains associated with the COVID-19 pandemic will have a lasting legacy for those living within prison.

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