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## An assessment of violent incident rates in the Dangerous Severe Personality Disorder Unit at HMP Whitemoor

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A pilot assessment unit was established at HMP Whitemoor in 1999. The aim of the pilot was to assess prisoners to determine whether they met the entry criteria for a specialist Dangerous Severe Personality Disorder service and to provide a therapeutic environment within a high secure prison for such prisoners. A comparison between the actual and expected number of violent adjudications for 55 prisoners, who volunteered for the pilot, were assessed and the reasons for the results are discussed below.

### Key points

- Between September 2000 and September 2002, 58 male prisoners from the high secure prison estate volunteered for the pilot programme. All prisoners were serving sentences for serious sexual and violent offences. They were mostly serving life sentences and had served an average of 8.5 years in prison for their current sentence.
- Complete data was available for 55 of the 58 prisoners. The 55 prisoners on the unit recorded ten violent incidents over the assessment period compared with the 37 which would have been expected (based on an assessment of their behaviour prior to entering the unit). The lower levels of violence could indicate that these prisoners were being successfully managed.
- Other factors which could have influenced the lower level of violent incidents include possible changes in adjudication policy, maturation, statistical regression or recording differences.

Following a consultation document on how dangerous people with severe personality disorders should be managed (Home Office, Department of Health, 1999) a pilot assessment unit was established at HMP Whitemoor. This was part of a joint initiative between the Home Office, Department of Health and HM Prison Service. The aim of the pilot was to assess prisoners to determine whether they met the entry criteria for a specialist Dangerous Severe Personality Disorder (DSPD) service and to provide a therapeutic environment within a high secure prison for such prisoners.

Between September 2000 and September 2002, 58 male prisoners from the high secure prison estate in England and Wales volunteered for a pilot assessment programme at HMP Whitemoor. On volunteering, each prisoner was visited by a member of the Whitemoor clinical team and a brief assessment was made to determine whether the prisoner was potentially high risk for future sexual or violent offending and possibly suffering from a severe personality disorder. During the visit, the purpose of the DSPD unit was explained to the prisoner and, if he was judged to be suitable, he would be invited to transfer to the unit for further in-depth assessment.

The full DSPD assessment was scheduled to last for 16 weeks. During this period, prisoners were under the supervision of a multi-disciplinary team, including psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, probation officers, prison officers and education staff. The assessment included actuarial risk assessment tools, clinical interviews and behavioural observations. Prisoners were engaged in a number of group activities and periods of association with other prisoners and prison officers. The officers were trained to manage severely personality disordered prisoners.

Members of the multi-disciplinary team stated that they had observed improvements in prisoners' behaviour during the course of the DSPD programme. The research aimed to test this statement empirically by comparing a prisoner's number of adjudications for violent offences pre- and post-entry into the unit. The results are discussed below.

### Method

Information was collected on 58 male prisoners who had entered the DSPD unit between September 2000 and September 2002. 55 prisoners were matched by name, prison number and date of birth on the Prison Service Inmate Information System (IIS). The IIS database provided details about each prisoner's adjudication record during the course of his current sentence. (An adjudication is a disciplinary hearing to investigate an alleged breach of prison rules.)

In addition, information was collected from HMP Whitemoor on date of sentence and date of entry into the DSPD unit for the 55 prisoners matched on the IIS database. In this way, a complete record of each prisoner's proven adjudications was available from the start of his current sentence to 30 October 2002, complete with the date when he entered the DSPD unit. The three prisoners with incomplete records were excluded from the subsequent analysis.

### Demographics and criminal history

The 55 prisoners in the final sample were mostly serving life sentences (76%). All were serving sentences for serious sexual and violent offences (Table 1) and were aged between 23 and 61 years (mean = 36.7). On 30 October 2002, they had served an average of 8.5 years in prison for their current sentence (range 1.3 to 24 years).

**Table 1 Whitemoor sample by offence group**

Offence	No.	%
Murder	21	38.2
Attempted murder	3	5.5
Manslaughter	8	14.5
Wounding (inflicting GBH)	2	3.6
Buggery	1	1.8
Indecent assault	1	1.8
Rape	11	20.0
Robbery/assault with intent	3	5.5
Arson	1	1.8
Kidnapping	2	3.6
False imprisonment	2	3.6
Total	55	100.00

### Psychopathy

At the time of this study, data from the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, 1991) were available on 48 prisoners. The checklist is a well-developed, extensively validated instrument which measures an individual's level of psychopathy.

#### The characteristics of psychopaths according to Hare:

'Interpersonally, psychopaths are grandiose, egocentric, manipulative, dominant, forceful, and cold hearted. Affectively, they display shallow and labile emotions, are unable to form long-lasting bonds to people, principles, or goals, and are lacking in empathy, anxiety, and genuine guilt and remorse. Behaviourally, psychopaths are impulsive and sensation seeking, and they readily violate social norms. The most obvious expressions of these predispositions involve criminality, substance abuse, and failure to fulfil social obligations and responsibilities.' (Hare, 1991, p 3.)

Hare's Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R) consists of a 20 item checklist to be scored on the basis of a long semi-structured interview in conjunction with collateral information. The PCL-R produces a score between 0 and 40. The higher the score, the more psychopathic the individual. The mean PCL-R score for this group was 26.3 (range 13 to 36), with 60% having a score of 25 points or more. According to Cooke and Michie (1999) a score of 25 or more would indicate a significant level of psychopathy in a UK based sample.

### Design and data analysis

The actual and expected number of violent adjudications of all 55 matched prisoners were compared, between the start of their sentence to the day before entry into the DSPD unit and from the date of entry into the DSPD unit to 30 October 2002. Cook and Campbell (1979) describe this as a 'one-group pre-test – post-test design'.

The length of time each prisoner spent in prison before, during and after entering the DSPD unit varied and therefore it was not valid to compare the raw number of violent adjudications for the periods pre- and post-entry into the DSPD pilot. Following the method of Cooke (1989), in his analysis of the Barlinnie Special Unit for violent and disruptive prisoners, expected numbers of violent adjudications were calculated for each prisoner (for details see Methodological note).

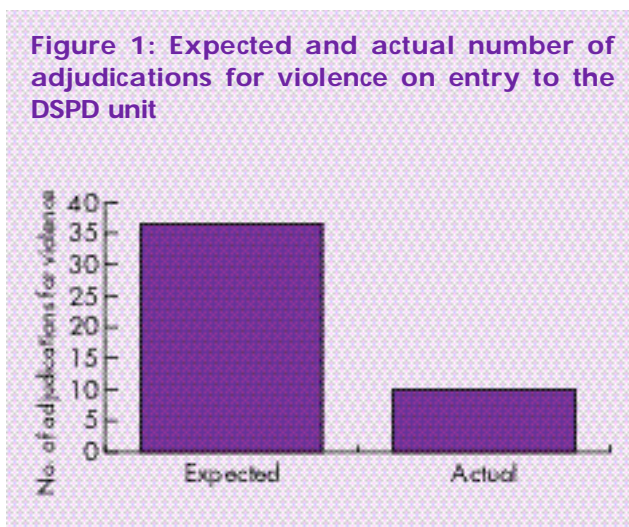
A violent adjudication was defined by a proven adjudication for one of the following offences:

- assaults on prison staff, inmates or other persons
- detention of prison staff, inmate or other person
- fighting
- attempted assaults on prison staff, inmates or other persons
- attempted detention of prison staff, inmate or other person
- inciting assaults, fights or the detention of other persons.

## Results

33 out of the 55 prisoners with IIS records had adjudications for violence (60%) before entering the unit. The average number of adjudications for violence was two (minimum = 0, maximum = 11).

Before entering the unit, the 55 prisoners were responsible for 97 proven adjudications for violence. On entering the unit the group were responsible for ten violent incidents (Figure 1). This compares to an expected number of 36.5 (derived from the formula outlined in the Methodological note). This difference was statistically significant.



## Discussion

During the period of this study the DSPD unit at HMP Whitemoor managed a disproportionately high proportion of severely personality disordered sexual and violent offenders. For example, in the general prison population around 13% of prisoners score 25 points or more on the PCL-R (Hare et al., 2000) compared with a rate of 60% in the DSPD unit. Previous research would indicate that high scores on the PCL-R are predictive of high levels of adjudications (Clark, 2000). Therefore it is encouraging that this study shows that the DSPD unit has actually reduced the number of adjudications for violence in such a disordered offender group.

However, the findings are based on what Cook and Campbell (1979) describe as a 'one-group pre-test – post-test design'. Although widely used in the social sciences, this design is subject to a number of confounding effects. For example, the above findings could be explained by one or more of the following factors.

### A change in adjudication policy

A change in adjudication policy could have had an effect on rates of violent incidents, as in October 2002 the prison service changed its policy of adding days to a prisoner's sentence for more serious adjudications. However, the adjudication data used in this analysis was up to 30 October 2002. Therefore any change in prison service policy on adjudications would be more likely to have an effect on adjudication rates after the period of this study.

## Maturation

The observed reduction in adjudications may reflect maturation. Prisoners may learn the prison rules during the course of their sentence, making them less likely to receive an adjudication. However, the average age of the prisoners was 37 years and they had already served a number of years in prison before transfer into the unit. In addition, Cooke (1989) noted in his analysis of the Barlinnie Special Unit, that transfer to the unit resulted in a dramatic change, not the gradual change that might be expected with a maturation process. Therefore, given the prisoners' age and their experience of prison life, any maturation effect would be likely to be small.

## Regression

The observed reduction on adjudications might be due to statistical regression rather than a treatment effect. The offenders were selected for Whitemoor because they had recorded an extreme level of violent behaviour. Adjudication rates can be an unreliable measure because, as Cook and Campbell (1979) note, high pre-test scores can often be lower at the post-test stage simply because the pre-test score was so extreme. This is a possible explanation, given that more than half the prisoners had previously recorded adjudications. However, a prisoner's adjudication record was not a specific criterion for entry to the unit.

## Recording

Officers on the Whitemoor DSPD unit may be less likely to use adjudications than officers in other parts of the prison estate. This is a possibility, but other effects may counteract this. For instance Cooke, in a similar analysis of the Barlinnie Special Unit, suggested that the recording of assaults is likely to be less accurate in jails other than the special unit because:

'...the former afford greater opportunity for indulging in assaults which are not detected, whereas the small size of the [special] unit, together with the powerful anti-violence ethos which pertains to it, makes it most unlikely that violent incidents could be undetected or unrecorded'. (Cooke, 1989)

Similar statements could be made of the Whitemoor DSPD unit. Indeed close observation is a key feature of the DSPD assessment process and this could result in the detection of more, rather than fewer, rule infractions. In addition, while there is evidence to suggest that adjudication records can be subject to recording bias (Howard et al., 1994; Light, 1991), there is also some evidence that official records correlate moderately with other measures of prison misconduct, such as self-reporting (Van Voorhis, 1993).

Nevertheless while it is recognised that there are a number of possible explanations for the reduced rate of adjudications, the possibility remains that the reduction could reflect a genuine change in prisoners' behaviour as a direct result of entering the DSPD unit. If the change is genuine, this raises the question of why this should be so.

There may be at least two explanations:

- Prisoners may have changed behaviour as a direct result of entering the regime. If this is the case, it is important to know what features of the regime resulted in the behavioural change. Some suggestions can perhaps be derived from previous studies on the Barlinnie Special Unit. For example, some commentators (e.g., West, 1980; Whatmore, 1987; Fitzgerald, 1987; Cooke, 1989) have argued that the staff-prisoner relationships were of central importance in the success of that regime. In addition the use of group meetings for the ventilation of aggressive feelings, and mechanisms whereby grievances can be dealt with rapidly are other features of the Barlinnie regime that have been cited for its success (Cooke, 1989). An important question will be to

determine whether or not such factors are involved at HMP Whitemoor. A factor though that may be unique to the Whitemoor regime may be the in-depth clinical assessment. The assessment itself may be of some therapeutic benefit to prisoners.

- It may be that prisoners have temporarily changed their behaviour while on the unit in the belief that this may help them to make progress in their sentence. It is of course impossible to speculate on the motivations of individual prisoners but this is a possibility that cannot be easily dismissed.

In order to answer some of these questions an in-depth evaluation has been commissioned.

### Methodological note

The formula used for calculating the expected number of violent adjudications:  $A_e = T_2 \cdot A_0 / T_1$  where  $A_e$  is the expected number of violent adjudications post entry into the DSPD unit,  $A_0$  is the observed number of adjudications prior to transfer to the unit,  $T_1$  is the prisoners' time spent in prison before transfer, and  $T_2$  is the time in the unit and beyond to 30 October 2002.

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