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## **A study using Situational Action Theory (SAT) to explore prisoner violence in High Security Prisons**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2022, more than 20,000 people were victims of violence carried out in prison settings, with an upward pattern of violence an area of growing concern (MOJ 2023). Despite decades of empirical research, lack of a clear, current understanding around this phenomenon persists (Wooldredge 2020).

Much current research in this field has centred around identification of how individual variables, such as age, or prison type correlate with violence (Gadon et al 2006, Schenk & Fremouw 2012). However, inconsistent results, approaches, and even definitions across different jurisdictions have frustrated generalisable understanding. This study sought to extend the research in this area by using Situational Action Theory (SAT) to explore how the influence of the prison setting guides violence as 'moral action' (Wikström 2006:75).

This study was conducted within two high security prisons within the England and Wales (E&W) prison system, chosen as sites in which people with violent propensity were deemed to be held. A mixed methods design allowed for the survey and subsequent semi-structured interview of participants across the two sites to understand what moves them to use violence within the prison context. Data obtained supported the relevance of morality in guiding the violent choices prisoners made, as well as the relevance of past violence-related attitudes and behaviour, indicating habitual violence occurrence.

This study claims elements of the prison setting and culture provide an overall experience that fuels feelings of fear and hopelessness, making it hard for prisoners to abstain from violence, even where morally they would be inclined to make non-violent choices. Whilst prisoners recognise the intent of formal strategies to deter violence, for those serving long, indeterminate sentences they were ineffective, and at times counterproductive. This research found informal strategies designed to counter feelings of hopelessness and trigger the development of self-control through moral education were most likely to provide more realistic and durable non-violent options and disrupt

habitual violence propensity giving officials opportunities to intervene. These findings contribute to empirical understanding of the problem of violence in prison settings and provide a partial test of SAT in an otherwise untested landscape. Findings highlight SAT's utility in better understanding the complexity of the prison world given the central relevance of morality and habitual behaviour in guiding prisoner behaviour.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the year 2022 - 2023, 22,319 people fell victim to violent acts in prisons across England and Wales (E&W). The rate of violence in male prisons during this period increased by seven percent to 267 incidents per 1000 prisoners, and in female prisons by 16 percent to 436 per 1000 prisoners (MOJ 2023). Significantly, there is general acceptance that under-reporting of crime and victimisation is a 'well-known phenomenon in institutional settings' (Gadon et al 2006: 531), which suggests a more accurate rate may be considerably greater. The rate of prison violence has been increasing for a decade. Whilst a dip in recorded assaults were observed during 2020-2021 whilst prisons were in Covid lockdown, the reduction was only partial, with recorded rates still considerably higher than they were in 2013 and an upwards trend resuming since 2021 (MOJ 2023).

Violence in custody is a crime, subject to legislation set out in Acts including the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and Prison Rules 1999 (Leg. Gov. N.d). Prisoners committing violence in custody are liable to prosecution for additional charges, and administrative sanctions within the prison setting. As prisons aim to help prisoners lead 'law-abiding and useful lives, both while they are in prison and after they are released' (HMPS 2021), this threatens delivery of organisational objectives. This is in the sense prisoners committing violence are not living law-abiding lives in custody, but also because links have been established between violence in custody and subsequent engagement in re-offending presenting associated annual implications to the economy of £15bn (MOJ 2016). When proximal and distal costs associated with staff absence, loss of loyalty and high turnover are considered, the compound intrinsic effect of violence is even greater (Gadon et al 2006).

Whilst prison violence has been subject to considerable empirical scrutiny, current understanding of the problem has been described as 'piecemeal' (Wooldredge 2020:182), with conflicting understanding compounded by inconsistent definitions of prison violence, and contradictory findings (Schenk & Fremouw 2012, Gadon et al 2006). There has been some agreement on variables

consistently deemed relevant, including age (e.g. Cohen et al 1976, Bottoms 1999), race/ ethnicity (e.g Schenk & Fremouw 2012, Ricciardelli 2014), and past criminality (e.g Gadon et al 2006). These are 'importation characteristics' (McGuire 2018: 1) specific to the individual. Other studies have argued hardships of prison life, or 'deprivation' features (Sykes 2020: 43), such as crowding, in which a prison holds more prisoners than it is specifically designed for, and prison type are correlative to prison violence, with high security prison settings in particular featuring higher levels of violence over other settings (Gadon et al 2006). There are no general studies exploring how the intersection of all aspects combine to underpin prison violence.

Situational Action Theory (SAT) presents an opportunity for a fresh perspective on prison violence. It is a 'general, dynamic and mechanism-based theory' (Wikström 2017:510) that claims it can be used to explain any crime (Wikström 2006). SAT differentiates from other action theories in that it recognises rule-breaking behaviour can be the outcome of deliberate choice, but also of habit shaped by past behaviour and familiarity with a particular setting (Wikström 2014). It contends whilst 'people are the source of their actions...the causes of their actions are situational...guided by the relevant input from the person–environment interaction' (Wikström et al 2018:12). This highlights the potential utility of SAT in understanding the relationship between individuals, their violence-relevant morality, the prison setting, and how its inducements affect violent choices, in a way that has never been previously studied.

This study aims to contribute to understandings around the problem of prison violence using SAT as a framework in its approach. In doing so, frustrations borne by inconsistency in past empirical definitions of prison violence will be simplified by SAT's view that all crime is 'moral rule-breaking' (Wikström 2006:61). Whilst a study using SAT to explore violence in any setting has not yet been undertaken, it has been used to theoretically explain violence, in which violence is defined as 'acts intended to bring about physical harm to other beings' (Wikström & Treiber 2009: 78). This study will seek to exploit the key proposition within SAT that violence in prison would be the outcome of



the interaction between the violence moral propensity of the person and the moral violence-related inducements of the setting. This research seeks to develop a better understanding of violence in prison, support subsequent identification of strategies to resolve it, and provide a partial test of SAT's relevance to a previously unexplored context.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The enduring and growing problem of prison violence needs a new perspective, which this study will approach using SAT as a theoretical framework. Part one of this literature review will focus initially on SAT as a criminological theory. It will begin with an overview of SAT as a theoretical construct, before outlining how its application to violence is relevant to understanding it as a form of moral action, and its limited use in the prison context to date. Part two of this literature review will explore what is known about prisoner violence in existing empirical literature, considering how personal characteristics and the inducements of prison settings result in violent outcomes. This will highlight how what is known also speaks to SAT's theoretical construct in explicating violence within the setting.

#### **2.1 Situational Action Theory (SAT)**

##### **Overview**

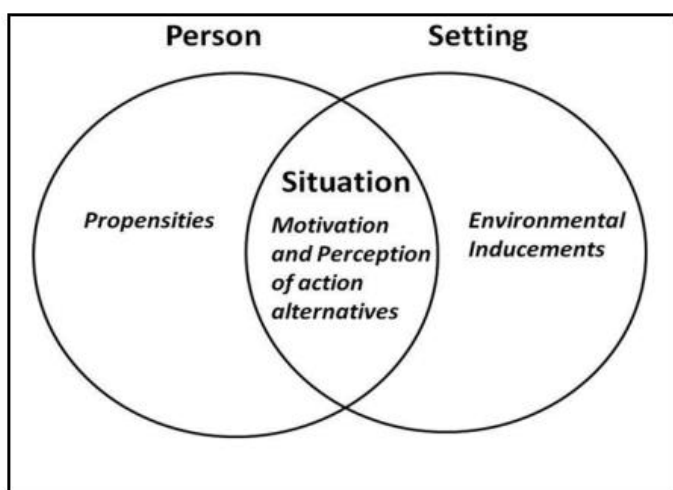
SAT was developed in response to the claim existing criminological theories were unable to satisfactorily explain what causes crime to happen (Wikström 2006). Wikström argued without a clear explanation of how to define crimes, why people are inclined to commit them, and how personal characteristics and their environments interact, a true understanding of why crime occurs was not possible (Wikström 2006).

SAT makes four key assumptions regarding human behaviour: people are the source of their actions; the causes of their actions are situational; people are generally rule-guided; and social order is built upon shared rules of conduct (Wikström 2020). These assumptions are central to the theory's claim that where humans are generally disposed to follow shared, societal 'rules of conduct,' crime is a breach of the moral rules established in law (Wikström et al 2018:12). This is evidenced by the fact even the most crime-prone individuals spend relatively little time engaging in crime action unless

specifically moved to do so (Wikström et al 2012). The action choices they then make are 'guided by rules about what is the right or wrong thing to do' (Wikström 2014:75), thereby making it a form of moral action. The theory contends it can be used to explain any crime, by viewing it as a form of moral rule-breaking behaviour.

### Situational model

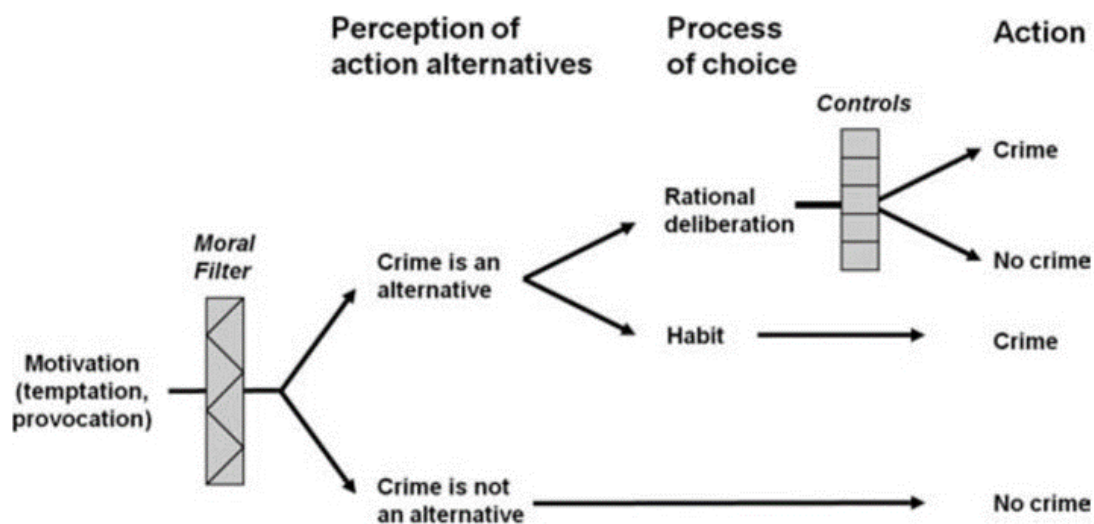
SAT's situational model argues the determination of action choices a person perceives as viable is the situation arising from the interaction between them and their environment triggering a *perception-choice process*. This is influenced by the person's criminal propensity and how they perceive the crime inducements of the setting (Wikström 2006).



**Figure 1. The relationship between person, setting and situation illustrated** (Wikström et al 2018: 13).

The perception-choice process is a two-stage process (Hirtenlehner & Kunz 2016). Initially the actor perceives options in response to motivations, determined by personal morals and the moral context of the setting; a process referred to as the *moral filter*. What motivates the response are *provocations* - an 'emotional inducement to respond aggressively toward the perceived source of friction or...something representing the source of friction' (Wikström 2006:90), or *temptations* to satisfy wishes or personal obligations that exposure between themselves and their setting enables (Wikström 2014). Where the combination between the individual's morals and the moral context of

the setting prompts exclusion of crime as viable action, no crime will happen. However, where crime is perceived to be a possible action alternative, the actor chooses whether to commit a crime, either by habit or following deliberation in which the effectiveness of internal self-control and external deterrents guide whether crime occurs. This situational process is shown in figure 2.



**Figure 2. - The situational process and key situational factors (applied to the explanation of crime)**

(Wikström 2014: 79)

### Social and DEA models

Whilst SAT's situational model explains how the perception-choice process affects crime (Wikström & Treiber 2015), the social model outlines how those propensities develop. It claims these are shaped historically, via processes of emergence and selection (Wikström 2014). Emergence is 'how something becomes as it is' (Wikström 2014:83), whilst how certain people come to be in certain places at certain times is referred to as selection (Wikström 2018). In his study on the factors relevant to career crime propensities, Wikström's Developmental Ecological Action Model (DEA) claims these are shaped by 'psychosocial processes of moral education and cognitive nurturing,' whilst 'socioecological processes of segregation and self-selection' determine exposure to criminogenic settings (2020:195). Whilst a person's age, or ethnicity do not directly cause crimes,

their life experience related to those factors, and the settings in which they choose or are able to access are likely to influence their moral propensity for certain types of conduct (Wikström 2020).

As a general action theory, SAT argues it can be used to explain *any* crime, regardless of seriousness, as a form of moral rule-breaking (Wikström 2017). In relation to violence, this overcomes difficulties experienced in some theoretical explanations due to inconsistent definitions (Bottoms 1999), or variance in crime thresholds linked to geographical legislation, and legislative changes over time. There has been no empirical study seeking to use SAT to explain the cause of violence, although it has been theoretically explicated (Wikström & Treiber 2009).

### Violence as moral action

SAT posits although 'people are the source of their actions...the causes of their actions are situational...guided by the relevant input from the person–environment interaction' (Wikström et al 2018:12). Violent actions are classed as situational in nature (Larmour 2014). This is because the act of violence is a possible outcome of a convergence between a particular person and their violent propensity, and a particular setting and its violence-inducing features (Wikström & Treiber 2015). SAT's situational model would suggest what might influence a person seeing violence as viable is their violent crime propensity, whilst a setting's violence-inducing criminogeneity is determined by its moral context; the 'moral rules (relating to violence) that apply to the setting and their levels of enforcement and sanctioning' (Wikström 2006:90). This interaction triggers the perception-choice process determining whether violence will follow.

Violence as moral action is distinct from other rule-breaking as it occurs when either a person with weak morals *opposing* violence, or strong personal morals *supporting* violence experience frictions or temptations in a setting they perceive to encourage (or fail to discourage) violence (Wikström & Treiber 2009). Just as individuals differ, so too do prison settings, with no such thing as a 'single prison culture' (Crewe 2009: 154). There is reciprocity in the moral context of both the actor and their environment, with a person's propensity influenced by the inducements of the setting, and the

setting's moral context shaped by the people within it (Wikström & Treiber 2015). A previous prison study claimed people who commit offences in custody, including violence, have lower self-control and morality than their non-offending peers and that the mere presence of other actors influenced perceptions on the acceptability of using violence (Downie 2015). This suggests an absence of self-control and perceived acceptability of violence prompting a violence-related moral context of prison settings shaped by the relevant rules of the setting, the level of enforcement of them, as well as supporting claims the moral context of a setting is shaped by other stakeholders (Woodham 2023), which in this case is likely to include pro-violent actors.

#### Motivation, emotions, and the moral filter

In each situation, a person may be motivated to see violence as a viable action alternative for instrumental gains, such as to steal a mobile phone, or in response to friction, provoking a violent reaction as expressive violence (Wikström & Treiber 2009). When such motivations occur, perceptions of acceptable responses are determined by the effectiveness of the moral filter (Rose 2022). A person with strong morality opposing violence, or a person whose violence-related morals are insufficient to withstand the effects of tightly controlled anti-violent settings may choose a non-violent response instinctively. However, a person deeming violence as viable action may do so through strong pro-violent morality or weak anti-violent morality responding either through deliberation, or through habit (Wikström & Treiber 2009).

Habits are formed by 'repeated exposure to particular circumstances' (Wikström 2014: 81), and it is argued that 'much crime (for example, many instances of violent crimes...) may be a result of habitual responses' (Wikström & Treiber 2015: 426). Emotions have significant relevance to violent action, as a strong emotional response to either an opportunity or type of friction 'may compel immediate action, encouraging a violent response and potentially affecting the perception of other alternatives by monopolizing attention' (Wikström & Treiber 2009: 86). Whilst SAT focuses predominantly on shame and guilt as moral emotions guiding the perception-choice process, wider

literature also points to anger, fear, disgust, and remorse as relevant to the experiences of people in the criminal justice system (Karstedt 2002). Repeated exposure to emotionally charged situations in prisons which trigger angry responses for example may provide moral education guiding actions and excluding comprehension of non-violent action without deliberation, influencing future crime propensity towards violence in this setting through habit formation (Wikström 2014).

When deliberating, the effectiveness of self-control or external controls are relied upon to deter violent action choices. Self-control is 'the ability to act in accordance with...personal morals when externally pressured to act otherwise' (Wikström 2020: 193), in other words the ability to refrain from violence because the actor knows it would be wrong, despite feeling influenced by features of a criminogenic setting to do otherwise. Where a person's own morals do not preclude violence, the relevance of external control factors determine their subsequent action. Even in professional contexts promoting violence such as boxing, rules are enforced to control it, with sanctions such as disqualification to guide the choices competitors make (Wikström & Treiber 2009). Violence in a prison context is a crime and therefore a breach of moral rules set out in law (Leg.gov n.d). Whilst the threat of sanctions such as prosecution are external controls intended to deter violence, a person might choose to disregard them if for example they disagree or do not care about them (Wikström & Treiber 2015). Alternatively, they may experience emotional reactions such as anger or fear guiding them to think violence is more acceptable if they feel provoked by others (Wikström & Treiber 2009). The relevance of controls when violence is deemed to be viable is shown in figure 3.

Situational Context		
Propensity	Exposure to Moral Context	
	Conducive to violence	Not conducive to violence
Conducive to violence	Violence is likely	Violence will depend on the level of deterrence
Not conducive to violence	Violence will depend on the actor's ability to exercise self-control	Violence is unlikely

**Figure 3. - The situational context and violent action** (Wikström & Treiber 2009: 92)

### SAT's utility in prison research

Whilst SAT has been used increasingly to study criminality as rule-breaking behaviour (e.g., Rose 2022, Antonnchio & Tittle 2008), its use in prison studies is limited. A 2018 study of white-collar crime amongst a small sample of prisoners in E&W found SAT's utility in exploring crime within criminogenic workplace contexts. The study found moderate support for SAT's proposition low law-relevant morals are more likely to correspond with crime propensity (Wikström 2006), with interviewees using 'neutralising strategies' (Jordanoska 2018:1445) to suspend morality and justify crime choices. A single study using SAT as a framework to explain rule-breaking *inside* a prison context has been conducted to date (Downie 2015) exploring rule-breaking and morality before and during imprisonment in a group of young males aged 16-21. The study found crime-inducing norms within the setting as some interviewees 'did not fight or had never fought in the community though they felt like they 'had to' whilst in the prison setting' (2015:75). Whilst the study found difficulty in participants' perspective taking, potentially linked to their age and stage of psychological development (Kohlberg 1984) and was limited to a single site in which Downie worked, its findings highlight the potential relevance of SAT in explaining prison violence. To do so, it is necessary to also consider what is known about the social environment in which violence takes place, its moral features, the personal characteristics of the individuals and what drives their violent action choices (Wikström et al 2012, Wooldredge 2020).



## **2.2 Violence in prison settings**

### **Overview**

Understanding the world in which prisoners live has long been a feature of empirical interest, arguably more so since Gresham Sykes' ethnographic study in a New-Jersey maximum security prison in the 1950's, *The Society of Captives* (Sykes 2020). As 'total institutions' (Goffman 1961:5), prisons confine those within them in a physical, and a metaphorical sense, with all aspects of daily life scheduled and conducted within the setting under instruction by prison authorities. Those who work and live there experience the setting as a 'society within a society' (Sykes 2020: xxx), but despite prolonged interest in prison research, 'understanding of the role of the social environment in crime causation is still rudimentary and leaves much unexplored' (Wikström et al 2012: v). SAT argues this would be the key to explaining rule-breaking such as violence within such settings.

### **Situational context of prison**

Consideration of the social context of prisons is important in explaining violence conducted within them, as 'people act, but they do not do so in a social vacuum' (Wikström 2017: 505). In Sykes' study he found fragile authority in prison officials insufficient to maintain social order within New Jersey State prison, with prisoners lacking a 'moral duty to obey' (2020: x). Instead, prisoners established a form of social order, observed using argot roles describing the typology of prisoners and their situational responses to the deprivations of incarceration; the so called 'pains of imprisonment' (2020: 63).

Evidence in more contemporary English studies supports Sykes' suggestions in that prisoner society acts collectively in opposition to prison authorities to offset the hardships of prison life, despite modern prisons having far fewer deprivations (Crewe 2009). Findings in different prison contexts reinforce the durability of this phenomenon, reported in different prison settings and different jurisdictions (Sykes 2020, Crewe 2009, Sparks et al 1996). In two English high security prisons, Sparks

et al found a sense of community based on regional networks and friendships underpinning daily life despite recognising hardships (1996). Medium security prisons, arguably with fewer restrictions, had an inmate 'value system' (Crewe 2009: 177) influencing the behavioural norms of prisoners. Occupants adjusted to prison life by adopting types of rule-breaking behaviour such as drug dealing, offering the means to raise their wealth and status within the community, and a less rigid behavioural 'code' than that found by Sykes formed an 'idealised model of inmate behaviour' (Crewe 2009: 177). Whilst prisoners were united in their disrespect for prison authorities, trust within their own ranks was fragile, relying at times on regional affiliations outwith the prison providing relationship confidence. Prison walls became 'porous' in nature because people could be vouched for by shared contacts, and because breaches of trust in prison could be pursued after release, providing insurance that prisoners would behave as expected by the wider prison community (Crewe 2009: 150). These observations reinforce the argument that the experience of the prison setting is relevant to the violent choices actors make within them in accordance with SAT's proposals.

#### Prisons as moral climates

As SAT contends all humans are morally guided (Wikström 2006), understanding the moral values of those in prisoner communities is key to explaining their rule-breaking behaviour. Such values studied in post modernity have subtle distinctions based on individuals' imported factors, as well as aspects such as the prison type and enforcement of managerial contexts (Crewe 2009, Wooldredge 2020). Acceptance of violence in individual contexts are influenced by the prisoner mix, demographics and power, the number, experience and skills of staff and managers and other factors as has been highlighted in empirical studies, meta-analyses, and critical reviews (e.g., Gadon et al 2006, Schenk & Fremouw 2012, Steiner et al 2014). Over time, variables deemed relevant to the moral climate underpinning violence have been categorized into three broad areas, namely *situational factors*, *management factors*, and *personal characteristics*.

In a systematic review of literature around the features of violence in prisons and hospital settings, their features, or *Situational* factors, deemed relevant to violence included prison features such as security classification, staff features such as age and experience, temporal aspects such as sentence length, crowding, management factors, and program availability. Overall, violence was more likely based on factors such as higher security level prisons, dense traffic locations and where staff supervision was reduced, where there were increased numbers of non-white prisoners, reduced staff experience levels, and at times where limited regime opportunities were available. Further relevance was found in management approaches towards violence and the quality of relationships between different staff groups and their prisoners, which are regarded as *management factors* (Gadon et al 2006). Such findings support SAT's contention that situational features contribute to the perceived levels of anti-violent control within the prison, and whilst there is general support that they have a bearing on violence being used in prison (E.g., Bottoms 1999, Ricciardelli 2014, Lahm 2009), individual studies have reached inconsistent conclusions. For example, whilst some found relevance of crowding of prisons, others argue it had less influence on misconduct than overall population size (Wooldredge & Steiner 2009). Further inconsistencies have included the relevance of race, with some claiming non-white race determined increases in violence (Steiner et al 2014), whilst others found only the compound effect of larger non-white demographics increased violence levels (Wooldredge & Steiner 2009, Lahm 2009).

Such distinct findings have frustrated previous attempts to understand prison violence, but they highlight the potential utility of SAT in advancing this issue, which would contend *all* the features found in previous studies are relevant in explicating violence as a form of moral rule-breaking behaviour. This is because features such as crowding, and low levels of staff supervision highlight insufficient external control within the prison as deterrence for example, or that unavailability of effective regimes providing moral education fails to encourage development of internal, self-control to abstain from violence even when provoked or tempted to do so.

A common feature in existing literature arguably contributing to the situational context of the prison is the role of hegemonic masculinity within the norms of prisoner society and how it guides the perception-choice process (Crewe 2009, Ricciardelli 2014, Michalski 2017, Gooch 2019). A delicate balance of power and influence is sought within prisoner groups, with favour displayed to some prisoners over others (Ricciardelli 2014), but also a general sense no individual groups should have excess power (Skarbek 2014). Prisons hold people free society deems too dangerous to live alongside (Schenk & Fremouw 2012). It is of little surprise therefore that a dominant form of masculinity emerges in prison societies, both to maintain a normative equilibrium, and in response to individuals' fear within their setting. Capability and willingness to use violence is deemed important in 'establishing and reinforcing masculine identity' (Michalski 2017: 41) and staving off victimisation. The presence of this masculinity in prisons is generally uncontested, arising where an enduring 'perceived threat to self...is the precursor for serious violence and homicide' (Gooch, 2022). Whilst there are arguments hegemonic masculinity may be imported by the offender into the prison context (Ricciardelli 2014), it is also more common where individuals have limited scope to avoid conflict or use non-violent means for resolution (Michalski 2017) so arguably also an adaptation to prison life as found by Downie (2015). Its reliance by some to avoid victimisation within a moral climate of hopelessness, hardship, opposition, frail trust, and fear arguably creates a feedback loop that reinforces its utility for survival of the prison experience whilst becoming somewhat self-prophetic (Byrne & Hummer 2007), thereby supporting SAT's claim that violence may occur out of habit.

#### Prisoner propensity

The final category of features relevant to prison violence is *personal characteristics*, that is, the relevant aspects of each human's individual features that determine the likelihood of their engagement in violence. As outlined within the social and DEA models of SAT, these features do not

directly cause violence, but an individual's life experience in relation to those factors may influence their violent choices (Wikström 2020).

Age has been consistently correlated with increased violence, as highlighted by Schenk & Fremouw's 2012 critical review of literature on the personal characteristics relevant to prison violence. Singling out empirical work by Cunningham and Sorensen's 2006 study, they report prisoners under 21 were three times more violence-prone than those aged 31-35. This is supported by official E&W data highlighting assault rates in youth offender institutions as more than twice those reported in male adult sites (Gov.uk 2023a, Gov.uk 2023b). Simply put, younger people in the criminal justice system have a greater propensity towards violence than their older peers. Beyond this, individual studies would suggest generalisation of personal characteristics are difficult to discern, with the range of imported characteristics triggering different responses by different people to the same settings (Bottoms 1999, Jordanoska 2018). Such inconsistencies over time have occurred in part due to inconsistent definitions, and nuanced approaches of individual studies (Bottoms 1999, Schenk & Fremouw 2012, Wooldredge 2020), but also arguably because the range of such possibilities make comparison for empirical analysis challenging (Crewe 2009).

### **2.3 Summary**

In summary, whilst current literature provides many possible explanations for why violence happens in prison settings, much focus to date has considered what makes an *individual* violent, or a *type of place* violence-inducing (Lahm 2009). Such importation and deprivation theories remain credible, but incomplete (Wooldredge 2020) and outdated (Crewe 2009), and although the need to integrate both personal and situational characteristics to explore the problem is acknowledged, it has yet to be undertaken. SAT's utility in responding to this acknowledgement is clear. Its very construct is based upon the proposal that violence is a possible outcome between the convergence of the person and the setting. This is augmented by the range of empirical studies that have highlighted

how prison societies and their unique moral norms are prepotent in guiding the behaviour of prisoners on both an individual and aggregate level (Sykes 2020, Crewe 2009).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **3.1 Research aims and objectives**

The aim of this study was to use SAT as a framework to advance knowledge around prisoner violence in high security prison settings in E&W. These settings were identified as locations of particular interest to a study of this nature because it was expected prisoners convicted of violent offences would be located within them and given claims in existing literature that they present with the strongest sense of hardship which may be relevant to violent responses within them (Gadon et al 2006, Steiner et al 2014). In addition, male prisons were chosen as it is generally accepted men are responsible for more violence than women (PRT 2023). In pursuit of this aim, and with the support of previous literature, this study explores the following research questions:

- How does past engagement in violence-relevant moral action correlate with engagement in violence-relevant moral action in a custodial setting?
- What moral emotions motivate violent behaviour in a custodial setting?
- What, if any factors act as controls where custodial violence is deemed an action alternative?

#### **3.2 Research design and methods**

The study employed a mixed methods, sequential design using SAT as a framework to expand understanding of prisoner use of violence in prisons in E&W. Whilst SAT has been predominantly explored using quantitative methodology (E.g. Wikström et al 2012, Antonnchio & Tittle 2008), it was felt that this approach in isolation may limit the depth of human perspective that can be explored more comprehensively using qualitative methods, so a mixed methodological approach was used to draw on the strengths of both empirical approaches (Steckler et al 1992). The study was conducted sequentially to support a purposive sampling approach for the second stage of the

research of candidates whose experience of using violence within the setting would be of relevance to the research questions developed.

Initially, a self-completed questionnaire was used to survey data relating to the respondents' pro-violent morality and violence use before coming to prison, and those which they exhibited within the prison context. Previous use of self-report data in examining the relationship between morality and action (e.g., Antonacchio & Tittle 2008, Galupe & Baron 2014) supported the benefits of using this methodology, as well as providing an efficient means to gather data on a larger scale than could be otherwise achieved using qualitative approaches due to time limitations of this study (Robson 1999).

Following collection of survey data at stage one, it was then the aim of this study to understand how prisoners are moved to act, or not to act, based on their interaction with both the setting they find themselves in and those around them. To achieve this insight, a qualitative approach was incorporated within the design (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

This study is concerned with how prisoners' violence-related morality guided their levels of violence in custody, and how their experience of the prison setting contributes to developments in their violence-related morality and subsequent violent actions. Self-report questionnaires were used to allow 'mapping' (Bryman 1988:136) of data relating to the relevance of morality in violent action. A deductive approach was undertaken in evaluating this part of the study, with the aim of measuring the relevance of past morality on that of the same individuals in a prison context, and as SAT proposes all humans are rule-guided (Wikström 2006), the violent actions it guided. This data was also used to identify a smaller sample of participants with whom more iterative, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Whilst SAT was used as a framework to guide the ordering of the questions used within the interviews, maintaining a semi-structured approach allowed adaptability to the varying levels of violence shown between participants, flexibility in the sequencing of questions, and further exploration of points of interest as they emerged (Robson 1999).



### **3.3 Survey**

#### **Survey design**

This part of the study sought to understand the relationships between past violence-related morality and engagement in violence as moral action, with violence-related morality and engagement in violence in a prison context. Specifically, this was refined as exploring the relationship between the location, pro-violent morality, and the act of violence, guided by the situational model of SAT (Wikström 2006). In view of past literature on violence in prison contexts as outlined in chapter two (Gadon et al 2006, Wikström 2014, Wikström 2020), two hypotheses were proposed:

H<sub>1</sub> – Prisoners with a history of pro-violent morality and violent actions display pro-violent morality and commit acts of violence in prison.

(H<sub>0</sub> - There is no correlation between a history of pro-violent morality and violence actions, and pro-violent morality and violent actions in a prison context).

H<sub>2</sub> – Experiences of prison settings increase pro-violent morality and engagement in acts of violence.

(H<sub>0</sub> - Experiences in prison settings have no effect on pro-violent morality, and subsequent acts of violence).

A self-report questionnaire was prepared, adapted from a study of rule-breaking in a Scottish Young Offender Institution (Downie 2015). Downie's study had been inspired by the PADS+ longitudinal study into urban youth crime in which Wikström et al examined how the social environment and the characteristics and experiences of its occupants contribute to crime causation (Wikström et al 2012). Its utility in exploring moral rule-breaking within the prison context was of relevance to this study, but as Downie's survey featured types of rule-breaking relevant to adolescents, such as non-completion of homework, questions were adapted to be more relevant to an adult prison context.

The adapted questionnaire utilised summated rating scales (Likert scales) to help ensure the questions remained interesting to the respondents and encourage thorough consideration in their responses (Robson 1999). Questions were formatted into three broad sections, namely

demographics, pre-prison morality and action, and prison-based morality and action. The demographics section established features such as participants' age, sentence length and type, time served against sentence and previous convictions for violence. This was to evaluate how such variables contributed to prisoners' experiences of their sentence and their violence related morality. Section two of the questionnaire centred around respondents' lives before coming to prison, seeking a series of moral responses to questions posed. The response scale ranged from 'not wrong at all,' to 'very wrong.' This section included brief violent scenarios, gauging moral responses of the participant, with a response scale ranging between 'not at all serious,' to 'very serious.' The final series of questions in section two related to the frequency the respondent had engaged in violence-related actions prior to coming to prison. A scaled response was used to determine the prevalence of violence-related action, ranging between 'never,' to 'frequently.' Section three of the survey invited similar responses, but to a series of questions and scenarios set within a prison context. This section concerned itself with moral responses to how wrong violence-related actions are in a prison setting, and how frequently the respondent engaged in them within that setting.

A self-report survey was used to gather this data, as there were limitations to the level of data available from official databases. Whilst some data on known offending could be obtained from official databases, more reliable understanding of how violent-prone respondents are could be achieved by gathering data which included previously undetected violence. This also provided the 'best and closest approximation of...real levels of crime involvement' (Wikström et al 2012:110). It would not have been possible to determine prisoners' pro-violent morality via official records. There was a possibility that prisoners may feel reluctant to discuss past use of violence, particularly otherwise undetected violence via self-report questionnaires. Assurances around confidentiality and anonymity were built into survey design to mitigate this. The survey design was piloted on two members of the Prison Council at the researcher's home establishment. Positive feedback was received from the pilot, but the results were not counted in the analysis of data.

### Survey sample

Two prisons within the Long Term and High Security Estate (LTHSE) were identified as research sites, to ensure any results were not specific to a single prison context and to obtain data which was more generalisable within this part of the prison system. In view of past research suggesting the norms of prison settings prompt the use of violence for the first time whilst in custody (Downie 2015), the study also sought to gather data from participants *without* a history of violence. To counter the potential that relatively few such individuals were held in the LTHSE, the decision to study in more than one site was deemed further relevant.

The Governor of each site supported the study and designated a manager within the Safer Custody department as a gatekeeper. With their help, a demographic list of each prison was prepared, split into two 'strata' (Robson 1999:138) of prisoners convicted for violent offences as defined by the Crown Prosecution Service (Leg.Gov. Nd), and those convicted for other, non-violent offences. The strata only counted the current offence/s the individuals were in custody for, with declarations of past use of violence captured within the demographic part of the questionnaire. Stratified random sampling was used to support close representation of overall demographics (Robson 1999), and 180 potential respondents were identified within each site accordingly. As a practitioner I was aware prisoner response rates in surveys can be low, and existing literature highlights a wide range of reasons for this, including mistrust on the part of the respondent (Singer 2016). In view of this, oversampling was deemed appropriate with the aim of gaining sufficient data for findings to be valid. This was deemed as being a minimum of 30 responses. A computerised, random number generator was used to select individuals from each stratum to be invited into the study. This list was shared with the Safer Custody team in each site, who excluded some individuals on the basis of health, impending release date, and poor literacy levels. During a two-day visit to each site, the remaining 353 potential participants received hand-delivered participant information packs, consent forms, return envelopes and questionnaires. Surveys were hand-delivered to give candidates the

opportunity to ask questions about the study and encourage participation. Each participant was allocated a unique personal ID number which was only known to the researcher for anonymity.

The survey remained open to participants until 16<sup>th</sup> July 2023, by which time 48 useable questionnaires were responded to, 21 from HMP Long Lartin and 27 from HMP Wakefield. A further eight responses were received, two of which had been retrieved by individuals not in the initial random sample, three of which were uncompleted questionnaires simply returned unanswered in the envelopes provided, two which were returned after the end of the survey period, and one which contained biblical text but no questionnaire responses. These eight returns were discounted from the data analysis along with the 2 responses provided during the pilot stage of the study.

#### Survey analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires were downloaded onto SPSS and cleaned, followed by completion of reliability tests prior to statistical analysis being undertaken. Nominal and scalar data obtained were used to identify potential interviewees for the qualitative part of this study as explained later in this chapter.

Data analysis is the 'process of examining and interpreting data' to develop insights of the research subject (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2005:240). Initially, descriptive statistics were examined to understand the individual features of respondents. Two further forms of analysis were performed on the survey data obtained during this study. To test hypothesis one ( $H_1$ ), bivariate correlation tests were performed establishing correlates to violence-relevant morality and violent action. Pearson's  $r$  correlation tests were performed, except where skewed data were observed, in which case the test was adjusted using Spearman's rho correlation tests. Finally, to test hypothesis two ( $H_2$ ), hierarchical regression tests were performed to establish how particular variables influenced pro-violent morality within the prison context, and subsequently the frequency of violence use.

### **3.4 Interviews**

#### **Interview design**

A semi-structured interview approach was chosen to allow pre-determination of introductory questions and prompts (Robson 1999). This allowed confirmation of the individual's unique identification and understanding and consent. Participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, how to withdraw consent, and provided with a pseudonym known only by themselves and the researcher. With the individuals' consent, interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Following analysis of survey data, an interview schedule was developed incorporating questions guided by SAT's construct, providing questions and prompts allowing a conversation about three broad areas relevant to the research questions being explored. Those were what motivates people to use violence in prison, what morality and choices are relevant its use, and what factors control the use of violence in that setting. Although being guided by SAT as a framework to explore the relevance of the interaction between the person and their setting in exploring violence in prison, open ended questions were used to support a more iterative approach (Bryman 2016). Participants were asked questions around their perception of wider prison community values relating to violence to gain closer insight into the morality of the setting, how the behaviour of other occupants influenced their own experiences of the prison context and to further pursue any relevant emerging themes. Due to time constraints this part of the study was not piloted.

Each interview was conducted in private with only the researcher and interviewee present. Digital recordings of interviews were transcribed by a professional typist employed by HMPPS. Care was taken during each interview to ensure each participant was referred to only by their pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

### Interview Sample

Nominal and scalar data obtained from questionnaire responses were used to identify individuals whose violence-related morality and/ or frequency of engagement in violence action had changed between their time before prison, and in prison. Six candidates' attitudes towards and use of violence had increased whilst in custody, and six had decreased. Purposive sampling was chosen with the aim it would allow for identification of 'information-rich' candidates whose experience may add depth of understanding as to what had guided such changes in their behaviour more than the data available through random means (Etikan 2016:2). Whilst all potential interviewees had returned signed consent forms agreeing to be interviewed, in preparation for any changes to consent or changes to their circumstances, such as transfers out of the research site, in addition to 12 potential interviewees being identified, five further candidates were identified should an alternative be required. The final list of interviewees consisted of 11 of the original selection and one of the additional candidates. This was due to one of the candidates being unable to attend the interview due to work commitments.

### Interview analysis

Once typed, transcripts were manually coded, guided by SAT's theoretical framework to aid thematic analysis of data relevant to the research questions and overall aims and objectives of this study. Coding was undertaken at first and second stage to establish the topics emerging from the data, and themes they could be interpreted under (Robson 1999). This was done by initially generating initial codes from interview transcripts, and then adopting a 'patterning' approach (Robson 1999: 401) to generate themes. Initially, 36 codes were identified within the interview data, which were then reviewed and redefined into 18. Finally, SAT's construct was used as a guide for consideration of the themes emerging at the second stage, resulting in five observable themes being found relevant to violent attitudes and use in the prison context. These were the prison setting; the prison culture; personal characteristics; motivation; and controls.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

The prison community in both sites were informed of the study via a general notice published across the prison. An information sheet was provided to each potential participant setting out clear explanations of research aims, that participation was voluntary, and providing commitments around confidentiality and anonymity to those consenting to participate (BPS n.d.). The study received approval from the Ethics Committee within the Institute of Criminology, the National Research Council, and it was supported by Directors within HMPPS. Anonymity was assured for all participants, which was achieved via the use of unique reference numbers for completed survey respondents, and pseudonyms for interviewees.

As an employee within HMPPS I am classed as an 'insider' (Robson 1999:297). Whilst it was deemed a degree of confidence in working with individuals in prison would be of benefit to the study, there was potential for role conflict, particularly in view of my seniority within the organisation. In addition to this, Bennett (2015) highlights the risk of bias in insider research. As mitigation, attempts were made to create distinctions between my role as a senior HMPPS manager and researcher by conducting research in unfamiliar prisons, and by using other researchers and my Supervisor at the University of Cambridge in discussing my findings. These individuals did not have access to data protected by commitments of confidentiality but did give feedback on interpretations as recommended (Robson 1999). Whilst I was recognised in both research sites by prisoners who had previously been at my establishment, none of the individuals interviewed were personally known to me, and I took great care in explaining my status as a student researcher when meeting individual prisoners throughout the study.

There were two occasions during the interview stage where ethical dilemmas occurred. One was when an interviewee advised me that a newly arrived prisoner had a £2000 price on his head. Another was when a prisoner describing a violent incident which had occurred the evening before our interview gave an opinion about who had paid the man who had committed the attack. After

careful consideration of my dual responsibilities as both a researcher, and as a member of HMPPS staff I advised Safer Custody staff that I had heard a recent arrival had a bounty on his head without revealing the name of the person who had told me this. I did not report the second concern as the absence of a threat to safety meant it did not compromise my responsibilities as a HMPPS official in the same way. I further reflected that the prisoner had only shared an opinion, and not provided first-hand knowledge of the perpetrator of the attack, although this dilemma did require careful consideration before reaching my decision.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Findings and discussion will be set out in this chapter sequentially in reflection of the research approach. Part one is concerned with quantitatively investigating how past violent behaviour influences the violence-related behaviour people exhibit in custody. Part two explores what individual and situational factors influence the violent-related behaviour they exhibit in prison. This is explored using semi-structured interviews analysed qualitatively. As this research project used mixed methodology, for ease of readership, discussion points will be set out within results and findings as they emerge from the data.

#### **4.1 Survey results**

##### **Descriptive statistics**

Descriptive statistics were used to explore respondents' features. These included prison location, age, type of offence, sentence length, time served, and unconvicted violence, the breakdown of which is shown in the following tables. Table one reveals the spread of responses between the two research sites.

Table 1

##### ***Respondent prison location***

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Long Lartin	21	43.8	43.8	43.8
	Wakefield	27	56.3	56.3	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 highlights that of the 47 individuals for whom data was available, nearly two thirds (n = 62.5%) were convicted for violent offences, supporting the expectation violent offenders would be found in the prisons selected for the study (Gadon et al 2006).

Table 2

***Type of current conviction***

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Non-violent	17	35.4	36.2	36.2
	Violent	30	62.5	63.8	100.0
	Total	47	97.9	100.0	
Missing		1	2.1		
Total		48	100.0		

Over half of respondents were serving life sentences, indicating their release date was unspecified beyond a notional amount of time they must remain in prison (Table 3). This was deemed important given the relevance claimed that hopefulness derived from being released is relevant to compliance in prisons (Seeds 2022).

Table 3

***Type of prison sentence***

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	determinate	21	43.8	43.8	43.8
	life	27	56.3	56.3	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

The average sentence length of the 45 respondents providing data was nearly 20 years (19.42 years), with the sentence range being two years to a 'whole life' tariff on a life sentence, with no possibility of release. This sentence was represented numerically as 50 years, although the individual could spend longer in prison depending on their life expectancy. 39 respondents declared the amount of time they had spent in prison, ranging from under a year ( $n = .75$ ) to 35 years. The average amount of time served within this sample was 8.1 years (Table 4), which would indicate most men who engaged in the survey were less than halfway through the minimum term they would spend in prison. Existing literature supports this as relevant to compliance on both individual and aggregate levels (Crewe 2009).

Table 4

***Sentence length and time served.***

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Length of prison sentence	45	2.00	50.00	19.4269	1.62974	10.93261
time served of prison sentence	39	.75	35.00	8.1000	1.38387	8.64228
Valid N (listwise)	36					

Over two thirds of respondents (n = 68.1%) claimed to have not been involved in any previous, unconvicted violence prior to coming into prison (Table 5). This may be explained in part by the fact that more than a third of total respondents (n = 35.6%) were not initially convicted of violent offences as previously seen in table 2, but the possibility prisoners were unwilling to disclose past offences, such as assault or murder, which could result in additional time in prison was also considered.

Table 5

***Previous unconvicted violence***

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no previous	32	66.7	68.1	68.1
	previous	15	31.3	31.9	100.0
	Total	47	97.9	100.0	
Missing		1	2.1		
Total		48	100.0		

In E&W, prisoners are held in adult prisons from the age of 21, with the age of participants for whom data was available in this study ranging between 23 to 74. The average age was 45.67 years. Age was perceived to be an important variable considering previous research and official data indicating the presence of an inverse relationship between age and violence in prisons, with younger people responsible for more violence within them (Schenk & Fremouw 2012, Gov.uk 2023c).

Table 6

***Age breakdown of participants***

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std.Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	St. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Age	43	23	74	45.67	2.15	14.10	.51	.36
Valid N (listwise)	43							

**Data reliability**

The questionnaire was designed to measure violence-related morality and use of violence in two contexts, namely pre-prison and in-prison settings. A reliability test was performed using Cronbach's  $\alpha$  in SPSS to make sure the measures 'consistently reflect the construct that it is measuring' (Field 2017: 821). To be considered acceptable, the value of the coefficients should be between .7 and .8 (Field 2017). As shown in table 7 below, the measurements for violence-related morality and use of violence in both pre-prison settings and the prison settings had high reliability, indicating consistency in the measurements of these variables.

Table 7

***Reliability statistics***

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on	
		Standardized items	N of items
<b><i>Pre-prison morality</i></b>	.934	.934	12
<b><i>Pre-prison violence</i></b>	.862	.84	9
<b><i>Prison morality</i></b>	.862	.84	9
<b><i>Prison violence</i></b>	.92	.915	13

**Pro-violent morality and action**

A full range of possible responses from most (4) to least (1) serious were provided across the sample. A higher score indicated heightened pre-prison pro-violent morality, and the average score across the sample was 1.77, increasing to 1.93 in a prison context (Table 8). This is in line with theoretical

perspectives that violence is more morally acceptable in a prison setting as a form of social order due to the perceived lack of non-violent alternatives (Michalski 2017).

Frequency of violence was measured with a higher score indicating increased involvement in violence, although the average scores for violence use were slightly lower than the scores for pro-violent morality, appearing to indicate some form of control to actual engagement in violence in both settings (mean<sub>pre-prison</sub> = 1.57, and mean<sub>in-prison</sub> = 1.37). It is of note that the inhibiting effect between pro-violent morality and actual use of violent appears greater in the prison context than the pre-prison context, which suggests the control mechanisms of the prison setting are more effective in deterring violence within this sample.

Table 8  
***Mean pro-violence/morality and use***

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Mean pre-prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	48	1.00	3.83	1.77	.72	.98	.34
Mean pre-prison violence (High score = more violence use)	48	1.00	3.11	1.57	.62	1.11	.34
Mean prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	48	1.00	3.46	1.93	.65	.98	.34
Mean prison violence (High score = more violence use)	48	1.00	3.36	1.37	.58	1.87	.34
Valid N (listwise)	48						

The main variables identified were violence-related morality, and violent action, which were measured before prison, and in prison. Additional background variables were identified as offence type, sentence type, age, and previous violence. To understand the relationship between these variables, bivariate test results were performed, shown in Table 9 and Table 10. They show large correlations between morality before prison and the violence in that context, which was statistically significant ( $r = .796$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This supports SAT's claim people whose moral rules support violence view violence as viable action (Wikström & Trieber 2009). The data also show strong correlation between pro-violent morality both before and in the prison context, which was found to be

statistically significant ( $r = .798, p = <.001$ ). The correlation between pro-violent morality and violence use in a prison context is also large and statistically significant ( $r = .635, p = <.001$ ), reinforcing the relevance of morality in guiding human action (Wikström 2006). This presents a picture of violence-relevant criminal propensity of those in the prison context as this morality has endured in different settings with different violence-inducing features.

Correlations observed between the two periods support the possible presence of violent habits. This is further suggested by correlations observed between prison pro-violent morality and the use of violence before coming to prison ( $r = .765, p <.001$ ). When considering actual violence in custody, further to the strong relationship with pro-violent morality, strong and statistically significant correlations are also seen with past use of violence ( $r = .652, p <.001$ ), and pre-existing pro-violent morality before prison ( $r = .508, p <.001$ ), again suggesting a familiarity in using violence that could be representative of habit formation (Wikström 2019).

Table 9  
**Correlations**

Correlations	Age	1_determinate, 2_life	Sentence length	1_non-violent, 2_violent	1_no prev violence, 2_prev violence	Mean pre-prison morality	Mean prison morality
Age	1 43						
1_determinate, 2_life	-.142 .365 43	1 48					
Sentence length	-.129 .428 40	.197 .194 45	1 45				
Time served	.148 .386 40	.469 .003 47	-.017 .920 36				
1_non-violent, 2_violent	-.213 .176 42	.659 <.001 47	.075 .627 44	1 47			
1_no prev violence, 2_prev violence	-.308 .047 42	.256 .080 48	.020 .898 44	.313 .034 46	1 47		
Mean pre-prison morality	-.252 .103 43	.256 .080 48	-.195 .200 45	.289 .049 47	.598 <.001 47	1 48	
Mean prison morality	-.294 .055 43	.129 .383 48	-.046 .766 45	.324 .026 47	.615 <.001 47	.798 <.001 48	1 48

Table 10

**Correlations**

Correlations Spearman's rho	Age	1- _determina te, 2_life	Sentence length	Time served	1_non- violent, 2_violent	1_no <del>pre</del> violence, 2_prev violence	Mean pre- prison morality	Mean pre- prison violence	Mean prison morality	Mean prison violence
Age	1									
	43									
1_determinate, 2_life	-.122	1								
	.437									
	43	48								
Sentence length	-.158	.159	1							
	.329	.295								
	40	45	45							
Time served	.142	.358	-.206	1						
	.409	.025	.229							
	36	39	36	39						
1_non-violent, 2_violent	-.205	.659	.054	.141	1					
	.192	<.001	.728	.400						
	42	47	44	38	47					
1_no <del>pre</del> violence, 2_prev violence	-.309	.156	.019	.327	.313	1				
	.047	.294	.903	.045	.034					
	42	47	44	38	46	47				
Mean pre-prison morality	-.221	.245	-.276	.449	.299	.545	1			
	.154	.094	.066	.004	.041	<.001				
	43	48	45	39	47	47	48			
Mean pre-prison violence	-.482	.247	-.161	.329	.493	.687	.796	1		
	.001	.091	.290	.041	<.001	<.001	<.001			
	43	48	45	39	47	47	48	48		
Mean prison morality	-.240	.161	-.032	.392	.358	.562	.770	.765	1	
	.121	.274	.836	.014	.013	<.001	<.001	<.001		
	43	48	45	39	47	47	48	48	48	
Mean prison violence	-.396	.252	.071	.277	.432	.595	.508	.652	.635	1
	.009	.084	.642	.088	.002	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	43	48	45	39	47	47	48	48	48	48

Within the sample, age is negatively correlated to mean levels of violence used both before prison ( $r = -.482$ ,  $P = .001$ ) and in prison ( $r = -.396$ ,  $r = .009$ ). Whilst the effect size is moderate, this is statistically significant, and appears to support the large body of literature claiming that as people become older, their use of violence reduces (e.g., Schenk & Fremouw 2012, Ricciardelli 2014). To summarise therefore, individuals who saw violence as viable action before prison appear to use more violence than those with stronger moral opposition to violence, and appeared to both show greater acceptance of violence as viable action in prison, and use higher levels of violence in that setting, supporting the hypothesis that correlation exists.

#### Impact of the prison experience

To evaluate hypothesis two ( $H_2$ ), hierarchical linear regression tests were performed, exploring the effect prison variables had on pro-violent morality and violent acts within that setting. Previous bivariate correlations had revealed a statistically significant correlation between time served in

prison and mean pro-violent morality in a prison context ( $r = .392$ ,  $p = .014$ ), supporting a previous claim that time spent in prison increased some prisoners' violence (Lahm 2009). This coefficient appears to indicate time served in prison may have had a moderate effect on respondents reporting pro-violent morality in that setting, as shown in a simple scatterplot below (figure 4). This was therefore examined further, in addition to other prison variables to establish their effect on both prison pro-violent morality and prison acts of violence. Hierarchical linear regression tests were conducted to examine if these variables explain a statistically significant degree of variance in prison pro-violent morality and prison violence after also accounting for pre-prison morality, pre-prison violence, and morality of the setting (Field 2017). This was also chosen due to the high level of multicollinearity between variables within previous correlations performed, which could make it difficult to establish the significance of each predictor (Field 2017).

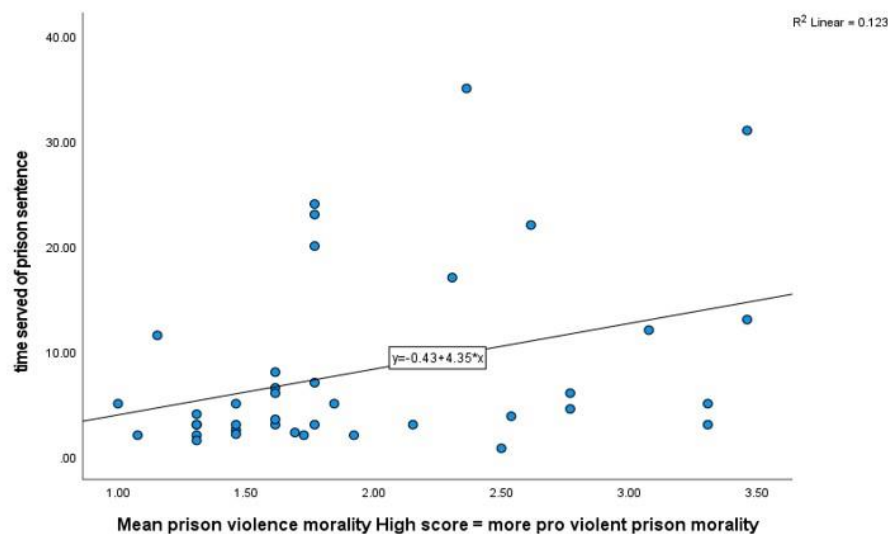


Fig 4.

#### Predictors of prison pro-violent morality

Variables were added to the test at different steps to establish whether existing attitudes or experience of using violence would wash out the effects observed of prison variables alone (Table 11). Whilst initially prison predictors accounted for 15 percent of the variance in pro-violent morality in a prison context, the results of the model were not significant, ( $R^2 = .149$ ,  $F = 1.87$ ,  $p = .155$ ). When the test was adjusted to account for pre-prison pro-violent morality the model became statistically



significant ( $F = 98.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and results indicated that pro-violent morality before prison was by far the strongest predictor on pro-violent morality found in a prison context ( $\beta = .949$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Predictors then accounted for 80 percent of the variance in pro-violence morality in a prison context ( $R^2 = .797$ ). This increased to 87 percent at step three of the test when the effects of pre-prison violence were added as a predictor, with pre-prison violence a predictor in pro-violent morality for 65 percent of the sample ( $R^2 = .886$ ,  $\beta = .654$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, the general experience of being in prison did not in itself increase pro-violent morality shown by the participants in this study. The most likely predictor of prison pro-violent morality was pre-existing pro-violent morality, followed by previous use of violence.

**Table 11**  
*Coefficients<sup>a</sup>*

Model		Standardized Coefficients	p-value	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		Beta		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)		.000	1.314	2.467
	Length of sentence	-.116	.503	-.029	.015
	Time served	.297	.114	-.006	.054
	Life determinate centred	.137	.474	-.175	.368
2	(Constant)		.033	.038	.862
	Length of sentence	.042	.632	-.009	.014
	Time served	-.133	.197	-.027	.006
	Life determinate centred	.033	.727	-.113	.160
	<b>Mean pre prison morality (High score = more violent morality)</b>	<b>.949</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.704	1.067
3	(Constant)		.033	.033	.713
	Length of sentence	.022	.762	-.008	.011
	Time served	-.041	.634	-.017	.011
	Life determinate centred	-.005	.944	-.116	.108
	Mean pre prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	.319	.078	-.035	.630
	<b>Mean pre prison violence (High score = more acts of violence)</b>	<b>.654</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.338	1.029

a. Dependent Variable: Mean prison violence morality High score = more pro violent prison morality

Whilst this study did not explore what caused participants to acquire pre-prison violence-related morality, results suggest pre-existing perceptions of violence as morally acceptable were imported into the custodial setting. However, of further relevance, is that SAT defines habitual behaviour as ‘tendency to intentionally act (or not to act) in a certain way as a response to a particular familiar circumstance’ (Wikström 2006: 78). As suggested by previously performed bivariate correlations, the relevance of past morality and use of violence in predicting prison pro-violent morality could suggest

a habitual attitude towards violence in a prison setting emerging from the 'moral experience' (Wikström 2019: 198) of past successes in using violent approaches to past motivations in other settings.

#### Predictors of prison violence

A second hierarchical linear regression was performed to evaluate the effects of prison variables on actual violence within prison (Table 12). Once again, additional variables were added at different steps to explore whether they washed out the effects of previous predictors to prison violence in view of strong previous correlations observed between morality and violence use in different contexts.

When evaluating predictability of prison violence, prison variables initially incorporated were statistically significant, jointly accounting for 24 percent of the variance in prison violence ( $R^2 = .237$ ,  $F = 3.313$ ,  $p = .032$ ). The only significant individual predictor was time served ( $\beta = .360$ ,  $p = .046$ ), appearing to support Lahm's claims (2009). When the test was adjusted accounting for pre-prison morality and violence, the model again found statistically significant effects of variables jointly predicting violence use in the prison context ( $F = 47.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These variables accounted for 82 percent of the variance in prison-based violence ( $R^2 = .815$ ), but when coefficients were looked at individually, the only variable found to have a statistically significant effect was pre-prison violence ( $\beta = .536$ ,  $p = .009$ ), plus it was observed that previous effects of time served were no longer significant, having been washed out by the predictors added ( $\beta = .046$ ,  $p = .655$ ). Finally, further adjustments were made allowing for the effects of pro-violent morality in a prison context on prison violence. Despite strong correlations previously identified between pro-violent morality and violence use in the prison context ( $r = .640$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the effects were not statistically significant ( $R^2 = .820$ ,  $F = 1.08$ ,  $p = .308$ ) with their addition also seeming to have countered the previous effects observed of pre-prison use of violence in predicting violence in the prison setting.

**Table 12**  
*Coefficients<sup>a</sup>*

Model		Standardized Coefficients	p-value	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		Beta		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)		<.001	.756	1.740
	Length of sentence	-.082	.616	-.023	.014
	<b>Time served</b>	<b>.360</b>	<b>.046</b>	.001	.052
	<del>Life determinate centred</del>	.209	.253	.099	.364
2	(Constant)		.923	-.345	.379
	Length of sentence	.044	.602	-.007	.012
	Time served	.046	.655	-.012	.018
	<del>Life determinate centred</del>	.083	.377	-.067	.172
	Mean pre prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	.343	.108	-.066	.642
	<b>Mean pre prison violence (High score = more violence)</b>	<b>.536</b>	<b>.009</b>	.136	.872
3	(Constant)		.764	-.449	.333
	Length of sentence	.039	.643	-.008	.012
	Time served	.055	.593	-.011	.019
	<del>Life determinate centred</del>	.084	.370	-.066	.173
	Mean pre prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	.271	.222	-.146	.601
	Mean pre prison violence (High score = more violence)	.389	.112	-.091	.824
	Mean prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	.224	.308	-.196	.599

a. Dependent Variable: Mean prison violence (High score = more violent)

As it appears high multicollinearity in predictors was too difficult for the test to distinguish between, the test was repeated but with different sequencing, as shown in table 13. As in the original regression test, results were initially significant ( $R^2 = .237$ ,  $F = 3.313$ ,  $p = .032$ ), with time served observed as having statistically significant effects in predicting violence ( $\beta = .360$ ,  $p = .046$ ). Step two of version two of the test remained statistically significant ( $R^2 = .799$ ,  $F = 86.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ), although when pre-prison violence was added it washed out the effects of time served in predicting violence in prison and became the only statistically significant predictor in its place ( $\beta = .820$ ,  $p < .001$ ). At step three, when morality variables were added, the test was no longer statistically significant as had been found in the original test.

**Table 13***Coefficients<sup>a</sup>*

Model		Standardized Coefficients	p-value	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		Beta		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)		2.527	.165	1.537
	1 - determinate, 2 - life sentence	.209	.253	-.199	.728
	Length of sentence	-.082	.616	-.023	.014
	<b>time served</b>	<b>.360</b>	<b>.046</b>	.001	.052
2	(Constant)		.772	-.469	.352
	1 - determinate, 2 - life sentence	.074	.444	-.152	.338
	Length of sentence	.024	.781	-.009	.011
	time served	.117	.225	-.006	.023
	<b>Mean pre prison violence (High score = more violence)</b>	<b>.820</b>	<b>.000</b>	.602	.941
3	(Constant)		.319	-.658	.222
	1 - determinate, 2 - life sentence	.084	.370	-.133	.346
	Length of sentence	.039	.643	-.008	.012
	time served	.055	.593	-.011	.019
	Mean pre prison violence (High score = more violence)	.389	.112	-.091	.824
	Mean pre prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	.271	.222	-.146	.601
	Mean prison violence morality (High score = more violent morality)	.224	.308	-.196	.599

a. Dependent Variable: Mean prison violence High score = more acts of prison violence

The test was performed again, with predictors added at step two and step three reversed (Table 14).

Once again, adding more predictors at each step appeared to wash out the results of the previous step, and at step three the test revealed no statistically significant predictions of violence in a prison setting. Repeating the sequencing of predictors added in this hierarchical regression test confirms high multicollinearity is too great for the test to tease apart.

**Table 14**  
*Coefficients<sup>a</sup>*

Model		Standardized Coefficients	p-value	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		Beta		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)		2.527	.165	1.537
	1 - determinate, 2 - life sentence	.209	1.163	-.199	.728
	Length of sentence	-.082	.616	-.023	.014
	<b>time served</b>	<b>.360</b>	<b>.046</b>	.001	.052
2	(Constant)		.186	-.733	.149
	1 - determinate, 2 - life sentence	.100	.296	-.117	.371
	Length of sentence	.043	.625	-.008	.012
	time served	.028	.787	-.013	.017
	<b>Mean prison morality (High score = more violent morality)</b>	<b>.434</b>	<b>.021</b>	.062	.719
	<b>Mean pre prison morality (High score = more violent morality)</b>	<b>.447</b>	<b>.028</b>	.043	.709
3	(Constant)		.319	-.658	.222
	1 - determinate, 2 - life sentence	.084	.370	-.133	.346
	Length of sentence	.039	.643	-.008	.012
	time served	.055	.593	-.011	.019
	Mean prison violence morality (High score = more violent morality)	.224	.308	-.196	.599
	Mean pre prison morality (High score = more violent morality)	.271	.222	-.146	.601
	Mean pre prison violence (High score = more violence)	.389	.112	-.091	.824

a. Dependent Variable: Mean prison violence High score = more acts of prison violence

It is unclear whether the level of correlation between variables is due to stability in behaviour between pre-prison and prison stages of participants' lives, or because of consistent relevance of morality and moral education in shaping habitual behaviour (Wikström 2020). In either case, the results of regression tests performed to assess the relevance of hypothesis two ( $H_2$  – Experiences of prison settings increase pro-violent morality and engagement in acts of violence) were inconclusive, and therefore the null hypothesis cannot be disproved.

In summary, this study found strong, statistically significant correlations between pro-violent morality and violent action, supporting the increasing body of literature morality has a central feature in explaining rule-breaking behaviour (Wikström 2006). Strong correlation was also observed between violence-related morality pre-prison and that in a prison context, as well as strong

correlation between that morality and violence use within the prison setting. The most likely predictors of pro-violent morality within the prison context were pre-existing pro-violent morality, followed by previous use of violence, highlighting the relevance of moral education and habit formation in pro-violent morality (Wikström 2020). A clear statistical explanation for predictors of violence in prison could not be achieved from the tests performed due to multicollinearity observed between the relevant variables of the study. The aim of part two of the overall study was therefore to explore the complexity of the interaction between the individual and the setting in explaining violent behaviour in greater depth, than could be achieved using quantitative analysis.

#### **4.2 Interview findings**

Interview data was analysed to better understand what moves and controls peoples' actions relating to violence within the prison context. Analysis of the interview data revealed the following five themes as relevant to violence in the prison context; features of the prison setting; the prison culture; personal factors; motivational factors; and control factors.

##### **Features of the prison setting**

Most interviewees described environmental features which contributed to their own violence and their perception of others' violent action choices. This supports one of the key proposals within SAT that inducements of the setting are relevant to the action choices of those within them (Wikström 2006). There was *durability* of violence-relevant negative perceptions of the prison context, in the sense violence permeated across different prison environments, and had endured over a considerable period of time. Violence was described as existential and inescapable due to *forced proximity* prisoners suffered, and the physical environment preventing *avoidance* with people with whom violent conflict had occurred or was feared. Aspects of daily life within prison were experienced as pro-violent through *aggressive cues*, including a type of *unpredictability* in how each

prison environment and its norms operated, making successful navigation without violence challenging.

Participants described the durability of negative, violence-inducing features across different prison contexts. Zain claimed prisons were ostensibly negative spaces, only recognising negative behaviour, contributing to violent attitudes which were anticipated by those who lived there. This view was shared widely:

‘Even before I came to prison, I always imagined prison would be a violent place’ (Steve).

Being forced to live amongst people perceived to be violent-prone and ‘dangerous’ (Andy), or with whom they had, or anticipated conflict contributed to aggression. Gordon recalled conflict he encountered when a rival group-member had arrived on his wing. After a violent exchange they had managed to reach a point of shared acquiescence through negotiations conducted via their windows, with both early in their sentence and wanting to avoid decades of ongoing conflict. This was unusual, with Gordon acknowledging living peacefully is ‘tougher inside prison as you can’t get away from these people.’ Several men described smaller units which held specialist roles within the LTHSE. These included a High Secure Unit in Belmarsh, and the Mulberry Unit in Wakefield for individuals with autism diagnoses (HMIP 2023). Despite recognising the opportunities smaller specialist units offered, within them prisoners described more acute forced proximity, with complex mental health needs or risks to others creating tension and fuelling conflict rather than easing it, and consequentially opportunities to avoid inducements of violence fewer.

Aligned to the concern that prisoners had little control over who they lived with was their inability to escape violence. This was largely a result of prison placing physical limitations on how prisoners can avoid one another; ‘outside you can walk away and escape...in these prisons there is no escape’ (Max). However, there was also a preoccupation exhibited that violence was imminent and

ubiquitous; 'you just don't know, you go for a shower, and it could happen in there, it could happen any time' (Lennox), which was relevant in guiding the violence-related choices prisoners made.

Prison conflict was described as having a long memory, with the experience of being in prison acting as a preservative to feudal behaviour.

'In prison your time necessarily stops... so someone may draw upon pain and hatred for a very long time, it could be two or three years and they may see that person and still have hatred for them' (Gordon).

This observation was not constrained by physical location, with pervading threats of violence occurring for some individuals across different prison wings, as had been the case with the individual who had arrived at the prison during the study with a bounty on his head. This interminable hostility between opponents after conflict seemed to be aggravated by the pressure of prolonged co-location which lessened opportunities for conflict to de-escalate over time.

'Have an argument and they are fucking abusing each other all night, so instead of having a cooling off period, it gets worse doesn't it...they are shouting, especially in the Seg Unit, shouting all night abuse at each other' (Andy).

Participants had their own perspectives of features which fuelled aggression and influenced perceptions of the action choices available to them. Existential noise levels and the general pace of prison life were triggers for some prisoners who lived in a constant state of alert, fearing unprovoked attacks, and creating feelings of 'paranoia' (Andy). In a theoretical study of prison violence, Blevins et al argued that prison conditions provide 'noxious stimuli' where noise levels and fear supported violence (2010: 153), which was evident in this study. Daily regimes created potential flash points, with violence used to resolve frustration over meal portions, or access to telephones, making it hard for interviewees to anticipate less harmful ways of meeting basic needs. At times supervising staff contributed to prisoners' perceptions of violence, whether through their appearance wearing



personal protective equipment (PPE) that 'projected they are interested in some type of violence' (Ben), or through hostile behaviour towards prisoners.

'I was put into my cell, there is a glass panel on the cell door where they do checks. The prison officer smashed the glass panel and he said to me, 'there's your air hole' (Steve).

Where prisoners lived in a state of anticipation and fear, a desire for predictability over daily life was sought and for some it was generally achievable. However, this was hard to maintain, with a lack of consistency in the norms and values of different prisons, and even different wings within a prison creating uncertainty, tension, and opportunities for conflict. Such fragile rules made it hard for prisoners to avoid violent situations. It was acknowledged in previous empirical studies on high security prisons there is no such thing as '*the prison*' (Sparks et al 1996: 301), and prisoners in this study were able to describe different prison contexts as having different inducements emphasising the relevance of how the individual and the prison setting converging shapes perceptions (Wikström 2006). Some felt that dispersal prisons were better at controlling violence, some felt the nature of the population within them prompted more violence, some felt particular dispersals were better than others. Vulnerable prison population wings generally appeared less violent prone but not exclusively, as even in those units 'one minute it's a level playing field and the next minute (clicks fingers) they are gone, so you are always on edge' (Ali).

### The prison culture

Within prison settings, the cultures establish the moral norms which guide prisoner action choices (Crewe 2009). Most prisoners in this study described a *dominant group* whose control influenced much of the violence used. This was exacerbated by *hegemonic masculinity* promoting aggressive behaviour and making it difficult to avoid violence through fear of victimisation if not meeting a stereotypical 'macho' image that created acceptance and feelings of protection from being targeted

by others. *Reputation* was key to survival, with violence used in a functional way to stave off threats and communicate personal strength to the wider community.

Most prisoners described the dominance experienced in the high security estate from the 'Muslim brotherhood' (Zain), whose influence over behavioural norms was perceived to be significant. Whilst Islamic conversion in prison has been linked to a search for meaning and belonging as well as safety and personal identity (Liebling et al 2011), prisoners in this study described a complex and varied construct around this well-established phenomenon. Several prisoners spoke about feeling safer from victimisation by being affiliated with the dominant group, rather than for religious motivations. Describing himself as Muslim, but 'Christian at heart' Paul explained 'it's horrible for people who are not Muslim,' explaining non-Muslims' daily lives, such as playing modern music are subject to control by the dominant group. The protection offered to members extended to prisoners whose actions would have normally contravened strict Islamic expectations. This included known drug users who would accrue significant debt and seek help from the brotherhood declaring the debt as 'squashed' (Ben) and offer protection from otherwise retributionist debtors.

Most men believed coercion lay at the root of Islamic conversions. Several, including some Muslim men, spoke about their dominance being less about faith, than having sufficient numbers within the setting to control the behaviour of others. This form of social control, whilst morally questionable was effective, with even the threat of punishment providing strong deterrence from unwanted behaviour to members and non-members alike. Whilst not universally popular, its effectiveness was experienced by those within it as a form of prisoner-led justice.

'I am not really religious at all, however, that system is a system people are turning to inside prison...because it is a system that is getting more justice'  
(Zain).

Men outside the protection of the group spoke to the durability of its sway having far-reaching effects on their lives.

‘you’ve got all this you attack one you attack them all, even though they don’t know each other...I’m stuck on here now; I can’t even go to the gym’ (Andy).

The perceived control of the Muslim group across the LTHSE dominated interview conversations, and whilst their systematic approach to preventing or condoning violence and keeping their members safe was undisputed, there were costs to membership. Aside from controlling lifestyle choices such as music, the attack one, attack all mindset presented personal risk to members whose willing participation in violence on behalf of the group was a requirement. Personal risk of injury or further sentences were less deterrent than the risk of upsetting the ‘brothers,’ and the protection they offered in general.

Making this more complex was a culture of hegemonic masculinity described without exception throughout the study, with a need to be seen as tough to avoid or manage feelings of vulnerability. This culture guided acceptance of violence in retribution for harsh comments or perceived slights signalling disrespect as a form of ‘violation’ (Paul). Most men were conscious violence was a response to their incarceration, and an informal prison induction appeared to propagate this culture, with prisoners encouraging new arrivals to show a willingness to mete out violence, even if in opposition to their personal morals, to avoid being targeted by others for the same treatment.

‘The first few years of coming inside prison mate you better show these guys what you are about, you’ve got a very long time in prison, 20, 30, whatever years. If you don’t...things are going to get very difficult for you over the next few decades’ (Zain).

The presence of other prisoners, and perceptions of missed opportunities to demonstrate toughness increased the likelihood violence would occur, reinforcing the suggestion prisoners were being guided to act contrary to their personal morals by the moral norms of the setting.

‘Me and someone could have nudged each other by accident, but turned around and he is with a few people, a lot of people are staring...it may not

be that deep, but because of your surroundings, like you can't be seen to be the one to back down' (Paul).

Experienced prisoners also felt pressure to exert recency, in which repeat demonstrations of violent attitudes and use re-validated strength to reduce perceived risks to self.

'When you've got a group of mates that are known for violence and you haven't carried any out for a period of months you...feel you have to carry out something...prove you've still got it' (Jamie).

Two different forms of survival were observed during this study. The first was a pre-emptive, reputational form of survival, linked to displays of manliness to protect from victimisation. The other, discussed later in this chapter was a more reactive, responsive survival, often following or fearing attack. Prisoner reputations were amplified in importance, with violence commonplace to assert status, and increasingly likely where abstention could cause the prisoner to appear weak.

'Cut it all down to what you have got left in here, you have got no freedom, no family, no nothing. You are limited to what you can spend, all you have is what your name is, that name on your door, and what that is worth (Zain).

Within an environment where reputation and strength dominated the culture, guiding valid action choices, individual prisoners worked hard to demonstrate their worthiness to their community, supporting Michalski's argument social status replaces other forms of power unattainable by prisoners (2017). Descriptions of prisoners shouting from their cell windows after their violent conquests where official punishments became 'medals of honour' (Ali) reinforce that claim.

Describing relationships of general unease and distrust with staff, prisoners felt violence was key to maintaining community justice with staff ignoring harm to disliked prisoners. Some men were accustomed to using fights to clear the air following disagreements before coming to prison and saw this as a means to resolve tension, reinforcing the presence of habitual violence (Wikström 2006).

Violence was less likely in vulnerable prisoner wings for maintaining order, with fewer men tending to display a dominant, tough façade. Within these communities however, prisoners still recognised violence as having purpose in ensuring debts were paid, and more generally there was recognition that the strategic use of violence either with one another or a member of prison staff would remove them from situations in which they felt unsafe.

Violence was a means of seeking retribution, as well as an effective way of communicating strength and reputation within the community to deter future victimisation. Injustice was described as having memory, in which perceived wrongdoings many years earlier would be reasonably pursued between opposing parties without dissent from the wider community. Where violence could not be served upon an identified target, a 'proxy' in the form of a family member or associate would suffice, thus sending a strong message of capability to others.

### Personal factors

One of SAT's key proposals is that rule-breaking is a possible outcome of the convergence between a setting and its inducements, and a person and their personal propensity to break those rules (Wikström 2006). Two thirds of the prisoners in this study had already shown propensity for violence (Table 2), but not all went on to use violence within prison. The relevance of *age* and the maturation process in violence use was highlighted throughout interviews. All men could describe personal rules, and personal *morality* around violence, but not all were able to act in accordance with it, tending to respond to the inducements of the prison setting and its culture. Those who were able to abstain from or reduce their violence were more likely to have experienced some form of *moral education* discouraging violent responses, whilst others, especially younger men suspended their personal morality using *neutralisation* strategies to justify violent choices.

Study participants recognised without exception that younger prisoners were more inclined towards violence than their older peers, less likely to show restraint in response to violence cues. As highlighted within chapter two, young people in custody commit considerably more violence than

their older counterparts, and prisoners themselves felt this was a result of the maturing process, and the presence of increased responsibilities such as children, which generally come with age. This is consistent with explanations of the impact the maturation process has on crime within SAT's DEA model (Wikström 2020).

Some prisoners felt the experience of being in prison made the maturing process harder, prolonging or stalling it meaning reckless or juvenile behaviour lasted longer in prison without the acquisition of normal adult milestones shaping moral development.

'They are young, they have not seen life, they have not been anywhere...

Let's say they come into prison at 22, by the time they are 30 they are still living as 22, and when they are 40, they are still living as 22' (Ali).

Although the average age of interviewees was 40, different attitudes were observed in those in their early 30's, who showed signs of maturity in their thinking, but in a self-serving way more concerned with using violence in a more considered way which would offer them protection from injury or punishment.

'I'm a bit smarter than I was...I wouldn't slash someone on the landing now.

If I could get away with doing it in a cell when I'm not going to get into trouble for it, sweet, no issues with doing that' (Max).

Prisoners closer to their forties, however, gave responses which indicated the development of increased morality, and the ability to exert control over their behaviour.

'I used to be an evil, horrible person and then I had kids, got an IPP sentence...it literally grew me up overnight' (Paul).

Each interviewee was able to describe personal rules and morality around violence as well as the violence-related moral code of the prison in general, with only partial concurrence between them. Violence was deemed to be more morally acceptable when used against fit and able adult males, or in retribution if a family member had been injured. Similar loyalty was exhibited towards friends and

associates, with several men using violence in support of others rather than for personal gain. Regret shown tended to be for unintended consequences, whether that be the injury of innocent parties, seriousness or fatality of injuries sustained, and often, the consequence of a lengthy prison term received. Only two individuals displayed strong morally-guided reflections of their violence. One had strong moral emotions of shame, wanting to form positive opinions of him in his mother. The other had committed a sexually violent attack with grave consequences, and after completion of offence focused work in prison had developed strong feelings of empathy towards his victims. For all other men the moral norms of the wider community outweighed personal morality, meaning even when their personal morality towards violence guided them away from violence, their self-control was insufficient to withstand the inducements setting leading them to act in opposition to their morals (Wikström & Treiber 2009).

SAT contends a person's propensity for rule-breaking depends largely upon 'processes of moral education and cognitive nurturing of relevance to people's law-relevant personal morals and abilities to exercise self-control' (Wikström et al 2018: 27). Every situation, and the response, including the reaction of others and application of sanctions, served as perpetual moral education which had been found in this study to both deter violence, and support it. Time for reflection, and maturity were found relevant for developing non-violent strategies for prison life.

'I made a lot of mistakes when I was younger, so as an adult I learned from them and tried to sway away from those mistakes as much as possible'  
(Gordon).

For some, offending behaviour programs (OBPs) aimed at helping them identify with victims and develop new rule-following skills had contributed to their moral education. Jamie had spent much of his adolescence in foster homes and been subject to abuse. His violence before custody had reinforced its utility in keeping him safe, leading to increasing engagement in violence and ultimately a life sentence. His participation in OBPs had given him skills in avoiding violence, with several

months without incidents at the time of our interview. Most prisoners however found the sanctions applied in prison following acts of violence as insufficient to alter theirs, or the wider community's attitudes towards violence.

'I got done for a slashing...went down the Seg and was there for three months and then they just put me back from the Seg onto a wing. What sort of deterrent is that?' (Max).

Most men used neutralisation strategies in inhibiting moral responses, and even where they had shown partial empathy, they justified other aspects of their violent actions. Hamza felt targeted by other prisoners after challenging their beliefs. They had provoked violence from him by pressing fire alarms causing adverse reactions due to his noise-sensitivity autism diagnosis. When describing those events, Hamza showed remorse and empathy for staff injured whilst they had tried to restrain him. However, he had no remorse for the actors who had taken advantage of his weaknesses. Neutralisation techniques have been found to 'temporarily suspend the hold of moral convictions and to neutralize the guilt that would otherwise mitigate against offending' (Jordanoska 2018: 1436), which was a common feature within this study. This included where the other parties had 'deserved' to be hurt or killed (Zain), or for 'revenge' (Andy), or because staff 'understand the risk' of their jobs (Max). Use of strategies to justify violence were so well established, that even victims of violence used them in making what happened to them more morally acceptable, including Lennox who sustained extensive injuries after being attacked by people angry at his brother.

'My brother was a prolific burglar; he was robbing peoples' houses and he got the hump – the other guy, because it had been his Mum's house, which I can understand so its quite different' (Lennox).

Such community values were less regulated and more unpredictable than personal morals, with the hegemonic masculinity outlined earlier in this chapter appearing to fuel this culture of retribution, with an eye for an eye being expected rather than just acceptable when someone initiates violent action, as 'there are no rules once you place hands on someone' (Ben).



### Motivational factors

The perception-choice process initially involves an instinctive response to some sort of outcome-based motivation. This may be provocation towards a source of friction often seen as a form of expressive violence, or a temptation based on a desired outcome such as achieving an instrumental gain (Wikström & Treiber 2009). Within this study, numerous features were found to motivate violent outcomes in the prison context, but these generally fell into three broad areas. These were *emotional or expressive* types of motivation in which prisoners were provoked into using violence, *instrumental or problem-solving* types of motivation, in which prisoners were tempted to use violence to meet their needs, or *habitual* use of violence.

The second form of survival found to be relevant to violence in prison contexts was an expressive and instantaneous response to attack or a perceived threat to personal safety. Past experience appeared highly relevant in structuring perceptions which guided a violent response.

‘I was attacked myself, and obviously that has put me on high alert to anything and everything’ (Lennox).

The absence of meaningful, trusted relationships amplified perceived risk to self; ‘you never know who is coming for you, and you don’t know who to trust,’ (Jamie). Some prisoners were found to over-compensate for fragile trust, describing feelings of righteousness when people more vulnerable than themselves were being attacked. Guided by their own experience of being victimised they felt provoked to act out of protection for their counterpart, despite having otherwise avoided violence in general.

‘I think my emotions would have taken over...because I am close to this person and he can’t really defend himself’ (Steve).

Few of the prisoners interviewed during this study displayed emotions such as shame, guilt, or anger in relation to past violence, which appeared somewhat self-preserving. This was mirrored by what

insight was shown during interviews focussing predominantly inwardly such as fear of getting caught or fear of retribution.

‘Its more about self-preservation than anything else, about how I am going to make sure I don’t get into trouble for this...I don’t really care about the person I’ve committed the violence to...I am not really one for empathy to be honest’ (Max).

However, in a culture where being perceived as tough was instrumental to survival, prisoners were surprisingly candid about how personal fear had prompted their use of violence in custody. Fear of future victimisation lay at the core of prisoners being unable to act consistently with their own morals within the hegemony of the male culture.

‘That sort of fear plays on your mind when you are in your cell and in the morning you would come out and find the first officer you see and you would hit him and think now I’ve saved face in front of everyone.’  
(Zain).

Many prisoners described fear of anticipated threats or violence guiding violent action, although it was less clear whether provocation, or a response as temptation to avoid feelings of unsafety. Prisoners also demonstrated fear of their own responses to feeling unsafe, and the potential consequences for themselves or others. Significantly, fear was somewhat self-prophetic, with fear of being perceived as vulnerable guiding violent behaviour towards others, but also generating fear of the man who has been victimised and how violent it might make him in response; ‘people are more scared of what happens when something has happened to you’ (Andy).

A sense of hopelessness featured around expressive violence; about the future, that prisoners felt unheard, or that prison lacked meaningful opportunities. Men associated sentence length, security category and life sentence status with having ‘nothing to lose’ (Graham), especially in describing why prison controls did not deter violence. Working towards a future that appeared unattainable was unimaginable for some.

‘2050 is a very long way away. I am thinking about now, and maybe next year, not 30 years down the line’ (Zain).

Others felt targeted by their peers who would presume them more violent-prone due to their sentence length, feeling missed opportunities to meet those expectations risked vulnerability as outlined above, prompting reputational violence. Within vulnerable prisoner wings, prisoners were less likely to respond with violence to feelings of hopelessness, appearing less guided to display dominance or that they were ‘top-dog’ (Jamie). However, these men were more likely to tolerate violence towards them out of a sense of resigned inevitability; ‘if something is going to happen it will happen, I don’t think anything can stop it,’ (Steve).

Within the noise and noxious stimuli of the prison some prisoners felt unsupported by officials, whose attention was concentrated on those causing disruption. Troublesome prisoners were perceived to get favourable responses from staff, leading others to feel unable to get their needs met by being compliant. For example, Max had spent 14 months adhering the rules whilst seeking a transfer, but ultimately took a fellow prisoner hostage, subjecting him to extreme violence.

‘I thought violence was an easier way of getting your point across in prison.  
It seems the only way people sit up and listen to you’ (Max).

Describing prisons as little more than a ‘holding place’ prisoners claimed they were drawn to violence in the absence of other, more meaningful activities available.

‘There is so much boredom in prison, people that aren’t really dictated to by a violent nature will succumb, if its not being violent themselves, being entertained by violence’ (Hamza).

The combination of men with potentially life-long sentences, lack of support and perceived limitations on rehabilitation and progression shaped prisoners’ experience of their setting, contributing to expressive violence.

‘When there’s a lot of people doing 30-odd years and they don’t care for nothing, and they are getting younger and wilder. Sentences are given and people are losing hope and that makes them more dangerous’ (Andy).

Whilst such expressive violence was evident within the prisons in this study, so too was violence for more utilitarian means. Despite Crewe’s 2009 findings of modern medium security prison providing fewer austerities than Sykes’ 1958 ethnography, two decades on the prisoners in this study spoke almost universally about prison being financially nonsurvivable. A shared sense of financial deprivation was expressed, with financially motivated violence a common feature. Prisoners argued costs of living, and canteen prices were increasing, but prison wages had remained the same, causing prison poverty. Once again it was difficult to discern whether this form of motivation was temptation, or provocation, as although it has been argued that rule-breaking for instrumental gain would be temptation (Wikström & Treiber 2009), prisoners in this study did not feel they had a choice, and that people were provoked into using violence to supplement inadequate earnings. One prisoner felt prison poverty explained half of prison violence, and another claimed it caused nearly all violence on prison staff.

‘Within a matter of weeks of being on Basic...you could become the hitman of the wing...you live in poverty, which is forced poverty, so where does the prisoner go from there?’ (Jamie).

Prisoners described commoditisation of violence capitalising on the effects of poverty. Experienced prisoners astute enough to observe who had no money, or expensive habits, simply offered them money in return for violence, as was the case at the time of my visit when a bounty was offered to assault a newly arrived prisoner. Significantly, where limited personal possessions contributed to feelings of deprivation akin to Sykes’ observations in New Jersey, the value of material goods were amplified beyond their normal intrinsic value. The expressed vulnerability most men feared when feeling obliged to show they could use violence was loss of personal belongings. This was in part due to the relative cost given low prison wages, but also because they appeared to provide a degree of

personal control and autonomy to the owner representative of their status. With increased sentence lengths, it was argued that over time, external support slows down, meaning people become more likely to be drawn into the illicit economy in prison, including violence.

For some, violence was a response to prison controls that affected them such as forced transfers, using violence as a form of rebellion, and to force additional moves which eased the prison experience for them and their families. Others saw violence as an indication of power and control in response to a largely subjugated existence.

‘You have taken everything away from people, that is the last thing in your control, that is in your hands, so how you respond to situations, how you deal with situations, that is something you can still have’ (Zain).

Whether motivated to act violently by instrumental or expressive reasons (Wikström & Treiber 2009), it was evident, as in other empirical studies that prison walls were ‘porous’ (Crewe 2009: 150). Significantly, this study found a dual sense of porosity guiding violence within the prison setting. Pre-established gang affiliations and rivalries imported risk of violence into the prison, which was not always anticipated and prevented, resulting in obligated violence. Other prisoners’ violence use was linked to their personal characteristics, including being shaped by traumatic events before prison which guided violent responses to certain situations.

‘I was in children’s homes, and five of the lads tried to drag me into the swamp and it was from that point I went to self-defence lessons...if people tried to assault me I am going to defend myself’ (Jamie).

Violence also emerged following perceived risk to friends and family outside by those in custody, and this was spoken about by several men in the study. This was part of prisoners’ understanding of their world, with one man even using this strategy to stop violence in prison, by sending a message to his aggressor that he had the means to attack the man’s family if he wasn’t left alone.

‘I have seen it happen, they have gone to their mum’s house to get the money that is owed in prison, or they are at the partner’s house, or say ‘we know where your boy goes to school’ that sort of thing, it gets really intense sometimes’ (Lennox).

Descriptions of familiarity in using violence again outlines habit forming behaviour. SAT maintains that such familiarity can precipitate automatic responses drawn from past experiences (Wikström & Treiber 2015). In this study, some prisoners, had experience of years of violence used in an extensive criminal career and previous periods of incarceration, meaning a pattern of behaviour initially imported had now become an instinctive use of violence.

‘If my brain okays me to commit a violent act there won’t be a pause, there won’t be that moment of thought I used to have years ago where I was hesitant or reluctant to do it’ (Zain).

There were signs some prisoners had been able to break violent habits through moral education provided in OBPs, or the maturation process. Whilst when questioned in more depth it wasn’t clear that the identity of a non-violent self was entirely durable, there were positive signs that prisoners had been able to reinstate a more deliberative consciousness around viable action choices, which had included non-violent choices.

### Control factors

As outlined by SAT, within this study, where prisoners viewed violence as a viable action choice, and gave rational consideration to the right course of action, violence was likely dependent on the effectiveness of controls, whether that be internal, self-control or external, deterrent control in inhibiting the violent action (Wikström 2014). *External* control would be the strategies and tactics employed by the prison intended to deter violent choices, such as management strategies and the deployment of prison officers to supervise prisoners, described as largely ineffective and at times counter-productive in this study. *Internal*, or self-control was evident in several participants’ explanations of their experience of violence within high security prisons. This was most likely in

maturer individuals, and those who has developed alternative coping strategies helping them avoid the inducements of the prison setting. The most powerful explanations came from interviewees who had experienced events which *humanised* them and served to repair fractured hope.

There was a common view the prison system provided relatively little in terms of meaningful deterrence, although inconsistencies between individual perceptions were observed. Whilst one of the fundamental purposes of sentencing is deterrence (Sentencing Council n.d.), the impact it had on prison violence was complex. Most prisoners generally regarded lengthy sentences as likely to induce increased levels of violence as prisoners had nothing to lose and experienced hopelessness as outlined above. Furthermore, hegemony within the community fuelled perceptions of reputational vulnerability of men serving lengthy sentences that peers would expect them to be violent-prone, making it hard for them to avoid. Whilst not a reliable gauge of compliance, prisoners with certainty and relative imminence of release, especially where serving a determinate sentence appeared most likely to avoid violence where possible, indicating sentencing does offer a form of external control to violence, even if that control relates to a reduction in seriousness rather than prevention, and specifically when release was anticipated.

‘You don’t want to use a knife, like them, because they are doing 30-odd years when you have got light at the end of the tunnel’  
(Andy).

Prison controls described by prisoners included preventative, and responsive approaches.

Preventative deterrents included the use of the built environment to create separation between opposing groups, the use of physical security systems such as CCTV cameras, the use of the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) to incentivise compliance and the application of administrative punishments. Prisoners were generally critical of such approaches to deter violence, describing them as coercive and fallible.

‘They are short fixes...just because you put a plaster on something today doesn’t mean it won’t get infected tomorrow’ (Ben).

A prisoner determined to harm their counterpart was able to capitalise on the reach of the prisoner social network, paying someone to commit the act, meaning separation could not provide a lasting anti-violence strategy. Where and when such an act would be conducted was influenced by the provision of deterrents such as CCTV cameras. Several prisoners describing the development of more skilled and strategic ways to use violence spoke about their ability to evade detection in CCTV blind spots, indicating their presence guided the action choices made around them.

It was argued the IEP scheme exacerbated already tense relationships between staff and prisoners, and prisoner poverty, meaning a cash incentive from a wealthy prisoner offered to attack an identified target was greater than the disincentive an extension of formal IEP sanctions provided.

‘People that are willing to commit violence don’t care about IEPs, don’t care about adjudications. All you do is go down the Seg for a couple of months and then get put back on the wing anyway. It’s no deterrent, is it?’  
(Max).

Similarly, the removal of prisoners to Segregation Units was also subject to malign use by prisoners to support violence, making it counterproductive. If a prisoner experienced tension with others on the wing, a tried and tested way of removing himself from the situation was to use violence, get segregated, and then seek a transfer from the segregation unit, reinforcing the utility of violence when feeling threatened and prompting habitual behaviour (Law 2021). Whilst prisoners were aware the aim of official approaches such as these were to encourage rule-following behaviour, their effect in many cases made violence more likely rather than less.

A further concern with official controls was that in the constant eye of their peers, prisoners were reluctant to report conflict and seek official resolution, as their perception was that official responses made it impossible to ‘save face’ in the way it drew attention to them from the wider community.



‘Let’s log this, sit down, call a meeting, call the SO, have ten people watching. That is not a situation prisoners want to be in’ (Zain).

Staff supervising prisoner activities provide a deterrent effect through complex application of negotiation and ‘peacekeeping’ (Liebling et al 2011: 205) and respond effectively to resolve violence when it occurs. However, most prisoners were experienced in staff routines and knew how to avoid detection when violence was planned, capitalising on a sense that staff were focussed on delivery of the prison regime, and that they were insufficient in numbers to observe everything. This was exacerbated by a perceived loss of experience participants described within the staff group post pandemic, with the modern prison officer lacking the confidence and skills to keep them safe. Informal resolution strategies relied upon by staff as part of their confident application of ‘peacekeeping’ were not yet within their arsenal, and there was low confidence staff would protect each other or prisoners.

Some prisoners had experienced staff behaving in a violence-inducing way, by provoking violence, through low level taunting so that when the prisoner reacts with aggression staff could justify using physical force on them as a legitimate form of violence. Hamza, described earlier, also experienced prisoners weaponizing staff against him by provoking him to violence, leading to staff restraints. It was of note however, that despite describing staff as uncaring, prisoners did try to use them strategically when using violence. Whilst staff presence was less deterrence than expectations or instructions from the prisoner community, prisoners at times relied upon their response to prisoner aggression to prevent anything extreme from happening whilst saving face within the community by not backing down.

With official strategies and responses offering limited controls inhibiting violence, the same was said about rewards for positive, non-violent behaviour, even when a previously violent prisoner had remained violence-free for a protracted period.

‘I was enhanced for 14 months; I didn’t have a bad word on my record and yet the Head of Residence said no, you are...perfectly housed, you are not going anywhere’ (Jamie).

In all, the use of formal sanctions and rewards systems were insufficient to withstand the cultural expectations of wider prison community norms, but some prisoners had experienced success in informal resolution strategies through cell window negotiations, through the provision of moral education courses or forms of mediation.

‘The only way around it is the prison providing more courses in regard to reducing violence within the establishment and getting a multiple prisoner input, and mainly from those that are carrying out the violence’ (Jamie).

Prisoners felt informal strategies and approaches which made it possible to make non-violent choices were more realistic to deter violence or seek quick resolutions where it occurred. Such approaches were more likely to engage prisoners’ self-control in avoiding the inducements of the setting. Self-control is the ‘ability to act in accordance with...personal morals when externally pressured to act otherwise’ (Wikström 2020:193). Despite being able to describe considerable aspects of prison life provoking or tempting violence, participants were also able to describe opportunities to apply internal control and avoid violence even where it was expected. The acquisition of moral nurturing previously described by Jamie helping him control violent propensity had been experienced by other actors within the study. Whilst few appeared genuinely changed by the development of empathy, they used skills learned in a more utilitarian way that whilst incomplete and lacking durability had given them the ability to trigger self-control by engaging rational choice where previously their violence response would have been automatic, and habitual.

‘If I get a thought in my head, I don’t need to carry it out, I can live with that thought in my head or try to understand why I am thinking this way and try to deal with it in a different way...I’ve put far too much effort in to just chuck it all away’ (Max).

Maturity appeared relevant to self-control, with most men describing an ability to avoid violence inducements being above the average age of the group. This was especially the case where children, family and trusted relationships were evident, with prisoners caring how they were portrayed to the people they trusted most. Family contact provided metaphorical time out of the prison context, with some men describing such mental stimuli as giving them moral fortitude protecting them from the violence inducements of the prison setting.

‘Just be yourself, don’t let nothing provoke you, don’t let nothing make you somebody that you are not, or do things you will regret. I have these talks (with family) daily’ (Ben).

Maintaining such family connections was key for many prisoners in preserving their identity as a human rather than just as a ‘prisoner.’

Having a sense of purpose within the prison context was also important in enabling self-control, with prisoners describing the importance of having structure and routine, and access to rehabilitation opportunities. Engagement over time appeared most likely to result in deliberation over whether to use violence, how to minimise violence being used, or how to avoid it.

Half the men interviewed during this study recalled an event in which the experience they described came across as an act of humanity, or inhumanity either provoking them to violence or enabling self-control. Displays of empathy and respect for family life were the most frequently described forms of humanisation contributing to abstinence from violence. This ranged from prisoners denied opportunities to ring children on their birthdays being driven to violent outbursts the wider community felt was just and understandable, to appreciation for staff doing what they could to give prisoners some form of personal choice and autonomy.

‘Some staff actually have empathy to the job and the role they are supposed to be doing and just a little bit of empathy towards possibly cooking can be very therapeutic’ (Ben).

Prisoners with a violent past being given trust by prison staff, such as a chance for employment on the wing had a profound effect on reaffirming the non-violent self they had developed, indicating a possibility that just as fear and violence were self-prophetic, so too could be humanisation and self-control.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study sought to better understand people in high security prisons, and what moves them to use violence within that setting. Previous empirical works found inconsistent explanations for violence in prison after relying upon distinct definitions and focussing on the relevance of specific variables in its causation. To overcome this, this study used Situational Action Theory (SAT) as a framework to guide its approach. Whilst SAT has been used to theoretically explain violence (Wikström & Treiber 2009), it had not been used empirically or practically to do so. It had also not been used to explain prison conduct within this jurisdiction. SAT therefore presented a new, untested opportunity to explore an enduring and growing problem within high security prisons (Gov.uk 2023a). SAT views all crimes as acts of moral rule-breaking (Wikström 2006) and overcomes difficulties in previous research on prison violence by contending such behaviour is the outcome between both personal and situational factors.

This was a mixed methodological study. Both quantitative and qualitative data highlighted centrality of morality in guiding violent choices within the sample of this study. In both settings, personal propensity towards violence was greater than its use, supporting the concept that people are rule-guided. High multicollinearity between morality and action over two periods and contexts were also observed, with each event providing a form of moral education guiding future behaviour, resulting in the formation of habitual behaviour towards violence, supporting SAT's claims (Wikström 2006). Survey data statistically evidenced the importation of pre-existing morality and violence propensity into the prison context, and whilst the experience of custody appeared to increase pro-violent morality, tests performed to assess its impact on levels of violence used were inconclusive.

Further exploration of the prison experience was undertaken qualitatively. Using SAT as a theoretical framework during coding, five themes emerged as relevant to violence morality and use. These were the prison setting, prison culture, personal characteristics, motivating factors, and control factors.

The prisoners in this study generally struggled to explicitly name moral emotions linked to their use of violence, but through the course of interviews, fear and hopelessness were repeatedly described. Aspects of the prison setting and prison culture precipitated this, with violence often the result of the protagonist fearing the consequences of a long and incomprehensible sentence whilst seen as a target for victimisation by others, and with limited opportunities to avoid such perceived threats. Perceptions of financial hardship and prison poverty compounded this.

Despite most prisoners evidencing some violence-related moral values, there were occasions where they felt obliged to show a willingness and capability towards violence, in which its use was for image rather than revenge, and because they felt they had to rather than wanted to, using violence in a functional way to survive within their setting. Being induced to act in opposition to their own morality highlights either the strength of the violence inducements of the setting, the limitations of self-control within the sample, or a combination of both (Wikström & Treiber 2009). Within the sample it was harder to discern at times whether protagonists' morality and violence use were motivated through temptation or provocation, with the distinction between the two more nebulous seemingly due to the complexity of perceptions around safety.

Official control strategies were perceived as having limited effectiveness, and at times viewed to encourage violence rather than deter it. Whilst research supports the relevance of certainty of detection and celerity of punishment in deterring crime (Chalfin & McCrary 2017), in this study it was also found relevant in terms of prison release in guiding violence action choices, with long indeterminate, and therefore uncertain sentences inhibiting the effectiveness of formal strategies. This was made further complicated by the existence of two sets of moral rules influencing the perception-choice process (Wikström 2006). The dominance of Muslim groups described within this study exerted a set of rules in conflict with those of prison authorities. Whilst rules around violence in prisons are established in law (Leg.gov N.d.), prisoners in this study described a construct in which observing them risked opposing the expectations of the dominant group and placing themselves in

danger. In this situation, most prisoners found the inducing effect of the dominant group, as well as the fear of victimisation from them and others more powerful than the deterrent effect of official control strategies.

In this study, in line with SAT's construct, where strong violence-inducements were experienced, the most effective means to discourage violence in prison were around the development of self-control. This was found most likely to occur as prisoners matured, and through the engagement in moral education and other activities prisoners found rehabilitative. Whilst such activities were not found to prevent violence in all cases, they were found to prompt deliberate choice and disrupt the emergence of violence through habit, giving authorities opportunities to provide alternative choices. Overall, whilst this study found insufficient evidence in quantitative data to support the hypothesis that the prison experience increased the use of violence in high security settings, subsequent qualitative analysis suggests the experience of the setting limits the likelihood of abstinence.

This study was limited to a small sample within two high security prisons in E&W, therefore limiting its generalisability, which could only be achieved via further research involving larger samples and other prison contexts. However, it has importantly supported the utility of SAT as a theoretical approach to understanding the violent behaviour of people within the prison setting. There has been no research to date combining the relevance of pre-prison attitudes and the prison experience in explaining re-offending at either a micro or macro level (Wooldredge 2020), which this study has introduced. The complexity of the setting, combined with the opportunities SAT offers highlight the benefit of conducting a study of this nature using a combined study approach.

This study offers a view that existing strategies offer insufficient deterrence from violence persisting in high security prisons, particularly for people early into lengthy and indeterminate prison sentences. HMPPS may benefit from considering a more targeted approach to counter some of the inducements outlined within this study that formal strategies fail to overcome for this group of prisoners. This should include opportunities which engage self-control for prisoners to act in

accordance with their own morals. An expansion of this understanding through a larger study would be recommended to tackle the growing problem of violence in prison, and its link to re-offending.



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## **Appendices**

Appendix 1      Participant information sheet

Appendix 2      Participant consent form

Appendix 3      Questionnaire

Appendix 4      Interview schedule



### **Participant Information Sheet**

**Area explored: A study of violence in high security prisons, and the relevance of the prison setting in its occurrence.**

**Researcher: Ruth Stephens, MSt student in Applied Criminology, Penology and Management**

#### **Who am I?**

I am a postgraduate student at the University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology, reading for the degree of Master of Studies (MSt) in Applied Criminology, Penology and Management. I am also a prison governor working at HMP Whitemoor, but for the purposes of this research I am a student.

#### **Why are we doing this study?**

I am interested in improving our understanding about violence in prisons, why it happens and how we keep people safe.

#### **What will participation involve?**

Participation in this research involves completion of a questionnaire, which should take no more than ten minutes. In addition to this, some participants will be invited to a one-to-one interview, which will last for approximately sixty minutes.

#### **Do I have to take part in the study?**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw your participation at any point before submitting/returning the questionnaire, and before attending /during the interview.

#### **Are there any risks involved in taking part?**

Whilst there are no anticipated risks involved in participating in this research, it is possible you will find it difficult writing about or talking about past events in your life. Information given during both the questionnaire and subsequent interviews surrounds past events and is being collected for research purposes only. If during interview you feel uncomfortable or distressed, you can let me know straight away and we will consider whether it is right to continue. I will also ask at the end of every interview whether you would like me to request any support on your behalf.

#### **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

There is no benefit in cash or kind for participating in the study. However, your contribution to this important field of research is extraordinarily valuable, and light refreshments will be provided to maintain comfort during our interview.

#### **Will what I say be kept confidential?**

All information collected will be kept completely confidential. Questionnaires will be held securely before being analysed, and I will be the sole person to see the responses on your questionnaire. I

will input your data for statistical analysis, which I will do with advice from an expert statistician. The statistician will not see your questionnaire. Interviews will be digitally recorded, with recordings held securely before being transcribed (typed) by a professional typist. Recordings and transcripts will be held by me for use on this research only. Other than the typist, the only other person who will have access to the recordings or transcripts will be my course supervisor at the University of Cambridge to advise me on coding. Transcripts are not submitted with the final thesis. All data will be deleted at the point of degree graduation. The data from your interview including quotes may be used in the research findings, but you will not be identified in person.

#### **Will my contribution remain anonymous?**

Any data used will be anonymised to ensure that you cannot be identified by its use. Codes and alias names will be used by me to conduct this research, but I will be the only person aware of information you have personally provided. If you consent to quotes from your interviews being used, this will be done in a way that you cannot be identified.

#### **How do I agree to take part in the study?**

If you agree to take part, before starting the survey you will be asked to complete a consent form and confirm that you (1) consent to participating, (2) are happy to complete the questionnaire and (3) are happy to be interviewed if selected following completion of the questionnaire.

#### **What if I want to withdraw from the study?**

You are free to withdraw your consent and stop being involved in this research up to the point analysis of findings has begun. If you are participating in the survey, this will be up to 16<sup>th</sup> July 2023. If you are participating in interviews, this will be up until 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023. You do not have to give any reasons for wishing to withdraw from the study.

#### **What will happen to the results of the study?**

Your responses will contribute to my research findings within my thesis for the MSt in Applied Criminology, Penology and Management. It may be retained by the University of Cambridge, and a copy will be available to HMPPS. A short report may be required by the National Research Council (NRC), and findings may be incorporated in future articles, presentations/ seminars or publications.

#### **What if I want more information about the study, or want to complain about some aspect of it?**

I am happy to provide further information about the study in writing via the Institute of Criminology, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA. My proposed research has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology, as well as the National Research Committee for HMPPS. If you would like to complain about the nature about any part of this study, you can send a complaint to the Course Director, Professor Ben Crewe, via the Institute of Criminology. Alternatively, if you wish to make a general complaint about my conduct for any other reason, this can be directed to the Deputy Director, LTHSE (South), Hannah Lane via HMP Whitemoor, Longhill Road, March PE15 0PR.

**Thank you for your time in reading this information. If you have any further questions at any stage of the research, please do not hesitate to ask me.**



**Prisoner Consent Form: Voluntary participation in a research study undertaken in HMPPS.**

**Area explored: A study of violence in high security prisons, and the relevance of the prison setting in its occurrence.**

**Researcher: Ruth Stephens, MSt student in Applied Criminology, Penology and Management**

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**Please tick the boxes if you agree with the following statements.**

- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the study (or have had it read out to me and have understood it), and have had chance to ask questions. ☐
  - I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I do not have to answer any of the researcher's questions if I do not wish to, and that I can withdraw at any time, without giving reasons, up to 16<sup>th</sup> July 2023 for questionnaire completions, and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023 for interviews. ☐
  - I agree to take part in part of the study by completing a self-report questionnaire. ☐
- or**
- I agree to fully take part in the study, which means completing a self-report questionnaire, and being interviewed by the researcher. ☐

**Please answer YES or NO to the following two statements by ticking the appropriate box.**

- |  | YES  | NO   |
|--|--|--|
| • I agree to our interviews being recorded   | <input data-bbox="1134 1498 1206 1574" type="checkbox"/> | <input data-bbox="1347 1498 1418 1574" type="checkbox"/> |
| • I agree to let the researcher use quotes from our interviews and conversations, as long as this is done in such a way that I cannot be identified. | <input data-bbox="1134 1610 1206 1686" type="checkbox"/> | <input data-bbox="1347 1610 1418 1686" type="checkbox"/> |

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Prison violence questionnaire

### About you

Code	XXXXXXX	
Age		
Are you serving a life sentence?	Yes?	No?
What is your sentence/ tariff length?		
How much of your sentence have you served?		
Have you been convicted of any violent offences? (not including any prison violence)	Yes?	No?
Have you used violence other than any you've been convicted for?	Yes?	No?

### Before Prison

Please think about your life before you came into prison. How wrong did you think it was for someone to be involved in the following:

		Not wrong at all	A little wrong	Wrong	Very wrong
1	Hit another person who makes a rude comment				
2	Threaten to hit another person who makes a rude comment				
3	Threaten violence towards a partner who has been unfaithful				
4	Hit a partner who has been unfaithful				
5	Threaten to use a weapon or force to get money or things from another person				
6	Use a weapon or force to actually get money or things from another person				
7	Threaten to use a weapon or violence towards someone who disrespects friends or family				
8	Use a weapon or violence against an authority figure (e.g Police)				

### Before prison scenarios

Thinking about your life before prison and how you viewed things at the time, how do you think you would have viewed the following scenarios:

9) Two sports players are arguing on a pitch. One of them punches the other in the face. How serious do you think this action is?

Not at all serious	Not very serious	Quite serious	Very serious

Should this incident be dealt with by criminal prosecution?

Yes	No

10) Two people in a busy pub are arguing. One of them punches the other in the face. How serious do you think this action is?

Not at all serious	Not very serious	Quite serious	Very serious

Should this incident be dealt with by criminal prosecution?

Yes	No

11) In their home, a couple are arguing. One of them punches the other in the face. How serious do you think this action is?

Not at all serious	Not very serious	Quite serious	Very serious

Should this incident be dealt with by criminal prosecution?

Yes	No

12) In the canteen at work, two employees are arguing. One of them punches the other in the face. How serious do you think this action is?

Not at all serious	Not very serious	Quite serious	Very serious

Should this incident be dealt with by criminal prosecution?

Yes	No

**Before prison self-reported activity**

Please answer the following questions about behaviour you have been involved in **before** coming to prison:

		Never	Once or twice	Occasionally	Often
13	Used a weapon, hit, or threatened to hurt someone to take money or other things from them				
14	Used a weapon, hit, or threatened to hurt someone to feel more powerful than others				
15	Used a weapon, hit, or threatened to hurt someone to get back at them for doing something bad to me				
16	Used a weapon, hit, or threatened to hurt someone to show loyalty to my friends/ family				
17	Hurt an animal				
18	Used violence towards a partner				
19	Carried a weapon for protection but with no intention to hurt someone else				
20	Carried a weapon for use if feeling threatened by someone else				
21	Used a weapon, hit, or threatened someone because I was frightened of them				

### In Prison

Please think about your life in prison. How wrong do you think it is for someone to be involved in the following whilst in a prison setting:

		Not wrong at all	A little wrong	Wrong	Very wrong
22	Hit someone for being rude or disrespectful to them				
23	Threaten to hit someone who is rude or disrespectful to them				
24	Use force against another prisoner to take something from them				
25	Threaten someone with a weapon or force to take something from them				
26	Hit a male prison officer or other member of staff				
27	Hit a female prison officer or other member of staff				
28	Damage another prisoner's property (e.g stereo)				
29	Damage prison property (e.g pool table)				
30	Hitting someone believed to be a 'grass'				

### Prison-based scenarios

Thinking about your life in prison and how you view things in this setting, how would you view the following situations:

31) During the morning routine, David is on the wing with no other prisoners nearby. Steve comes up to David and pushes him to the ground, accusing him of taking his TV remote. Several staff are around and can see what happened. How wrong would it be for David to hit Steve?

Not at all wrong	Not very wrong	Quite wrong	Very wrong

Should this incident be dealt with by adjudications or IEP procedures?

Yes	No

32) If other prisoners were in the vicinity when Steve did this to David, how wrong would it be for David to hit Steve?

Not at all wrong	Not very wrong	Quite wrong	Very wrong

Should this incident be dealt with by adjudications or IEP procedures?

Yes	No

33) Sam comes up to Jamie and calls him a 'grass.' There are no other prisoners around who can hear this. How wrong would it be for Jamie to hit Sam?

Not at all wrong	Not very wrong	Quite wrong	Very wrong

Should this incident be dealt with by adjudications or IEP procedures?

Yes	No

34) If other prisoners were nearby and could hear what Sam says how wrong would it be for Jamie to hit Sam?

Not at all wrong	Not very wrong	Quite wrong	Very wrong

Should this incident be dealt with by adjudications or IEP procedures?

Yes	No

### Prison self-reported activity

Please answer the following questions about behaviour you have been involved in since coming to prison:

		Never	Once or twice	Occasionally	Often
35	Started a fight with someone				
36	Hit someone who hit you first				
37	Threatened another prisoner to feel or appear more powerful				
38	Threatened prison staff or a visiting official (eg a police officer)				
39	Assaulted prison staff or a visiting official				
40	Got involved in a fight to protect a friend				
41	Smashed up your cell				
42	Damaged prison property				
43	Set a cell on fire				
44	Got involved in threats or violence to please others				
45	Used threats or violence because you thought you would be seen as disloyal to a wider group if you didn't				

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.**

## Interview Schedule

### Checklist of formalities

- ☐ Welcome to the interview and offer refreshments.
- ☐ Confirm identity and check the participant signed a consent form and completed a survey.
- ☐ Reiterate the purpose of the study.
- ☐ Ask if the participant has any questions or whether there is anything about the study they do not understand.
- ☐ Remind the participant about confidentiality and that they have the right to decline to answer any question or withdraw their consent up to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023.
- ☐ Advise the interview will last approximately 1 hour.
- ☐ Are they happy to proceed and for the interview to be recorded?
- ☐ Start

	Question	Prompts/ follow-ups
<b>Warm up</b>	1. Please spend a few minutes telling me about yourself	a. Is this the first time you have been in prison? b. How many prisons have you been in?
<b>Motivation</b>	<i>I'd like to focus initially on your experience of using violence since you've been in prison.</i>  2. What has been the reason for you using or threatening violence in prison?  3. What provokes your use of violence?  4. How hard is it to avoid using violence in here?	a. What was the nature/ circumstances? b. Spur of the moment or planned? c. For your sake or for others? d. What did you hope to achieve? e. How do you think your use of violence has changed over time?  a. Is it unavoidable?

## Violence Morality and choices

*I'm now going to move on to ask you about your personal feelings about violence in prison.*

5. What regrets do you have about violence?
  - a. How do you feel when you hurt another prisoner? A member of staff?
6. How has the experience of being in prison shaped your attitude towards and use of violence?
7. What are your personal rules around violence?
  - a. Do you think violence in prisons is more/ or less serious than violence outside prison? Why?
  - a. Are these rules necessary?
  - b. Whose rules are they?
  - c. Is this based on what you think, or what others think?
  - d. When is it ok to use violence in here?
8. What rules/ laws do you think generally apply to violence in prisons?
9. How easy is it for you to live by your own rules and beliefs in here?
10. What choice do you feel you have around violence in prison?
  - a. Do you have alternative choices?
  - b. Is violence unavoidable?
  - c. Is it safe to do your own thing?
11. What influences your choices?
  - a. Perception of others?
  - b. Peers inside/ friends/ family outside/ skills?



## Controls

*I am going to now ask you some questions about things which control violence.*

12. How easy is it to walk away from conflict in here?

13. Can you think of a time when you could have used violence in the past but didn't, why was this?

14. How do prison 'controls' influence violence?

15. What values within the prisoner community affect violence levels?

16. What would happen if someone used violence that wasn't acceptable to the prisoner community in here?

17. What is the best thing about how this place deters violence?

18. Finally, what advice would you give to your former self about violence in prison?

a. Your use of violence has changed. Why do you think this is?

a. Does IEP, extra charges, Segregation, adjudication, loss of privileges shape violence?

b. Staff presence?

a. Community values?

a. And what might happen if someone didn't use violence when others might think it was acceptable to?

#### Close Interview

- ☐ Thank participant for taking part in the study and remind them of confidentiality.
- ☐ Check whether they have any concerns about the interview that may need additional support now that the interview has finished.