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Serious Violence in the Irish Prison Service: Exploring the Experiences of Prison Officers and Prisoners under the Violently Disruptive Prisoner Policy

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Abstract

In the Irish Prison Service, prisoners repeatedly engaged in serious violence are managed under the Violently Disruptive Prisoner (VDP) policy. With the development of the National Violence Reduction Unit (NVRU), practice has shifted from being operationally-driven to the integration of a psychological perspective in the management of these prisoners. Part of an ongoing evaluation of this changing practice, this study explored the experiences of VDP policy prisoners (n = 4) and the prison officers (n = 13) working with them before practice changed. Descriptive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews identified nine themes: (1) describing VDP policy prisoners, (2) staff characteristics and approaches, (3) describing the VDP policy regime, (4) the social environment, (5) the occupational environment, (6) function of the VDP policy, (7) impact of the VDP policy, (8) factors influencing violence, and (9) responding to violence. Results are interpreted in light of comparable research and the Power Threat Meaning Framework. Implications for policy, practice and research in the NVRU are considered.

Introduction

In the Irish Prison Service (IPS), a small cohort of prisoners, repeatedly engaged in serious violence, are managed under the Violently Disruptive Prisoner (VDP) policy. Until recently, practice under the VDP policy has been operationally-driven, focused primarily on containment and risk management. In November 2018, the National Violence Reduction Unit (NVRU) was developed to integrate a psychological perspective to the management and rehabilitation of these prisoners. As part of an ongoing research project evaluating this change in practice, this study aims to describe the experiences of VDP policy prisoners and the prison officers working them before the establishment of the NVRU. Firstly, however, this paper briefly summarises what we know about the nature, extent, causes and correlates, consequences and management of prison violence, in Ireland and internationally.

Both the United Nations (UN) and European Committees for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) have noted the high levels of violence in Irish prisons (Martynowicz & Moore, 2018). In 2019, the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) reported 110 incidents of prisoner-staff assaults, 418 incidents of prisoner-prisoner assaults, and 27 alleged incidents of staff-prisoner assaults in the IPS. In 2015, following numerous serious prisoner-staff assaults, the State Claims Agency (SCA) were asked to identify if a new culture of violence was developing in Irish prisons. They found that most violent incidents could be attributed to less than 1% of the approximate 3,722 individuals imprisoned in 2015. Presenting with significant mental health problems and challenging behaviours, these prisoners pose a substantial threat, with some seriously injuring staff despite the use of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and Control and Restraint (C&R) procedures – a practice referred to locally as ‘barrier handling’. VDP policy prisoners represent a smaller subset of this cohort. This is consistent with the international literature, and indeed findings in Northern Irish prisons, which highlights that it

is usually a small cohort of prisoners, typically with multiple and complex needs, that engage in repeated violence and disruption in prison (Butler et al., 2021a).

Much of the literature exploring prison violence has focused on identifying the factors influencing it, primarily at the individual level where various demographic (e.g. male, younger age), criminogenic (e.g. previous offending history, gang membership) and psychological (e.g. mental illness, personality disorder) variables have been consistently reported (McGuire, 2018; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Steiner et al., 2014). Some interactional (e.g. feeling threatened/unsafe/mistreated by staff), environmental (e.g. overcrowding, limited structured activities) and organisational (e.g. poor administrative control, inconsistent treatment) level factors have too been identified (Gadon et al., 2006; McGuire, 2018; Steiner et al., 2014). While these situational variables have been under-explored by comparison, they have been paid due attention more recently, for example with the development of the Promoting Risk Intervention by Situational Management (PRISM) approach to forensic violence risk assessment (Cooke, 2020). Furthermore, although the literature exploring risk factors for prison violence is vast, it is largely confined to the North American context. The importance of considering cultural context was recently highlighted by Butler and colleagues (2021b), who in exploring risk factors for violence in Northern Irish prisons did not confirm many of the risk factors consistently reported in the international literature, whilst also identifying additional risk factors which may be unique to the Northern Irish context (e.g. nationality, religion).

The consequences of prison violence can be stratified similarly to its risk factors. At the individual level, victims of prison violence experience substantial physical and psychological harm (McGuire, 2018), while those who perpetrate violence are subject to longer periods of imprisonment and are more likely to re-offend (Gadon et al., 2006; McGuire, 2018; Steiner et al., 2014). The prison environment is perceived as less safe

(Steiner et al., 2014), while the organisation suffers from short-term financial repercussions (e.g. staff absenteeism, sick pay) and long-term reputational damage (e.g. diminished staff satisfaction, morale and loyalty; Gadon et al., 2006).

While the terminology varies (e.g. segregation, solitary confinement), most prison systems use some form of restrictive and isolative practice to manage violence and misconduct (Martynowicz & Moore, 2018). Although conditions similarly vary, they can generally be characterised by increased control over prisoners (e.g. increased staffing levels, handcuffs, screened visits; Martynowicz & Moore, 2018; Shalev & Edgar, 2015); reduced environmental input (e.g. inadequate space/light/ventilation, limited access to therapeutic/educational/vocational programs; Martynowicz & Moore, 2018; Shalev & Edgar, 2015); and restricted social interaction (e.g. minimal staff contact, indirect interaction with peers; Scharff Smith, 2006; Shalev & Edgar, 2015). Human rights literature concludes that experiencing these conditions for 22 hours or more per day constitutes solitary confinement (with 15 consecutive days being considered prolonged solitary confinement), while other prisoners may experience similar conditions under different labels (Martynowicz & Moore, 2018). Although sometimes used for a limited time to punish breaches of prison discipline, restriction and isolation are often used as administrative tools to manage specific groups of prisoners. This includes the small cohort of prisoners found in most prison systems, who due to their repeated serious violence have proved too challenging to manage in the general prison population, and are segregated to protect the good order of the prison (Scharff Smith, 2009).

In the US, these prisoners are managed in supermax facilities, often considered to be the most extreme and harmful variation of prolonged solitary confinement. Conditions are further impoverished (e.g. regular use of PPE, no windows, no peer interaction) and technological advances (e.g. intercom systems, mechanical gates, video-link visits) reduce

human contact to an absolute minimum. While supermax facilities aim to reduce overall levels of violence in the prison system, research suggests they are ineffective in doing so (Shalev, 2009).

The management of these prisoners in England and Wales is given more consideration here due to comparability with the Irish context, though earlier developments in Scotland (e.g. the Barlinnie Special Unit) may also interest the reader (see Wilson & Brookes, 2021). In 1984, following a concerning trend of serious prison violence, the Control Review Committee (CRC) made the first systematic attempt to manage such prisoners with the publication of their influential report (Home Office, 1984). Ultimately, they recommended that a series of small, specialist units which catered to the complex needs of these prisoners be developed, with a Research Advisory Group (RAG) enlisted to coordinate and monitor (see Bottomley & Hay, 1991; Bottomley et al., 1994; Walmsley, 1991). Following the initial years of their implementation, the RAG began to report some undesirable outcomes arising from the units, for prisoners (e.g. difficulty coping), staff (e.g. stress) and management (e.g. difficult relationships between units and host prisons) alike. It became evident that the units were not working as envisaged, and in 1998 they were ultimately replaced by the current Close Supervision Centre (CSC) system (Her Majesty's [HM] Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2015).

CSCs aim to both contain the most violent prisoners in the system, while psychologically intervening with them to reduce their violence. While conditions have always fared much better than those found in supermax facilities, the development of the CSC system has not been seamless (see HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1999). However, since their implementation in 1998 CSCs have made gradual and consistent progress towards becoming a system based on sound psychological principles (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2018). CSCs are expected to adhere to the principles of Psychologically Informed Planned

Environments ([PIPEs]) HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2015), one of many initiatives implemented across the prison system in England and Wales which places due emphasis on social climate and context (see Akerman et al., 2018). PIPEs are contained but enabling environments co-led by clinical and operational management figures and staffed by psychologically trained prison officers. The social and interactional environment is valued and honed in order to address the needs and progress the development of prisoners (National Offender Management Service [NOMS], 2012; Turley et al., 2013). In Ireland, a cohort of prisoners comparable to those managed in CSCs are managed under the VDP policy (Irish Prison Service [IPS], 2019). The former VDP policy operated a restricted regime, focused primarily on containment. However, having learned from developments in the management of serious violence in England and Wales over time, particularly the CSC system, the revised VDP policy and practice in the NVRU have shifted towards a joint operational and psychological approach.

Having considered the consequences of prison violence, it is important to also consider the consequences of managing prison violence in different ways. Research exploring the impact of isolation on prisoners, whether in the short-term (e.g. solitary confinement following a violent incident) or the long-term (e.g. supermax facilities) comes to overwhelming consensus on its adverse effects. These related physical and psychological harms include physiological reactions (e.g. headaches, weight loss); confusion, impaired concentration and memory loss; hallucinations, illusions and paranoid ideas; emotional reactions (e.g. depression, anxiety) and impulsive actions (e.g. self-harm, suicide); and overall debilitation. The risk of harm is thought to increase with every day spent in isolation, and while some prisoners show signs of ‘recovery’ shortly after it is removed, others struggle to adapt to social environments within and beyond prison (Scharff Smith, 2006).

Paradoxically, the conditions of isolation can result in increased frustration and aggression, resulting in a vicious cycle of violence and containment (Haney, 2009).

Though under-explored by comparison, research suggests that working with violent prisoners under special regimes can also negatively impact prison officers. Regular confrontation with actual and potential violence can be stressful, over time resulting in psychological burnout (Fenwick & Bennett, 2009). Indeed, some prison officers working in CRC units complained of work-related stress and poor working conditions (Clare & Bottomley, 2001). Prison officers working more therapeutically (e.g. in PIPEs) have reported many positive professional outcomes, including increased understanding of complex prisoners, enhanced interactional skills, greater empathy and compassion, and positive attitude change. However, some staff have struggled to adjust to this less traditional way of working, at times undermining the therapeutic work being done by other officers and excluding them from the wider staff culture through resistance, mistrust and ridicule (Benefield et al. 2018; Bennett & Tew, 2018; Paget & Woodward 2018; Turley et al. 2013)

While there has been no distinct research into the impact of working in CSCs, it has been acknowledged that working with the most complex and challenging prisoners on a daily basis has clear implications for staff wellbeing, and subsequently support needs (Vince, 2015). These regimes also facilitate the development of a distinguishable staff sub-culture, typically characterised by social separation from the wider prison community, group solidarity, an orientation towards security and control, and machismo (Fenwick & Bennett, 2009; Shalev & Edgar, 2015). This sub-culture can also impact prison officers, resulting in emotional hardening, cynicism and anger, which in turn may negatively impact the prisoners with whom they work. However, just as negative social climates and staff sub-cultures can exacerbate the impact of such regimes on prisoners, positive social climates and staff sub-cultures may ameliorate it (Akerman et al., 2018; Scharff Smith, 2006). For example,

prisoners and staff in CSCs have described ‘good’ prison officers as firm but fair, calm and confident, empathetic and patient, respectful, resilient, and ultimately agents of change (Shalev & Edgar, 2015).

This aligns with the concept of legitimacy, which has been extensively researched in the penal literature (see Brown & Toyoki, 2013 and Ryan & Bergin, 2022). Prisoners have consistently reported similar moral traits as being of value to them, ultimately influencing their perceived legitimacy of their treatment and resulting in positive outcomes, such as order, compliance and wellbeing. Conversely, where such traits are absent or manifested negatively, prisoners perceive their treatment as less legitimate, resulting in negative outcomes such as frustration, anger, misconduct and violence (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Butler & Drake, 2007).

Current Study

The RAG evaluating the CRC units noted that in order to begin evaluating new and innovative prison developments, it is essential to first generate or obtain a detailed description of what they entail (Walmsley, 1991). Following their evaluation of the CSC system, Clare and Bottomley (2001) highlighted that much of what we know about the management of violence through restrictive practices has emerged from evaluative and inspectorial work, ultimately calling for more original, empirical research. This study, being the first empirical work to explore the management of serious violence under the VDP policy in the IPS, aims to produce this detailed description. In doing so, and noting their diminished presence in the existing literature, it pays due attention to the experiences of prison officers, in addition to prisoners. Research into prison violence has been criticised for conceptualising prisons as unique environments which necessitate specific theories to understand them. While theories of prison violence (e.g. importation and deprivation theory) have identified important risk

factors for violence, they are each confined to certain levels (e.g. individual and environmental). While there have been recent attempts to integrate these levels, for example general strain theory (Butler et al., 2021a), more holistic theoretical frameworks can offer greater utility (Steiner et al., 2014). The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) is used to interpret participant experiences in the current study.

The PTMF provides a framework for understanding the origins, experiences and expressions of emotional distress and troubled/ troubling behaviour, through four core elements – power, threat, meaning and response (Johnstone et al., 2018). Not dissimilar to the concept of legitimacy, the PTMF proposes that the negative operation of various types of power (e.g. coercive, legal) threatens against different types of core human needs (e.g. relational, emotional). The individualised, subjective meaning of these experiences, shown through beliefs, feelings and bodily reactions, is emphasised. Subsequently, individuals use learned and evolved threat responses (e.g. paranoid thoughts, violence), all of which serve a function (e.g. regulating overwhelming feelings, protection from danger). The PTMF groups together various types of power, threat, meaning and response into seven patterns. Although developed as an alternative framework for understanding mental illness, by focusing more broadly on emotional distress and troubled/ troubling behaviour, the PTMF has considerable relevance for criminal justice settings. The PTMF highlights pattern six – 'surviving social exclusion, shame and coercive power' – as a useful perspective for exploring experiences of incarceration and expressions of violence.

Since its publication, the reception and uptake of the PTMF has been very encouraging (Harper & Cromby, 2022; Ramsden, 2019). The framework has particularly resonated with forensic psychologists (Johnstone, 2022), with many already applying it to practice and research (see Ramsden, 2019; Reis et al., 2019, Willmot & Evershed, 2018). However, and as the authors of the PTMF themselves acknowledge, the core ideas of the

PTMF have been long evident in other contextual approaches to understanding human behaviour, including prison violence. For example, in Akerman and colleagues' edited book (2018), which gives a comprehensive overview of such approaches, Jones (2018) illustrates how the conditions of the prison environment, which may mirror adverse conditions experienced in early life, can trigger a 'fight, flight or freeze' trauma response for prisoners, enacted through violence. Needs and Adair-Stantiall (2018) also highlight the well-established and central roles of low-self-esteem, shame and threatened identities in such behaviour. Butler, too, has extensively discussed how experiences and feelings of shame, humiliation and disrespect are important catalysts to prison violence. This may explain why in a landscape where violence is not unusual, some prisoners, with identities sensitised to shame, engage in more violence than others. This violence can serve a number of related functions including demonstrating masculinity, demanding respect, achieving status, deterring victimisation, relieving frustration and protecting self-esteem (Butler & Drake, 2007; Butler, 2008; Butler & Maruna, 2009). Indeed, in their dedicated book on prison violence (2003), Edgar and colleagues also consider violence as a functional behavioural response to threats against prisoners' basic needs within the unique social and interpersonal contexts of the prison. They also highlight the importance of understanding the perspectives of those engaged in violence, and what violence means to them.

To conclude, the research questions of the current study are: (1) what are the experiences of VDP policy prisoners, and (2) what are the experiences of prison officers working with VDP policy prisoners? In addressing these questions, this study aims to generate a detailed description of life under the VDP policy before practice changed, which can inform best policy and practice as the newly established NVRU continues to develop.

Method

Participants

This study aimed to recruit VDP policy prisoners and the prison officers working with them. Prisoners eligible for inclusion were those: (1) currently managed under the VDP policy, (2) previously managed under the VDP policy, (3) currently managed similarly to VDP policy prisoners, and (4) previously managed similarly to VDP policy prisoners. Similar management was defined as long-term containment under a restricted regime with continuous barrier handling. With only five prisoners designated under the VDP policy at the time of this study, those managed similarly (n = 8) were also recruited to increase the potential sample size. For ease, throughout the remainder of this paper all participating prisoners are referred to as VDP policy prisoners, describing experiences of the VDP policy. Eligibility criteria were mirrored for prison officers to include those: (1) currently working with VDP policy prisoners, (2) who had previously worked with VDP policy prisoners, (3) currently working with prisoners similar to VDP policy prisoners, and (4) who had previously worked with prisoners similar to VDP policy prisoners.

To recruit participants, the researcher emailed the governors of all 13 prisons in the IPS, who returned the names of all prisoners and prison officers in their institution meeting eligibility criteria. A database of eligible prisoners (n = 13) and prison officers (n = 180) was developed. In each prison, a psychologist or prison officer met with eligible prisoners to explain the study, ascertain their interest in participating, and obtain their written consent. Staff identified any psychological (e.g. acutely mentally unwell) and operational (e.g. significant risk of violence) barriers to participation, wherein participation was to be postponed to a more appropriate time. Given the volume of eligible prison officers, only those currently working with VDP policy prisoners (n = 41) and those who had previously done so (n = 15) were invited to participate. The researcher contacted prison officers directly via their IPS email and letters posted to their respective prisons.

The final sample included 17 participants. Four prisoners participated in the study, two of whom were currently being managed under the VDP policy, and two who had previously been managed similarly. Of the nine prisoners who did not participate, six declined to do so, two were transferred to hospital and unavailable, and one prisoner was not permitted to participate by the governor for security reasons. All participating prisoners were male, white, Irish and single. The mean age of prisoners was 31.50 years (*SD* = 8.54), and the mean age prisoners left school was 13.25 years (*SD* = 2.50). Descriptive statistics related to their current and historic offending behaviour are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. Thirteen prison officers participated in the study, including eight who were currently working with VDP policy prisoners, and five who had previously done so. Of the forty-three who did not participate, four declined and thirty-nine did not respond. Frequencies related to the demographic and occupational characteristics of participating prison officers are described in Table 3.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Related to Prisoners Current and Previous Offending Behaviour

Variable	Min.	Max.	Sum	*M*	*SD*
Current custodial period					
Number of sentenced offences	1	13	36	9.00	5.48
Number of incidents of prison misconduct	31	87	209	52.25	25.13
Number of prison rules broken	62	256	465	116.25	93.33
Number of prison transfers	5	32	74	18.50	14.48
Previous custodial periods					
Number of sentenced offences	6	28	42	14.00	12.17
Number of periods of imprisonment	1	2	5	1.67	0.58
Number of incidents of prison misconduct	35	184	265	88.33	83.03
Number of prison rules broken	36	189	298	99.33	79.83

Table 2

Frequencies of Characteristics Related to Prisoners Current Offending Behaviour

Characteristics	*n*	%
Legal status		
Sentenced	3	75.00
For trial	1	25.00
Types of sentenced offences		
Assault offences	16	44.44
Robbery/burglary/theft offences	8	22.22
Criminal damage offences	3	8.33
Weapons offences	2	5.56
False imprisonment	2	5.56
Violent disorder in a public place	2	5.56
Possession of mobile phone in prison	2	5.56
Murder	1	2.77
Types of prison rules broken		
Abusive language/behaviour	155	33.33
Non-compliance	92	19.78
Harming others	83	17.85
Any other	43	9.25
Prohibited articles	40	8.60
Property damage	37	7.96
Collective indiscipline	12	2.58
Substances	3	0.65
Types of sanctions administered		
Prohibition on activities	145	36.07
Prohibition on outside contact	109	27.11
Caution	71	17.66
Prohibition on material possessions	38	9.45
Not stated	29	7.21
Postponement/forfeiture of gratuities	8	2.00
Confinement in cell	2	0.50

Table 3

Frequencies of Prison Officer Demographic and Occupational Characteristics

Characteristics	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	13	100.00
Female	0	0.00
Age (years)		
31-35	1	7.69
36-40	3	23.08
41-45	7	53.85

46-50	2	15.38
Time working in IPS (years)		
6-10	3	23.08
11-15	4	30.77
16-20	5	38.46
21-25	1	7.69
Time working with VDP policy (years)		
0-5	9	69.23
6-10	4	30.77
Grade		
Prison Officer	10	76.93
Assistant Chief Officer	2	15.38
Assistant Governor	1	7.69

Data Collection

Prisoners participated across three prison sites: Prison A (n = 2), Prison B (n = 1) and Prison C (n = 1). All interviews were conducted in either screened (n = 3) or open (n = 1) conditions, dependent on guidance from prison managers. Only the researcher and prisoner were present in the room, though prison staff remained outside at all times. Prison officers participated across five prison sites: Prison A (n = 5), Prison B (n = 5), Prison C (n = 1), Prison D (n = 1) and Prison E (n = 1). All interviews took place in private rooms.

All data were collected by the researcher, which involved conducting interviews, administering questionnaires, and extracting data from prison records. During semi-structured interviews participants were asked open-ended questions about the VDP policy. These were organised into four categories, aimed at describing: (a) what practice looks like (e.g. how would you describe the regime?), (b) why practice is like this (e.g. what do you think is the purpose of the regime?), (c) how practice is working (e.g. what impact does the regime have on you?), and (d) how practice could change (e.g. what would be the ideal regime?). Interview schedules remained as similar as possible for prisoners and prison officers, and are available in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. Interviews were audio-recorded,

lasting an average of 50 minutes. Prison officers completed a brief demographic and occupational questionnaire, and relevant demographic and offending data were extracted from prisoners' records on the Prison Information Management System (PIMS).

Data Analysis

In the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 24, statistics were generated to describe the demographic and offending backgrounds of prisoners (Table 1; Table 2), and the demographic and occupational backgrounds of prison officers (Table 3).

Interview data were qualitatively analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive approach to thematic analysis (TA). Braun and Clarke distinguish between descriptive and interpretative TA. The broad research questions of this study, and the absence of existing data on the topic, warranted the use of descriptive TA. Throughout an iterative six-phase process, incorporating the entire dataset, patterned responses were identified and summarised. In phase 1 (familiarisation), the researcher transcribed audio files verbatim and read interview transcripts in-depth, noting initial impressions of the data. Phase 2 (coding) involved identifying and labelling segments of data relevant to the research questions. The researcher coded inductively at the semantic level (i.e. focusing exclusively on the surface-level meanings expressed by participants), before collating all data extracts for each code. In phase 3 (searching for themes) the researcher organised similar codes into broad categories, using themes and sub-themes to structure the data. In phase 4 (reviewing themes) the researcher reviewed themes in terms of the codes they contained and how they related to the entire dataset. In phase 5 (naming and defining themes) the researcher created names for themes and sub-themes, accompanied by definitions specifying their focus and scope. In phase 6 (producing the report) the researcher produced an illustrative narrative around the thematic results, using data extracts to evidence and emphasise important findings.

An external researcher performed a credibility check on the data, indicating the extent to which they agreed that 126 randomly selected extracts matched each of the identified 126 codes. The external researcher completely agreed with 84.92% of extract-code matches, partially agreed with 8.73%, and was unsure about 6.35%. Following discussion with the researcher, complete agreement reached 95.24%.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, it is important to make explicit any researcher characteristics which could potentially bias the research (Yardley, 2008). In contrast to participants, the researcher is female, with no prior personal or work-related experience of prison. An educational background in forensic psychology informed data collection and analysis. While not their employee, the researcher is funded by the IPS to complete independent research on the management of violence in prison, and is kept informed of developments with the VDP policy.

Results

Descriptive TA resulted in nine themes, which are presented in Table 4 with their sub-themes and corresponding codes. Importantly, superscript letters denote where a code was identified by prison officers only ([a]), prisoners only ([b]), or both groups ([c]). Each theme is briefly discussed below with participant extracts to evidence and emphasise findings. Prisoner quotes are identified by the abbreviation ‘P’ and prison officer quotes by ‘PO’, followed by participants’ ID numbers. Italics denote sub-themes.

Table 4

Themes, Sub-themes and Codes Resulting from Descriptive TA

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
1. Describing VDP policy prisoners	1.1. Prisoner characteristics	Potential to kill [a] ‘Bad’ [c]

		Easily triggered/influenced [a] Limited insight/control [a] Unpredictable [c] Manipulative/opportunistic [c] Issues with authority [a] Mental health issues [c] Adverse childhood experiences [c]
	1.2. Function of violence	Causing harm [a] Release [a] Defence mechanism [a] Escape [c] Better treatment [a]
2. Staff characteristics & approaches	2.1. Differences	Treating violent prisoners differently [c] Different types of staff [c] Inconsistency [c]
	2.2. The 'right' staff	Caring [c] Fair [c] Experienced [c]
	2.3. The 'wrong' staff	Misconduct [c] Punitive [a] Antagonistic [c] Egotistical [a] Machismo [b]
3. Describing the VDP policy regime	3.1. Restrictive	Enclosed environment [c] Limited out of cell time [c] Lack of routine [c] Lack of autonomy [c] Lack of privacy [b]
	3.2. Solitary	Limited human contact [c] Isolated environment [b]
	3.3. Controlled	Secure environment [c] Structured [a] Staff-intensive [a] Barrier handling [c]
	3.4. Facilities, services & activities	Limited [c] Beneficial [c] Prisoner engagement [c] Staff engagement [a]
	3.5. Negative	Lack of positive features [b] Room for improvement [a]
	3.6. (In)appropriateness	Safety [a] Punishment [c] Physical security [c] Mental illness [a]
	3.7. (In)consistency	Organisation [a] Institution [b] Management [a] Staff [c] Prisoners [c]

4. The social environment	4.1. Prisoner-prisoner interaction	Restricted [c] Indirect [c] Carefully managed [c]
	4.2. Staff-prisoner interaction	Minimal [c] Professional [c] Mutual influences [c] Building relationships [c] Prison officers vs 'other' staff [c]
	4.3. Staff team dynamics	'Tight' [a] Camaraderie [a] Dependency [a]
	4.4. Management-staff dynamics	Inappropriate management figures [a] Staff excluded [a] Staff under-valued [a]
5. The occupational environment	5.1. Staff role	Vast [c] Busy [a] Autonomous [a]
	5.2. Staff motivation & morale	Willingness [a] Incentive & reward [a] Enjoyment & reward [a] Influenced by prisoners [a]
	5.3. Staff training	Limited [a] De-escalation & communication [c] Mental health [a] Control & restraint [a]
6. Function of the VDP policy	6.1. Placement under the VDP policy	Repeated violence towards others [c] Risk [c] Staffing [c]
	6.2. Purpose of the VDP policy	Protection [a] (Not) deterring violence [c] Containment [c] Intervention [a]
7. Impact of the VDP policy	7.1. On prisoners	Violence [a] Status [a] Wellbeing [c] Isolated [c] Fear [c] Humiliation [c] Surreal [b] Misunderstood [b] Others unconcerned [c] Coping [c] Positive change [c]
	7.2. On prison officers	No impact [a] Wellbeing [a] Exposure to violence [a] Tension [a] Coping [a]
	8.1.Individual	Adverse childhood experiences [c]

8. Factors influencing violence		Drugs [c] Medication related issues [c]
	8.2. Interactional	Staff misconduct [b] Staff crossing boundaries [b] Antagonistic staff [c] Unfair staff [a] Negative staff-prisoner interactions [c] Other prisoners [a] Gang related issues [c]
	8.3. Environmental	Imprisonment [c] Lack of structure [a] Lack of transparency [a] Inconsistency [c] Staff shortages [c]
9. Responding to violence	9.1. From reaction to prevention	Meeting violence with violence [b] Early recognition [a] De-escalation [c]
	9.2. Contracting behaviour	Enforcing the rules [a] Reviewing behaviour [a] Flexibility & balance [c] (Appropriate) punishment & reward [a]
	9.3. From containment to intervention	Containment [c] Intervention [c]
	9.4. Looking to the future	Progression [c] Post-release support [c]

Note. [a] refers to codes identified by prison officers only. [b] refers to codes identified by prisoners only. [c] refers to codes identifies by both groups.

Describing VDP Policy Prisoners

In describing VDP policy prisoners, participants identified generally negative *prisoner characteristics*, including being easily triggered and influenced, unpredictable, manipulative and opportunistic, with limited insight into and control over their behaviour, and possessing a serious potential to kill: ‘These are some of the worst people in the country, and they’re in here for a reason, and things can go [participant clicks fingers] from bad to worse, ya know.’ (PO5). While most prison officers believed these prisoners were ‘just bad’, prisoners expressed that they had both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides: ‘I’m a good bloke, but I can be a bad bloke as well’ (P1). Participants identified common experiences amongst VDP policy prisoners, including issues with authority, mental health issues and adverse childhood

experiences (ACEs): ‘See, a lot of prisoners in here are from bad backgrounds and mad abusive backgrounds’ (P3). In discussing the *function of violence* for VDP policy prisoners, prison officers highlighted psychological functions such as gaining enjoyment from causing harm, self-defence against low self-esteem and relieving tension: ‘If you’re caged, your natural reaction is to become more aggressive and difficult’ (PO10). Prison officers and prisoners also identified that violence can be used strategically to escape the general prison population and secure better treatment: ‘When I was on drugs, we used to go to the block to get away from that […] it’s like goin’ to treatment’ (P3).

Staff Characteristics and Approaches

Under the sub-theme *differences,* participants acknowledged that staff treat VDP policy prisoners differently to the general prison population: ‘You know, I become a different officer on that side of the door than I was on the main landing’ (PO1). Participants also identified two types of staff, the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’, with the stark differences between them resulting in the inconsistent treatment of VDP policy prisoners. Participants emphasised the importance of having *the ‘right’ staff* working with VDP policy prisoners, who they described as experienced, fair and caring: ‘Fellas that are fair, fellas that are firm, fellas that are approachable’ (PO4). Participants also stressed that having *the ‘wrong’ staff* working with VDP policy prisoners can be problematic, describing them as punitive, antagonistic and egotistical: ‘There’s a lot of people who want to go on it ‘cause it makes them feel big’ (PO11). Prisoners noted the issue of machismo, finding it easier to interact with female staff: ‘I see my old social worker, I see the teacher, I see the psychologist. They’re all female. They’re not like you know that macho man, “I’m the f*ckin biggest, I’m the best”’ (P4).

Describing the VDP Policy Regime

Participants described the various characteristics of the VDP policy regime, and how they felt about these features, in numerous sub-themes. Participants highlighted the *restrictive* nature of the regime, which involved limited out-of-cell time in an enclosed environment, with prisoners experiencing a lack of privacy, routine and autonomy as a result: 'My freedom's taken away from me […] like I understand I have to be here, but I don't understand being locked in a hole like' (P2). Participants highlighted that the regime was incredibly *solitary,* involving minimal human contact in an isolated environment: 'The only people that come to your door are a load of people in suits and with a visor on […] it's not really human contact' (P2). Participants described the regime as extremely *controlled*, with physical security, evident in both the physical environment and the procedures implemented, being the predominant feature: 'It was a full C&R regime, so any movement of the prisoner, any time the door was unlocked, a team had to be present' (PO10). Prison officers commented on the highly structured nature of the regime, which involved a lot of planning, preparation and paperwork, with increased staffing levels and input: 'Like you have to prepare everything before you go near the door' (PO11). Participants expressed that the *facilities, services and activities* available to prisoners were extremely limited, despite offering benefits: 'Someone under that regime needs to have something to do, needs to have something to occupy their time' (PO10). Prisoners' willingness to engage with facilities, services and activities seemed to vary, with some wanting 'to get up and get out of bed and have somewhere to go' (PO3*)* and others expressing the opposite: 'I don't even want to talk to anyone else, I don't want to know any of these people in here' (P1). Similar variance was apparent with staff engagement, for example with some prison officers reluctant to engage with the psychology service, whilst others acknowledged the benefits of increased information-sharing with psychologists: 'Just a bit more interaction from the psychologists to say look it, he's having a bad day today, or this is what's going on with him' (PO13).

Participants reflections on the regime were generally *negative,* with prisoners struggling to identify any positive features, and prison officers noting substantial room for improvement: 'There's a certain amount of it that's working well, but you know, like there's so much that can be improved with it' (PO6). Participants discussed the *appropriateness* of the regime, and while there was consensus that safety comes first, some felt that the regime was overly severe, whilst others expressed the opposite: 'If you didn't have to have any interaction with them at all it would be better' (PO5). Prison officers also emphasised that the regime was not appropriate for prisoners with mental illness. Participants highlighted that while consistent implementation of the regime was important, this was rarely achieved. *Inconsistency* was evident at multiple levels, including how different prisoners under the same (VDP) policy were managed, how different staff teams (i.e. different sides of the roster) treated prisoners, how different prisons implemented the regime, and how different managers made decisions. Overall, and at the organisational level, participants emphasised that practice under the VDP policy deviated considerably from what it said on paper: 'On paper it's great, but not in practice' (PO1).

The Social Environment

Participants discussed the various interactions occurring within the context of the VDP policy under four sub-themes. Participants described *prisoner-prisoner interaction* as extremely restricted, characterised by indirect communication: 'He gets to talk to fellas through the door, that's it' (PO8). Where prisoners were permitted to interact with one other prisoner, this was carefully managed by staff: 'I'd make the decision who can mix together when they go out to the yard, who's to be isolated' (PO3). Participants described *staff-prisoner interaction* as minimal and largely professional: 'You're trained to be dealing with him in suits, and sort of be stone-faced' (PO13). Participants acknowledged that both staffs' willingness to engage and prisoners' behaviour influenced the nature and level of interaction,

but that positive working relationships could be built over time. Participants also noted that prisoners' interactions with 'other' prison staff (e.g. psychologist, teacher) tended to be more positive: 'They're just kind people. That's all. Just genuinely, one hundred per cent kind people. You can just tell straight away' (P4). Commenting on *staff team dynamics*, prison officers believed that their teams were 'tight', involving a lot of camaraderie and dependency: 'More so than anywhere else in the jail we would kind of have a panel that's fairly rock steady' (PO1). However, *management-staff dynamics* were less positive, as some officers felt that management figures occupied the role inappropriately, with limited ability to manage VDP policy prisoners: 'Management are weak. Even if they're not weak, they're not trained properly. And especially now that they're bringing management in from the wrong places' (PO1). Prison officers, having extensive experience of working with VDP policy prisoners, felt excluded and under-valued by management: 'The people on the floor know a hell of a lot more than the people that are in charge, even though the people in charge don't like to hear that' (PO12).

The Occupational Environment

The occupational world of prison officers was captured under three sub-themes. Participants commented on the vastness of the *staff role,* attributing this to the fact that VDP policy prisoners were housed with other prisoners managed under various regimes. Consequently, prison officers often struggled to fulfil their duties, having to 'pressure [prisoners] into having a shower quicker, into cleaning their cell quicker' (PO2). Prison officers also described working with VDP policy prisoners as more autonomous: 'Downstairs for the most part it is better because the staff structure it ourselves' (PO1). Reflecting on *staff motivation and morale,* prison officers discussed the varying levels of willingness to get involved in the role, which was often influenced by prisoner behaviour: 'And the panel, it gets a bit longer when there's been no trouble. But as soon as there's a bit of trouble the panel

gets shorter very quick' (PO8). Because the role is voluntary, prison officers felt there should be more incentive and reward for doing it. Many prison officers struggled to identify any enjoyable or rewarding aspects of the role, whilst others identified their staff teams, the challenging environment and ensuring the safety of others: 'When I was there, if all the staff walked away injury free, that's rewarding' (PO12). Prison officers emphasised that *staff training* for the role was extremely limited, with staff drawing on their experience and learning from team members. Participants identified C&R, mental health, and de-escalation and communication as important training needs: 'They've been pushing a course for de-escalation here for years, which is supposed to have been rolled out three years ago and it never happened' (PO3).

Function of the VDP Policy

Participants identified three main reasons for *placement under the VDP policy*, highlighting repeated violence towards others, and the risk that this patterned behaviour poses, as most important: 'They won't stop hitting people' (PO9). Participants believed that staff factors also played a role, with managers having to consider the high staffing levels necessary to implement barrier handling before placing a prisoner under the VDP policy. Participants expressed that some staff might request that certain prisoners are placed under the VDP policy, either directly or through the Prison Officers Association (POA): 'They're happy to keep me in solitary confinement, because people have problems with me, you know what I mean. They're listening to the POA' (P4). In discussing the *purpose of the VDP policy*, participants emphasised the protection of staff, other prisoners, and the VDP policy prisoner themselves. Participants expressed that while the regime aimed to deter violence, it rarely achieved this: 'They say like it's to stop staff being assaulted or whatever, but I think that's goin' to happen no matter what. Like ya can still attack them when you're on barrier handling' (P2). Relatedly, participants commented that while the stated aims of the VDP

policy may have included intervention, it was primarily focused on containment: ‘It mirrors putting the child on the bold step for ten minutes. It’ll have a short-term effect, but long-term it doesn’t do anything’ (PO8).

Impact of the VDP Policy

Two sub-themes capture the impact of the VDP policy on *prisoners* and *prison officers*, respectively. Prisoners expressed that being managed under the VDP policy felt surreal, with feelings of humiliation, isolation and fear being predominant, and prisoners’ overall wellbeing negatively impacted: ‘You can’t function really, because you have nothing to function for’ (P2). While some prison officers believed that the VDP policy provided prisoners with status, prisoners often felt misunderstood: ‘That’s a big thing to me, being branded as this monster, this animal, this psycho’ (P3). Prisoners developed various ways of coping with the impact of the VDP policy, including material (e.g. shop orders) and psychological (e.g. resilience) strategies, but some prison officers expressed a lack of concern about the impact on prisoners: ‘You can go on and talk about what it’s doing to the prisoner, but that’s another story like, you know. Am I overly concerned about that? Not really’ (PO4). While the regime made a positive impact on some prisoners, thus reducing their violence, there was consensus that the VDP policy often had the opposite effect: ‘You’re just creating a monster’ (PO2).

Although many prison officers expressed that the role had no impact on them, others acknowledged that staff would be reluctant to admit to this: ‘It would take a very resilient person for it to not have an impact on them. But I’d say if you were to talk to a group of people, they would never admit that’ (PO10). Some prison officers noted a negative impact on their overall wellbeing, highlighting increased tension and being exposed, and subsequently de-sensitised, to violence: ‘If I was walking down the street and I seen someone

stabbed […] it just wouldn't be a big shock to me' (PO2). Prison officers relied on staff camaraderie, talking, and having a good home life to cope with this impact, but highlighted a lack of organisational support in this regard: 'There's a mental wellbeing that needs to be checked, you know and that's never checked' (PO6).

Factors Influencing Violence

Participants identified factors influencing violence at three levels, captured by three sub-themes. At the *individual* level, participants discussed the influence of ACEs, medication related issues (e.g. non-compliance) and drugs on violence. Notably, participants highlighted both drug use and drug dealing and debt as important: 'It's going to contribute to violent incidents because people owe money for drugs, it also leads to kind of erratic behaviour' (PO9). At the *interactional* level, participants identified that staff engaging in misconduct, crossing boundaries, and being unfair and antagonistic influenced violence: 'Sometimes they do look for reactions like, and they get them most of the time like' (P2). Participants highlighted that while negative staff-prisoner interactions easily influenced violence, positive staff-prisoner interactions helped prevent it*:* 'If you treat someone as a person, and you treat them the way you would like to be treated yourself, it is a very, very, very, very unique individual that would not reciprocate that in the same fashion to you' (PO10). Participants highlighted the prominence of gang-related issues, with prison officers noting that these prisoners are particularly susceptible to the influence of high-status prisoners: 'Roaring and shouting out windows and telling him "you got to go, and you got to do this", so then they have to show face' (PO11). At the *environmental* level, participants expressed that the experience of being imprisoned itself influenced violence: 'Most of the stuff I've done in here to end up in the block I wouldn't even think about doin' on the outside, 'cause ya can just walk away*'* (P2). Staff shortages, through hindering the availability of facilities, services and activities, also influenced violence, while the lack of structure, consistency and transparency

in the implementation of the VDP policy also played an important role: ‘Don’t lie to prisoners. If you’re lying to prisoners, it’s going to create conflict’ (PO6).

Responding to Violence

Participants discussed current and preferred responses to violence under four sub-themes. Participants expressed that the management of violence should shift *from reaction to prevention*. Prisoners perceived the current approach, with the continuous use of barrier handling, as meeting violence with more violence. Participants expressed that focusing on de-escalation is preferable, with prison officers already possessing the skills to recognise early signs of violence: ‘We can read their body language, we can read the way they’re talking, the way they’re acting. It’s our job and we’re good at it’ (PO8). Participants discussed that reducing violence can be achieved through *contracting behaviour* with prisoners, which involves fairly and consistently enforcing the rules, and regularly reviewing prisoner behaviour. Participants highlighted the importance of a flexible approach, which responds and adapts to behaviour changes: ‘If they start playing ball, certain things can be relaxed, slightly. Not much, but a little bit. But if they’re not playing ball, then everything stays the same’ (PO1). Inherent in this approach is the balancing of an appropriate level of punishment and reward:

> If a person is contracted to good behaviour and if their behaviour is working out, then there needs to be some sort of rewards. But it can’t go to the stage of the reward surpasses what other individuals in the prison have (PO10).

As previously highlighted with the function of the VDP policy, participants believed that responses to violence should move *from containment to intervention,* where the root causes of violence are addressed to ultimately reduce it: ‘Just help people. There’s nobody sayin’ ‘right you done somethin’ wrong, we’ll help ya work through it’ (P2). Participants highlighted the

importance of *looking to the future* when responding to violence. Within prison, participants felt that the IPS had a responsibility to progress prisoners off of the VDP policy: 'There's a duty of care there like, we have to release him and he's not going to be dealt with in suits when he gets to the main gate' (PO7). Beyond prison, prison officers emphasised the importance of post-release supports in maintaining progress, but raised concerns about their availability: 'I'm nineteen years in the job this August and I've seen people come back and back and back, 'cause […] we don't have the proper outside care here, we don't have the proper outside facilities' (PO11).

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of those prisoners managed under the VDP policy in the IPS, and the prison officers working with them, before the establishment of the NVRU. A primarily qualitative methodology was adopted, using semi-structured interviews to collect data. Descriptive TA resulted in nine themes: (1) describing VDP policy prisoners, (2) staff characteristics and approaches, (3) describing the VDP policy regime, (4) the social environment, (5) the occupational environment, (6) function of the VDP policy, (7) impact of the VDP policy, (8) factors influencing violence and (9) responding to violence. The synthesis of these themes provides a comprehensive picture of what practice looked like, why it was like this, how it was working, and how it could change.

While prisoner and prison officer data is analysed together in this study, it is important to briefly acknowledge the unique contributions of each group. Overall, prisoners tended to speak negatively of their experiences with the VDP policy, particularly in terms of how they have been treated. Understandably, these prisoners may view their treatment through a particularly negative cognitive and emotional lens due to previous adverse life experiences. They highlighted an interesting paradox whereby they felt both isolated by the

prison, but at the same time lacked privacy. They demonstrated something similar to an external locus of control, whereby they focused on the (negative) actions of others, namely staff, when discussing their violent behaviour. Prisoners reported feeling misunderstood by others, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are evident throughout their accounts.

Prison officers appeared to have more balanced viewpoints. For example, while they described prisoners in quite negative terms, they demonstrated an understanding of their violent behaviour by identifying the functions of it, which prisoners did not do. Prison officers, in addition to commenting on the prisoner variables influencing violence, noted the influence of others, both staff and other prisoners, in incidences of violence. Overall they spoke positively of staff, but they did not avoid discussing the negative characteristics of some, and spoke about their negative experiences with management. They identified that while the management of violent prisoners was primarily concerned with containment, it also made attempts towards intervention. However, they also noted that being managed in this way likely facilitated rumination, frustration and ultimately aggression and violence. In responding to this violence, prison officers highlighted the importance of balancing control and care.

Existing Literature

It is important to consider the findings of this study in relation to the existing literature, particularly that examining CSCs, the closest comparison to the VDP policy. Descriptions of VDP policy prisoners aligned with the profile of supermax and CSC (and previously CRC) prisoners, considered to be the most challenging in the system (Scharff Smith, 2009). Consistent with existing literature, participants commented on the strategic and psychological functions of violence. In line with Butler (2008), participants spoke of relieving frustration and self-defence against low self-esteem, while enacting violence for

enjoyment could evoke similar feelings to enacting violence to gain respect or status, and using violence to escape the general prison population could also be a means of deterring victimisation. Participants created binary categories of the 'right' and the 'wrong' staff, while CSC research (Shalev & Edgar, 2015) and PIPE research (Turley et al., 2013) identified a mix of staff attitudes. In line with the core conditions of isolative practice, participants characterised the VDP policy regime as restrictive, controlled and solitary (IPRT, 2018). Inconsistent implementation of the VDP policy emerged as a prominent issue, while consistency has been identified as positively influencing prisoners' perceptions of legitimacy (Ryan & Bergin, 2022). This finding perhaps reflects the Irish context where VDP policy prisoners were previously managed in separate prisons, as opposed to the purpose-built units of the CSC system and supermax facilities. The quantity and quality of prisoner-prisoner and staff-prisoner interaction can be situated between the minimal human contact in supermax facilities (Shalev, 2009) and the increased social interaction in CSCs (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2018). Prison officers reported feeling excluded and under-valued by management. Similar management issues were evident in the early days of the CSC system (Clare & Bottomley, 2001), but these improved over time (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2018). Research on the CRC units reported other managerial issues, including difficult relationships with the host prison and headquarters, the reluctance of managers to engage in the referral process, and poor staff continuity (Walmsley, 1991). Prison officers identified similar training needs to CSC staff, who also highlighted the importance of training as a group to enhance bonding (Shalev & Edgar, 2018). In line with the existing literature, repeated violence and disruption was cited the primary reason for placement under the VDP policy (Scharff Smith, 2009), while participants also noted the influence of staffing factors in these decisions. Consistent with the extensive literature, participants reported adverse effects of the VDP policy on prisoners' wellbeing (Scharff Smith, 2006). Some prison officers also

identified the negative personal impact their work has had, for example increasing stress, similar to CRC staff (Clare & Bottomley, 2001). Contrastingly, staff working in enabling environments (Bennett & Tew, 2018) and PIPEs (Benefield et al., 2018; Turley et al., 2013) spoke of more positive professional impacts. Factors influencing violence were identified at various levels, but with less focus on individual factors and increased focus on interactional and environmental factors (Gadon et al., 2006; McGuire, 2018; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Steiner et al., 2014). This is in contrast to the Northern Irish prison context where individual factors were more prevalent (Butler et al., 2021b), but supports the contributions of contextual and situational approaches more prevalent in England and Wales. Consistent with CSC staff (Shalev & Edgar, 2015), and general consensus in the IPS (SCA, 2016), prison officers reported a preference for verbal over physical techniques when responding to violence. Overall, though the aims of both the former VDP policy and CSCs reflect both containment and intervention, the VDP policy was primarily focused on the prior, whilst CSCs have made more progress towards the latter (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2018).

The PTMF

The PTMF provides a novel way of understanding the origins, experiences and expressions of distress and troubled/troubling behaviour (e.g. violence), and offers an interesting interpretation of the experiences documented in this study (Johnstone et al., 2018). While participants briefly commented on experiences prior to imprisonment (e.g. ACEs), this was not the focus of this study, and so the PTMF is applied to the prison context only. Participants' accounts demonstrate that prisoners in particular experienced the negative operation of various types of power. For instance, they experienced the negative operation of legal power through imprisonment in general and management under the VDP policy specifically. Participants' reflections on the inappropriateness of the regime, and the lack of autonomy and privacy experienced by prisoners, suggests that their sense of justice, fairness,

agency and control is threatened – similar to well-documented perceptions of illegitimate treatment. The negative operation of material power was evidenced by the impoverished environment and conditions of the VDP policy regime, hindering prisoners' abilities to meet basic physical needs. The negative operation of social and interpersonal power was perhaps most prominent. VDP policy prisoners were managed separately from the general prison population and one another, thus threatening their sense of belonging to a social group. Minimal staff-prisoner interaction resulted in further isolation, while the use of barrier handling, and the characteristics and approaches of the 'wrong' staff, sometimes resulted in controlling and hostile interactions, at times crossing prisoners' boundaries. This aligns with Butler's finding that disrespect, especially in interactions between staff and prisoners, can be a crucial catalyst for violence in prison, where prisoners already feel devalued by the very nature of their incarceration (Butler & Drake, 2007; Butler, 2008; Butler & Maruna, 2009).

The PTMF centralises the subjective meaning of these experiences for the individual, evident in beliefs, feelings and bodily reactions, and how these shape one's life narrative. In line with examples contained in the PTMF, prisoners reported feelings of fear, isolation and humiliation, while Butler has previously highlighted that experiences of humiliation, both outside and inside prison, feature prominently in the narratives of violent prisoners (Butler & Drake, 2007; Butler & Maruna, 2009). Comments around feeling misunderstood and neglected by the IPS reflected feelings of hopelessness and unfairness, again highlighting the central role of legitimacy in prisoners' narratives.

Just as Edgar and colleagues (2003) and Butler (2008) have previously done, the PTMF highlights the importance of understanding threat responses in relation to the functions they serve. Participants identified psychological and strategic functions of violence, suggesting that violence is used to preserve self-esteem, meet emotional needs (e.g. relieving tension), preserve a place in the social group (e.g. status of the VDP label), and elicit better

treatment. The PTMF additionally suggests that violence may be used to protect oneself from perceived physical danger, regulate overwhelming feelings, and maintain a sense of control.

While the PTMF provides a useful way of understanding the origins, experiences and expressions of the violence of VDP policy prisoners, the experiences of staff must also be considered. The PTMF recognises that when staff occupy the same space as those they care for, they can also be impacted by the negative operation of power. In this study, prison officers acknowledged that whilst a prisoner is being managed under the VDP policy they are in essence living together – 'they're living with us for that time period, and we're living with them for that time period' (PO3) – and as such prisoners and staff share the same environment: 'A prisoners living conditions is an officers [working] conditions' (PO12). Prison officers highlighted the personal impact of the job (e.g. exposure to violence, tension), while the PTMF suggests that, subsequently, staff may be less able to fulfil their caring duties. This is in line with suggestions that staff factors may ameliorate or exacerbate the outcomes of isolation for prisoners (Scharff Smith, 2006). In this study, prison officers reported a lack of organisational support in dealing with the impact of the job, which the PTMF suggests is necessary to enable staff to work with the high levels of distressed and troubled/troubling behaviour they encounter. Thus, just as prisoners' perceptions of legitimate treatment by staff are important in understanding their experiences, perhaps prison officers' perceptions of legitimate treatment by management are equally important, with both potentially influencing one another.

Strengths and Limitations

Original, empirical research allowed for the focused exploration of participant experiences, as opposed to the broader overview achieved through inspectorial or evaluative work. As the first study to examine practice under the VDP policy, broad research questions

and descriptive TA ensured that detailed descriptions of the VDP policy could be generated, and that these were appropriately grounded in the experiences of prisoners and prison officers. Equal attention was paid to both of these experiences, with the integration of these sources to understand the same phenomenon (i.e. triangulation) increasing the dependability of findings. Dependability was further enhanced through the consideration of potentially biasing researcher variables (i.e. reflexivity), while the credibility of results was increased through an external researcher check. Detailed description of the participants, setting and circumstances of the research allow the reader to assess the transferability of findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations of the study, particularly the unfortunate under-representation of prisoner perspectives, must also be considered. We encountered difficulties in recruiting an already limited prisoner sample, with many declining to take part (n = 6), and others not permitted to do so (n = 3). As such, less prisoners (n = 4) participated than prison officers (n = 13), and less codes were identified for prisoners only (n = 9) than prison officers only (n = 53). While analysing data from both participant groups together is in many ways a strength of the current study, it is possible that this approach dilutes the prisoner viewpoint. Unfortunately, due to the small prisoner sample size, and concerns about protecting their anonymity in the data, it was not possible to analyse their data separately from that of prison officers. However, every effort was made to manage the representation of both groups as best as possible. For example, Table 4 identifies which codes were identified by prison officers only, prisoners only or both groups. A brief synopsis of the unique contributions of both groups is provided in the discussion. In addition to their own experiences, prison officers also spoke to the experiences of prisoners, reflected in the large proportion of codes (n = 65) shared by both groups.

Additional limitations related to the study sample include the possibility that the 'right' as opposed to the 'wrong' staff would be willing to voluntarily participate in a study closely examining their work, the exclusion of prisoners with acute mental health difficulties and an immediate risk of violence whose contributions would have been valuable, and the differing profile of prison officer (experiences of the VDP policy only) and prisoner (experiences of the VDP policy and similar management) groups.

Implications

Policy and Practice

With the development of the NVRU, the IPS has begun to positively progress the management of VDP policy prisoners to integrate a psychological perspective. Further learning should draw from the increasing number of prisons and units in England and Wales adopting contextual, therapeutic approaches (see Akerman et al., 2018). The findings of the current study are integrated here to inform recommendations in four key areas, applicable to both the NVRU and the management of serious violence in comparable prison systems.

Firstly, participants highlighted the importance of the 'right' staff (e.g. experienced, caring, fair) working with violent prisoners, with the literature consistently identifying that prisoners value similar moral traits. Efforts should be made to both recruit staff who demonstrate these traits, and to further develop these traits through training, team building and supervision.

Secondly, participants repeatedly discussed the crucial role staff-prisoner relationships play in the management of violent prisoners. Participants identified that factors related to staff-prisoner interactions (e.g. staff crossing boundaries, staff misconduct, antagonistic staff) are perhaps most influential in violent incidents. As such, in order to make real attempts to reduce violent behaviour, and enhance the psychological wellbeing of

prisoners, it is essential that positive staff-prisoner relationships are encouraged and facilitated.

Thirdly, just as prisoners' perceptions of the legitimacy of their treatment are largely influenced by staff, so too are prison officers' perceptions of the legitimacy of their treatment influenced by management. Prison officers reported a lack of faith in management, and feeling over-excluded and under-valued. The literature has highlighted the pivotal role of negative or positive staff dynamics in the negative or positive treatment of prisoners in these areas. Indeed, the PTMF has emphasised the importance of organisational support for staff working with troubled/troubling individuals. As such, positive management-staff relationships should be paid due attention in order to improve the experiences and outcomes of prison officers, and subsequently prisoners.

Fourthly, participants described the VDP policy as operationally-driven, confined to the short-term, and focused on physical security and containment. However, they identified a clear place for psychology in the management of these prisoners, with practice focused on relational security and intervention to address violence in the long-term. Relatedly, they highlighted the importance of truly understanding violence, for example by acknowledging its potential roots (e.g. issues with authority, mental health issues, ACEs) and viewing it as a functional behaviour.

While the PTMF is well-placed to further develop such understandings of violent behaviour, and could be beneficial in developing practice in the NVRU and beyond, there are some important considerations. It has been noted that the PTMF has the potential to contribute to professional divides in the mental health realm, for example between psychology and psychiatry, which could be counter-productive to achieving its aim of a more humane approach to understanding distress and troubled/ troubling behaviour (Ramsden,

2019). It would be wise to be mindful of similar divides developing between operational and psychological prison staff, in the NVRU or indeed any prison environment, particularly given the scepticism of and difficulty adjusting to a more therapeutic role experienced in similar units (Benefield et al. 2018; Bennett & Tew, 2018; Paget & Woodward 2018; Turley et al. 2013). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty of addressing issues of power in an environment with an inherent power imbalance, and where staff are often required to exercise their power in order to fulfil their job of maintaining order and safety. It is crucial that staff are provided with appropriate supervision and support in order to navigate this complex dynamic (Ramsden, 2019).

Research

As part of an ongoing research project evaluating the changing management of serious violence in the IPS, this study created a cross-sectional, descriptive snapshot of practice under the VDP policy before it changed. However, subsequent studies in this planned programme of research have been afforded the valuable opportunity to longitudinally follow the experiences of prisoners and prison officers in the NVRU, from the very beginning and as the unit continues to develop. In doing so, future research can gain more in-depth understandings of these complex experiences, for example through interpretative TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research should also consider how these experiences align or differ from those in the current study, while evaluating the effectiveness of the NVRU in achieving its aims in its initial years.

The PTMF prioritises individual subjectivity in understanding the origins, experiences and expressions of distress and troubled/troubling behaviour. As such, it is well-placed to act as a lens through which this planned programme of research can explore experiences in the NVRU, and through which future related research can explore similar experiences or

environments. Given the recency of its publication, applications of the PTMF in research are so far limited. However, and as acknowledged by the authors, the core concepts of the PTMF have been developed from a vast and diverse evidence-base supporting contextual approaches in understanding human behaviour. The application of such approaches to understanding offending and violent behaviour has been well-documented in this article, and this literature should continue to be drawn upon in future related research. Additionally, while some have criticised the PTMF for failing to employ rigorous scientific methodologies, the authors have highlighted that the positivist principles underpinning the scientific method, and indeed the dominant biomedical model, are at odds with the aims of the PTMF (Ramsden, 2019). As such, they argue for greater recognition of the legitimacy and value of alternative research methodologies (e.g. qualitative approaches). It is important that those conducting future related research consider adopting such approaches, and that those funding, evaluating and implementing such research recognise their value.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study demonstrated the value of giving voice to prisoner and prison officer perspectives. Doing so not only provides insight into their individual and shared experiences, thus developing our understanding of serious prison violence, but also ensures that its management is informed by those whom policy and practice most directly impacts.

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Appendix A

Prison Officer Semi-Structured Interview Schedule[1]

Warm-Up Questions

1. How long have you been a prison officer?
2. How long have you been managing prisoners under the VDP policy?

What Practice Looks Like

3. Can you describe the regime for managing prisoners classified as violently disruptive?
4. What does your role involve?
5. How is this regime similar or different to other prison regimes?

Why Practice is Like This

6. Why do you think some prisoners are managed under the VDP policy?
7. What do you think is the purpose of the VDP policy?
8. What factors do you think contribute to violent or disruptive incidents in prison?
9. What factors do you think might prevent violent or disruptive incidents in prison?

How Practice is Working

10. What about the regime do you think works well?
11. What about the regime do you think does not work well?
12. What do you enjoy most about your role?
13. What do you not enjoy about your role?
14. What impact does the regime have on you?

[1] This interview schedule was used for those prison officers currently working with VDP policy prisoners. Those prison officers who were being asked about their previous experiences working with VDP policy prisoners were asked the same questions but in the past tense (e.g. how long were you managing prisoners under the VDP policy?).

How Practice Could Change

15. What do you think would be the ideal regime for managing prisoners classified as violently disruptive?
16. What would be the ideal working conditions for you?
17. What is your understanding of the new unit to be opened for the management of violently disruptive prisoners?

Round-Up Questions

18. Are there any final thoughts you would like to share on this topic before we conclude this interview?

Appendix B

Prisoner Semi-Structured Interview Schedule[2]

Warm-Up Questions

1. How long have you been in prison?
2. How long have you been managed under your current regime?

What Practice Looks Like

3. Can you describe your current regime?
4. How is this regime similar or different to other prison regimes you have experienced?

Why Practice is Like This

5. Why do you think you are managed under your current regime?
6. What do you think is the purpose of your current regime?
7. What factors do you think contribute to violent or disruptive incidents in prison?
8. What factors do you think might prevent violent or disruptive incidents in prison?

How Practice is Working

9. What about your current regime do you think works well?
10. What about your current regime do you think does not work well?
11. Is there anything about your current regime that you like?
12. Is there anything about your current regime that you do not like?
13. What impact does your current regime have on you?

[2] This interview schedule was used for those prisoners currently being managed under the VDP policy and those prisoners currently being managed similarly to those under the VDP policy. As such, general terminology, as opposed to terminology specific to the VDP policy, was used (e.g. what do you think is the purpose of your current regime?). Those prisoners who were being asked about their previous experiences under the VDP policy, or previous experiences being managed similarly to those under the VDP policy, were asked the same questions but in the past tense (e.g. What about your previous regime do you think worked well?).

How Practice Could Change

14. What would be the ideal regime for you in prison?
15. Is there anything you would like further support with?

Round-Up Questions

16. Are there any final thoughts you would like to share on this topic before we conclude this interview?