# 4

# THE PRISON SECURITY FALLACY

## How the everyday use of force produces unequal security

*Oscar O'Mara*[1]

*It was grey and overcast when Jermaine*[2] *was let out onto the concrete square that is called an exercise yard at 15:30. It is encased by brick on all four sides, with a single gate at either end and netting above. Whilst technically 'outside', the yard feels suffocating and windless. A broken pipe to the left of the entrance fills the yard with the aroma of human waste.*

*From the safety of the corridor leading onto the yard and separated by metal gates, I watch as Jermaine quickly pries open a drain cover and uses it to begin destroying drain pipes, gates, and locks in and around the concrete slab. After a few minutes of tiresome destruction, Jermaine takes a break. With sweat dripping down his forehead, he looks over to me watching from behind the entrance gate, covered in perspex. He asks who I am, what I was doing here, and generally seems to want to chat: 'There isn't much talking here, we get told what to do or to shut up'. I tell him that I am a student studying prison security, to which he laughs and says, 'Good luck, they make it up as they go along… there's no control, it's a joke, no one knows why they do what they do… it's obviously not working as the prison isn't any safer'.*

*I'm equally intrigued by who he is and what he is doing: 'Why are you destroying things, what are you hoping to achieve?' Jermaine mocks me, 'You clearly don't work here'. He was friendly, talkative and honest, telling me about his life, 'Violence is all I know'. His prison experience, 'I've been everywhere, you learn to fight screws (staff) and prisoners to survive in prison' and history. In his own words, Jermaine was 'a nice guy but a dangerous guy… I fight for respect when I need to.' Making it clear that all he wanted was to leave. He said he didn't want to hurt staff, he was 'just making a point' and was angry with the staff because 'no one has spoken to me. I don't know why I'm here (in segregation)'. Jermaine has decided that if staff don't want him here, then he doesn't want to be*

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> *here and is 'going to force a move (prison transfer)'. Jermaine regains his energy as he talks to me and after a couple of minutes, picks up the drain cover again 'It weighs a tonne!' and re-commences the destruction. 'Violence speaks louder than words here'.*
>
> (Fieldnotes, 4 February 2020)[3]

## Introduction

In its basic form, security refers to the protection of humanity against internal and external threats (Aldis, 2008). Youde (2005) explains that security is an intermediate goal to some other larger goal, a means to an end, but it is often framed in military terms, of identifying risks to individuals, populations, or infrastructure, and preventing attacks. It is disconnected from wider narratives of social insecurity, such as employment, income and housing. In prisons, security is also restricted in its meaning and application, associated with threats, risks and attacks but often delivered as the larger goal, an end in itself to control prisoners and protect the public. As the Ministry of Justice's (2021) ten-year prison strategy set out, 'Our prisons and prison regime must protect the public: this means holding prisoners securely' (p. 5). Whilst prisons also have a secondary responsibility to reduce reoffending, security is the social priority of imprisonment (see Lundeberg and Smith, this volume). Prisons are predominantly categorized and function by their security classification: High, medium or low, based on the population they hold and the apparent risk they pose to the public or the reputation of the prison service. As such, security in prison is distinct from security in broader society. Wider society pursues security to protect those in its care, the former pursues security by controlling those in its care. The prisoner is the risk of being contained and excluded from society, thus security defines imprisonment: its structure, delivery and experience. Given the subject of this book and the role of imprisonment, this chapter examines the meaning, application and outcomes of 'prison security'.

The concept of 'prison security', ostensibly aimed at safeguarding the public from 'dangerous criminals' (Ministry of Justice, 2021, p. 3) has long been a central tenet of penal policy and infrastructure in England and Wales. As the former Minister of State for Prisons, Parole and Probation, Damian Hinds explained in the UK Parliament:

> There can be no higher purpose for a Government than protecting the public from the devastating consequences of crime.
>
> *(Hansard, 2023a)*

As the priority of the prison service, prisons are measured by their 'security' to prevent escapes, riots and serious disturbances, thereby protecting

the public. After the escape of Daniel Khalife from HMP Wandsworth in September 2023, politicians widely proclaimed the 'failures' of the prison, sparking an independent investigation into security protocols and categorization (Hansard, 2023b). Following similarly high-profile escapes from two high-security prisons in the 1990s, the prison service commissioned a senior military officer to review security, order, and control of and in custody (Learmont, 1995), reinforcing the idea that security should be paramount. This led to the fortification of prisons, with all but 13 out of 122 facilities adopting a 'closed' design (Ministry of Justice, 2023a) to reflect and represent the role of the prison in controlling the risk of prisoners to the public. Therefore, security is 'what it [prison] is about' (King, 1985, p. 187)—not to protect prisoners from the harms of inadequate natural ventilation (Kinner et al., 2020), insufficient sanitation (de Carvalho et al., 2020) and crowded conditions (SAGE, 2021), but to control prisoners and protect the public from their apparent risk. This narrative has been constructed around the portrayal of prisons as islands, surrounded by impenetrable walls and razor wire, giving the illusion of complete containment.

However, the prevailing focus on prison security does not ensure public safety. Whilst security measures have curtailed prison escapes, with fewer than five in any year since 2005[4] (Ministry of Justice, 2022), crime rates remain largely unchanged (Ariel & Bland, 2019). Research has found no significant relationship between imprisonment and crime rates (DeFina and Arvanites, 2002; Wacquant, 2009), including a lack of deterrence effect (Aebi et al., 2015), and violence, alcohol and drug use persist in both prisons (Ministry of Justice, 2023b) and society at large (Office for National Statistics, 2022a, 2022b), debunking the idea that prison security protects the public. Rather, without the ability or resources to address the drivers of social inequality and crime (see Fernandes et al., 2018), factors associated with incarceration have been shown to exacerbate recidivism (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002, p. 7) as prisoners feel increasingly unsafe (HMIP, 2022a) and neglected (Warburton and Stahl, 2021), swinging on a pendulum between marginalization in wider society and deprivation within custody. Consequently, the unequal social (in)security experienced by prisoners upon entry and release from prison, such as homelessness, substance misuse and unemployment (Bozkina & Hardwick, 2021; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010; Sampson & Laub, 2003), remains unaddressed. Social inequalities are deepened in part due to the fallacy of prison security. This prompts a critical reevaluation of the role of prison security in safeguarding the public.

Within the confines of custody, security has become synonymous with strict control of prisoners. Rather than addressing prisoners' needs, prisons have become 'more conditional, more offence-centred, more risk-conscious' (Garland, 2001, p. 175), structured by punitive policies to incapacitate the 'problem'. In recent years, the punitive agenda within prisons has led

to longer sentences, reduced time out of cells, increased surveillance, and reduced contact with family and friends. Like the prison walls, internal controls, including CCTV, have reinforced the prison as an island on which all inhabitants are dangerous (Garland, 2001). The introduction of 'Airport-style' security infrastructure, such as X-ray scanners and metal detectors, turned prisoners' bodies into 'public property' (Wahidin & Tate, 2005, p. 60) and removed any sense of control. However, technology has, so far, had no significant effect on prison violence, only demonstrating that, between 2017 and 2021, the number of drugs and weapons found in prisons almost doubled (Ministry of Justice, 2022). In fact, apart from a brief period where prisons stopped reporting data due to the pandemic in 2020, prison violence has continued increasing as has the number of prisoners testing positive for drug use (Ministry of Justice, 2023a). This underscores that prison security's primary objective is to control prisoners, rather than protecting them and the public from harm.

Paradoxically, prison security deprives prisoners and the public of security. The 'security' restrictions on physical movement, clothing, food, sleep and behaviour produce psychological *pains*, where the threat and risk of violence and constant surveillance curtail prisoners' sense of autonomy:

> Every interaction, conversation, bodily movement, glance, laugh, smile, and even yawn must be monitored by the individual to ensure it is not causing offence, being taken out of context or rendering the prisoner vulnerable in the eyes of peers.
>
> *(Warr, 2016, p. 590)*

No one, nowhere, and no action escapes the 'risk climate' (Giddens, 1991). The 'Prisoner' is conceived as a threat by the prison and experiences their peers and the institution itself as a threat, revealing the 'essential nature' (Warr, 2021, p. 29) of control imposed upon prisoners who are deprived of their security. The effect of prison security in producing harm is well-evidenced in criminological literature. Deprived of their liberty, goods and services, relationships, autonomy, and security (Sykes, 1958; Haney, 2006; Crewe, 2011; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020), prisoners are *prisonised* (Clemmer, 1940) to comply with the customs of imprisonment, simultaneously inhibiting their reintegration into wider society upon release. In an environment where staff are preoccupied with threats and risks based on the 'dangerous' potential of prisoners, prison is delivered according to a 'worse-case mindset' (McKendy et al., 2021), and a related disposition to control the risk of possible harm. Physical control is, therefore, central to imprisonment as staff and prisoners are socialized to communicate with their physicality—their violence. As Jermaine, a prisoner, explained above: 'Violence speaks louder than words here'. It is the means and the aim by which the

prison is produced, understood and practised. Whilst Lundeberg and Smith (this volume) highlight that there are gendered differences between how men and women may be stereotypically characterized and understood in custodial environments, their findings in a Norwegian prison for women speak to shared experiences of and responses to unequal security. However, the causes—the how—of *(in)*security have received only minimal attention. Through a case study addressing staff use of force (violence), this chapter considers the 'fuel that fires' (Shammus, 2018, p. 207) prison security, what produces it and how.

This article examines the meaning, delivery and outcomes of prison security by drawing on the account of Jermaine, a prisoner resisting control and communicating with learned violence to achieve his ends of moving to another prison and to understand why he is in segregation. Along with ethnographic fieldwork data (10 weeks and 28 interviews with staff and prisoners in 2020) from a closed male prison in England, Clarendon, I theorise how prison 'security' is a fallacy, a self-legitimizing practice that fails to achieve its strategic intention and, paradoxically, reproduces unequal security by feeding on itself. This chapter approaches the practice of use of force as a product of structural factors imposed upon and experienced by those subject to them.

## Force is 'inevitable'

> Jermaine is not alone in thinking actions (violence) speak louder than words here. Ignoring Jermaine's loud protestations for an explanation, 'Why am I here?' he shouts at random intervals towards one of the nearby staff room windows during his destruction – the staff are busy behind the scenes preparing for a fight. After half an hour, I am joined at the gate by a member of the Independent Monitoring Board, observing staff practice and providing an independent review of proceedings, and Pink, a prison officer, who tells me that it is not possible for staff to 'engage' (prison parlance for overpower/ physically control) Jermaine safely as the destruction has created multiple possible weapons from pipe debris. Pink watches quietly and passively as Jermaine tries to ask him questions. There is a short exchange when Pink asks Jermaine what he wants, to which the latter replies, 'Two boxes of caps (Vape cartridges)' with a laugh and a smile. Jermaine then asks again, 'Why am I here?' Pink tells him, 'You know why'. When Jermaine is out of earshot, the officer explains that 'talking with him (Jermaine) won't get us far' and local staff were 'kitting up' because 'he has left us no other choice'….
>
> During another period of destruction, I pop into the staff room to find out what staff are planning. The room is buzzing with activity. Beneath the white lights and gaze of the Queen's portrait on the wall, I

> am greeted by at least eight people adorning riot gear (Personal Protection Equipment): helmets, shin guards, elbow protectors, body armour, etc. with shields and batons resting to the side. The room normally serves as the staff office and adjudication room (court-like proceedings for internal disciplinary issues) but tables and chairs have been moved to the sides to make space for the mass of staff. The senior manager present tells me that the Silver command suite was opened (an area for the senior management team to determine the next steps and how to best manage the situation with appropriate stakeholders). I'm told that 'the prisoner' has tied a ligature around the exercise yard netting and threatening to commit suicide ('jump') when staff enter the yard. I had not seen this nor had I heard Jermaine threaten this but Silver command had determined that a tactical response is necessary to resolve the situation 'safely', with the prisoner[5] distracted by a party of kitted-up staff ('a show of force') at the front gate, whilst an eight-man team enter the yard from the gate at the end of the exercise yard and 'engage' Jermaine. In the background, Jermaine can still be heard shouting, 'Why am I here?'
>
> I'm confused, but now does not feel like the time to ask questions. Staff are busy getting changed and chatting among themselves. They seem relaxed, like this is a normal occurrence, but at no point has Jermaine threatened to hurt staff or himself in my presence, only to cause as much destruction to property as possible. However, prison staff seem to see 'force' as necessary and inevitable to 'resolve' the issue, escalating for the purpose of de-escalating.
>
> *(Fieldnotes, 4 February 2020)*

Scholars have previously contested that 'all forms of incarceration imply the use of force' (Scraton et al., 1991, p. 62) as prisons enact 'violence' upon the bodies of prisoners by holding them against their will and imposing draconian policing and control of prisoners (see Rhodes, 2001). In the case of Jermaine, this insecurity can be experienced psychologically and physically. Jermaine was segregated from the general prisoner population for an undisclosed reason, inducing feelings of disrespect. He felt staff had not sufficiently communicated the reasons why, and consequently, he caused damage and destruction to the exercise yard with the use of a drain cover because 'Violence is all I know'. Jermaine had learned to 'fight' for respect. In response, prison staff determined that the use of force was *necessary* to 'resolve' the destruction and, allegedly, prevent further harm. This example evidences a shared belief in the inevitability and normality of force in prison.

In the case of Jermaine, prison staff believed that 'he has left us no other choice', force was the inevitable intervention to control the situation. This

sense of powerlessness among staff who refused to converse with Jermaine because it, 'won't get us far', suggests a normalisation and self-reinforcement of force. As most interview participants suggested, force was 'embedded' in the culture as a means of control:

> It [force] is inevitable. I think that if the culture and the understanding of staff was better then our force would be much less. It is also our first port of call here: 'Pack your kit, you're moving' - 'No' *Bang*, done. Rather than try to communicate with people.
>
> *(Billy, senior manager, interview 2)*

> Use of force is still a real problem… [it's] so embedded in the culture… [but] there's a permanent place for use of force, which is why we train staff to use it.
>
> *(Sally, senior manager, interview 28)*

> Use of force permeates this prison, it permeates every prison.
>
> (*Aaron, custodial manager, fieldnotes, January 27 2020)*

> There is a real, you know, if anyone refuses [an order] bang, down to reception let's go so that's the acceptance of use of force or regular use of force, when it shouldn't be the norm but still we do it on lower levels [of security threats] but maybe that's developing an attitude towards staff where they are more readily using force than they were in previous years.
>
> *(Chris, custodial manager, interview 3)*

Similar to how Jermaine learned to 'fight' to communicate with staff in prison, violence was normalized as part of the 'worst-case' disposition (McKendy et al., 2021) among staff in Clarendon, a 'permanent' practice permeating every aspect of imprisonment. As demonstrated in the intuitive mental structure of staff in response to Jermaine, the use of force was popularly described as neutral and objective, beyond the decision-making process of staff:

> We have to be versatile to different situations and this [force] just gives us confidence to stay safe, to stay in control. You know when you need to use it and that you can use it when you need to.
>
> *(Simon, supervising officer, fieldnotes, January 13 2020)*

> Force isn't a success or a failure, it's just responding to the situation.
>
> *(Bernie, custodial manager, fieldnotes, January 20 2020)*

> [Force] is just use of force… I don't choose to get involved, I just have to sometimes… it's always necessary, either responding to their cues or supporting someone else who has intervened… I was just doing my job.
>
> *(Mik, prison officer, January 28 2020)*

Force was constructed by staff as enacting their role in the prison, of maintaining control. Such narratives surrounding the use of force accord with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of doxa. The pervasiveness and universal framing of force represent the 'fundamental beliefs' (Bourdieu, 1997/2000, p. 16) of imprisonment, where violence rules. As Sykes (1958) and Sparks and Bottoms (1996) observed, prisons generate conflict and conflict promotes violence. Prison staff felt their actions were natural and that they did not have a choice, it was 'necessary' to respond with force. Marquart (1986) and Van Maanen (1978) similarly noted that, in almost every use of force in prison, post-factor explanations were manufactured by staff to legitimize their use of force: if they felt threatened, they can use force; if they are being assaulted, they can use force and if a prisoner is not complying with orders, they can use force. This is, *inter alia*, produced by prison training and policy.

## The double-game strategy

The normalization and legitimacy of force, the conditions of its use, were a product of a double-game strategy, where policy and training encouraged the use of force to control prisoners whilst limiting other possible actions. In response to Jermaine's destruction of the exercise yard, this can be observed in the 'tactical response' and language of staff. Without verbally communicating with Jermaine, senior managers legitimized and organized the use of force to 'resolve' the situation 'safely' and protect the prisoner and staff from apparent harm by using the threat of harm. Reflecting the parlance of policy, force was 'necessary'.

The use of force in prison is governed by a national policy that states prison staff may resort to using force as a security intervention to physically control and restrain prisoners if it is *reasonable, proportionate,* and *necessary* (NOMS, 2005, p. 5). According to national policy, *reasonableness* should be based on 'things such as the size, age and sex of both the prisoner and the member of staff concerned' (p. 5), *proportionality* 'between the means employed and the aim pursued' (p. 6) and *necessary* by 'the consequences of the prisoner not complying with his/her lawful instruction' (p. 5). Where force is subsequently assessed by staff—the judge of their own actions—as appropriate, 'the actions of the officer will not necessarily be wrong or unlawful, provided that they have acted reasonably and within the law' (p. 6). In other words, if staff believe it, then it is so, reproducing the doxic belief among staff that, 'at times [staff] have no other option than to

use force' (p. 7). Thus, the policy provided an 'objective truth', a fallacy that the decision to use force when staff determine it is *reasonable, proportionate* and *necessary* is beyond their subjectivity, to all intents and purposes, 'within the law'.

Training[6] of staff in the use of force further empowered and constrained staff. After explaining the various laws and policies legitimising the use of force (common law, criminal law, Human Rights Act, and national prison policy), the policy principles are reiterated and staff are informed that 'Prisoners use violence, staff use force' (Fieldnotes, 09/03/2020) reinforcing their practice of control as 'legitimated use of violence' (Seymour, 2003, p. 42). Staff are portrayed as the 'good guys' whilst prisoners are *othered* as the 'bad, nasty guys'. This collective identity, along with frequent references to staff as 'we' and the universality of force as 'our responsibility' to 'control' prisoners establishes and legitimizes an *us versus them* mentality between the keepers and the kept, maintaining the subordination of prisoners through their domination and control (see Carrabine & Longhurst, 1998), of which force protects.

Whilst force was framed as universal, it was also 'natural'. The practice of force is described in training as 'behaviourally-inspired and genetically-wired', stating that:

> It's human behaviour, in our DNA, to respond or flinch, a reflex action, to threats, SPEAR teaches you to identify pre-contact cues, the clench of a fist, the change of stance, and to respond.

By framing the use of force as natural, its practice is represented as objective and neutral. This is reinforced by technical jargon, such as 'limbic system', 'DNA', 'genetics', 'cognitive and neuro-associations', 'pre-contact cues', 'visual', 'auditory' and 'tactile' to encourage and legitimize the use of force as the product of 'science'—or at least the illusion of science. This sense of encouragement was reflected in conversation with officers after training:

> As we finish, I approach a couple of the officers I know who are chatting and they express their surprise in the tone of the training: 'It's really good! I thought it would be more about when we can't use it and learning loads of rules and laws, but it's not that at all'. 'Yeah, I thought it was quite good, I feel better about using it now', I ask why. 'Any time something new is introduced, there's normally loads of rules, but this almost felt like they were encouraging us to use it'. 'Yeah, I don't feel afraid to use it now. Like, we know when we're meant to use it, but it's like it's just another thing we can use'.
>
> *(Fieldnotes, 9 March 2020)*

The training facilitated confidence and a sense of empowerment as trainees learned to interpret force as legitimate and normal, a shared way of working that reduces the possibility of using other actions 'when we're meant to use it'. The use of force was both a single action among the illusion of many possibilities and a legitimate and 'inevitable' response to a 'security threat'. Two managers explained that policy and law encourage and legitimize their use of force:

> It's common law, we're looking after them… situations where yeah, legally I can use force, [there are] thousands! I could use force every part of every shift.
>
> *(Craig, custodial manager, interview 6)*

> The policy says, this human being that I'm dealing with, they've got a label 'prisoner' - that's a good starting label isn't it, so you've got the label prisoner, that legitimizes me in locking you up and using force on you if I have to and stuff like that, then you can apply all these other labels… Behind each of those labels, there's a whole set of policies and, therefore, people can hide behind all those policies and tell you that they have done things right.
>
> *(Edmond, senior manager, interview 13)*

Guided by ambiguous policy principles, prison staff are devolved of their individual responsibility as they perform their collective *duty* as officers. Staff are provided with an 'objective truth', a 'label… that legitimizes me in locking you up' and 'hides' any conscious intention, turning decision-making into a theoretical model of rules and responsibilities that structures the practice of imprisonment and provides staff with the authority to do so. Thus, policy and training establish a 'chain of legitimation' (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 824) that provides a sense of legitimacy through neutralization and universalization. As Tomczak (2018, p. 117) explained, prison policies have a strategic purpose to legitimize prison conditions and their problematic practices. In other words, policy reproduces the conditions for using force and legitimizes its practice.

As such, staff are empowered to legitimately use force in response to 'threats', yet constrained by force as the only 'logical' course of action. This shared logic is evidenced in Annex A 'justifications' where written statements by operational staff after every use of force explain what happened and why. Reviewing Annex A's with a custodial manager following a similar altercation between a prison and staff a week before meeting Jermaine, revealed that more than ten 'justifications' mirrored the policy principles and almost all were identical in format and content, never more than a few lines:

> I [insert name], [insert role/ job title], am C&R trained/ did my refresher on [insert date]. I used force on prisoner [insert name or ID] because it was necessary, reasonable, and proportionate. I confirm that the details above are correct to the best of my knowledge.
>
> *(Fieldnotes 28 January 2020)*

Reflecting the policy principles and that staff 'must act in a common sense manner' (NOMS, 2005, p. 10) the justifications were apparently self-evident and not worth expanding on. As Craig, a custodial manager, put it: 'If it's [force] justifiable, if anything's justifiable, it's justifiable' (Interview 6). Therefore, the use of force training and policy can be interpreted as 'the source' by which actions are understood, framed and determined as 'thinkable' or 'unthinkable' (Page, 2013, p. 154). The belief in force as inevitable, legitimate and universal reveals how the prison is constructed upon violence, symbolic and physical. Thus, the use of force policy and training perform a double-game strategy that empowers and constrains staff, maintaining the status quo of the prison as a place of control and normality of force as a means of control.

Subsequently, force was an almost daily occurrence in Clarendon. Between 2018 and 2022, Clarendon averaged 44–55 uses of force per 1000 prisoners each month (IMB, 2022). Force was a means to provide control in incidents where a prisoner refused to transfer, refused orders to remove paper blocking light from their cell window and were violent or seen as threatening. As such, the threat of force is 'always present' in a prison setting (Marquart, 1986: 347) where the frequency of force normalizes the method and its acceptability.

Demonstrating the pervasiveness of force in prison practice, its use occurs regularly across prisons in England and Wales. Nationally, force was used over 49,000 times in the 12 months to March 2020, 591 times per 1,000 prisoners (*The Guardian,* 2021, online), at an average of over 130 uses a day across England and Wales and more than double the last published figures of 23,000 uses of force in 2011 (Ministry of Justice, 2012). The social conditioning of staff has also been identified in many prisons. In an evaluation of PAVA spray (HMPPS, 2018), a synthetic pepper spray, pilot sites resorted to spraying prisoners because 'it's there to be used'. Whilst control sites without PAVA spray resolved conflict with verbal communication more frequently, staff in the four geographically dispersed pilot prisons reasoned that force is 'just part-and-parcel of the job', a means of 'easily controlling' and 'de-escalating' prisoners when they felt threatened. Force was used in incidents of self-harm, clothing issues, prisoners in distress, and disobeying orders. Accordingly, in 2019, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2020) found that force is 'widespread' and 'excessive' (p. 59)

in prisons in England and Wales, promoting 'a climate of fear, where staff and inmates justifiably feel at risk of violence' (p. 6). As Gooch (2013) identified, the threat or physical use 'of coercive force underpins and structures the very nature and texture of prison life' (p. 76). The double-game strategy is evident beyond Clarendon, suggestive of broader doxic thinking in prisons that governs thought and practice of security beyond local or subjective discretion.

## Prison security produces insecurity

90 minutes after the destruction began, staff 'engaged' Jermaine. It was a battle-like atmosphere as other prisoners in segregation, now aware of the evolving situation, were banging their doors rhythmically, smashing the observation panels in their cell doors, and yelling support for Jermaine, 'They're coming for you!', 'Protect yourself', 'Get it on camera!' It was a soundscape of injustice as Jermaine's peers projected their frustrations onto him, 'Hurt 'em!', 'Fuck 'em up!' On the yard, Jermaine was buoyed by the support as his peers made as much noise as possible and warned him of what was to come. The destruction continued at pace with Jermaine sporadically shouting in response to the calls from other prisoners. In the corridor, the staff got into position. I stepped back from the gate into the corner of the corridor and behind the battle-ready staff, clad head to toe in protective equipment. Under their helmets, staff could be heard mentally preparing themselves, 'Here we go', 'stay close together', 'Don't give him an opening', 'Let's do this'. They were confident; staff know that, like a Casino, the house always wins, but as one of the officers told me after the incident, 'you have to show them (prisoners), professionally, that you're in charge. Prisoners like that only listen to us when we are on top of them'.

In the actual event, Jermaine surrendered immediately at the sight of the black-clad, faceless, and battle-ready staff walking out onto the yard and was quickly handcuffed. For the last hour and a half, Jermaine had walked around the yard with bravado and purpose, talking freely and without restraint, but within a matter of seconds, surrounded by more than ten staff members in riot gear, Jermaine lost his voice. He became quiet and subdued, compliant. In between orders from staff, 'turnaround', 'hands out', 'do as we say and this is as far as it will go', Jermaine managed to squeeze out 'Why am I here?' one final time, but more as a statement than a question. He knew the staff weren't listening to him.

There was one last power play from the staff. Rather than bring him back through the gate that staff had entered the yard via and into a cell, Jermaine was paraded around the prison. Escorted by the men in black, Jermaine was walked in handcuffs around the outside of segregation,

> visible to a large proportion of other prisoners through their windows, through the centre of a couple of wings before returning to segregation. A senior manager told me that it was because a gate lock was damaged, but I had observed staff enter the yard through that gate. It felt like one last 'show of force'…
>
> Before leaving for the day, I managed one more quick chat with Jermaine through his cell door, asking about what happened when the staff came out on the yard. He seemed reflective, conciliatory, and said other prisoners might have 'fought them… but you're never going to win, at that point, it's just about protecting yourself because they're not going to'.
>
> *(Fieldnotes, 4 February 2020)*

In the example of Jermaine, prisoners and prison staff suggest that violence should be met with violence, what they call 'force', inferring that security produces a self-perpetuating cycle of insecurity and further violence. Rather than producing a safe or secure environment, Jermaine felt like he had to protect himself because the staff were 'not going to'. Relatedly, the staff said, 'Prisoners like that only listen to us when we are on top of them'. Subsequently, 'the prison isn't any safer' with the imposition of prison security interventions. Using force reinforces the necessity of force to control prisoners, whilst conditioning prisoners that violence is the answer to their problems.

This idea that violence produces further violence was reinforced by other staff and prisoners in Clarendon. To staff, force was 'the first thing that they [officers] resort to' (Simon, supervising officer, interview 8), an ordinary, routine and habitual act of control. The more staff used it, the more staff felt they needed it to stay in control:

> I'm not saying others at other establishments are better or worse, but their culture is driven by not using force, the culture in Clarendon is always 'Grrrr' and you put that into context with the lack of ability to communicate and de-escalate, and you almost get a perfect storm.
>
> *(Billy, senior manager, interview 2)*

This 'drive' of force produces 'a perfect storm' where force reproduces the conditions in which it is viewed and experienced as necessary. Relatedly, force produced feelings of insecurity among prisoners. Rather than resolving situations, most prisoners suggested that force produced a violent reaction, a 'cycle' of force:

> I've never been in an establishment where, how can I say it, escalating is like the word of the day - whereas they're meant to de-escalate situations, they're not de-escalating situations, they're just making matters worse.
>
> *(Phil, interview 10)*

> They [staff] don't resolve it, they let it escalate and that causes all this self-harm, violation, cutting themselves, and when you do that they still come and pounce you.… And now, that inmate will keep anger in them, and even though they come out through that process, they will repeat the same cycle again. Instead of that cycle being resolved in the first place through mental health, doctors, psychiatrists, prison officers, the moment you come back to the wing, give it a week, it's back again through the same process. The same cycle.
>
> *(Mr Adah, interview 20)*

> [After an incident with staff, being restrained and escorted to segregation] the prisoner told Oscar 1, 'I just want to be respected, to be heard and listened to. She wouldn't listen, wouldn't let me speak. I wouldn't go in my cell until someone explained why I can't move wings. She tried to push me inside, so I pushed her back and then she jumped me'. Xavier was upset at being restrained and close to tears as his voice broke. He told Oscar 1 that he 'can't deal' with people being 'aggressive' to him, it 'makes' him 'trigger'.
>
> *(Fieldnotes, 14 January 2020)*

These descriptions of force 'making matters worse', 'winding up' and 'triggering' prisoners echo the soundscape of Jermaine's peers in segregation and the views of Jermaine that the prison doesn't feel safe and that reciprocal violence is necessary to 'make a point'. In Clarendon, 45% of surveyed prisoners (n = 142) said they have experienced bullying and/or victimization from staff, and 50% of prisoners said they felt unsafe in Clarendon (HMIP, 2022b) as prisoners repeatedly cited examples of staff responding to disorder with force. Force did not provide a sense of safety or security, it facilitated feelings of retribution among prisoners, producing a self-perpetuating and self-legitimizing cycle where staff and prisoners perceive violence as the sole means of communicating and responding to their insecurity. Prisoners internalized their conditions and believed that 'violence was the way of Clarendon' (Thompson, prisoner, interview 9), the only 'objective' choice they faced:

> I can remember violence for as long as I can remember it and I've seen some nasty shit, so when it goes off in here, it's all I know. It's defence mode, punch them up… You get treated like an animal, I act like an animal. So you don't put a wild dog in a cage and expect it to change overnight, be tamed and that, sit down when you get told to and that, the dog won't do that, it'll bite you and that's how I see it. Some of these boys are like wild dogs, you need to help us, not just keep us locked away. It ain't going to help no-one, when they open the door, [we] just go mad.
>
> *(Jerry, interview 15)*

> You see, in here, you've got to be somebody, you've got to fight for respect. Guvs have the law behind them, it means they can do whatever they want, we've got our reputations. If someone attacks you or disrespects you, Con or Guv, you got to hold your own.
>
> *(Shane, fieldnotes, 21 January 2020)*

> In all fairness, I'd love to knock them out half the time 'cause now, if I went out, if I got six of my mates in here and went and smacked up one of the screws, that would be frowned upon. Now, when there's six of them smacking up one of us, it's called, 'force'. So, I'm one of them people that believe there's a mutual respect, so I don't agree with it and I do agree with the fact that when they attack us - which is, whether you call it force or not, it is an attack - that we're well within our rights to attack back.
>
> *(Luke, interview 23)*

As role-modelled by the violent prison staff, prisoners learned and adapted to the conditions of their violent climate. They were shaped by their restrictions and the routine abuse of prison life (Gowan, 2002) which, in turn, affected their reintegration into society upon release. As Caputo-Levine (2013) identified, the violence experienced by prisoners affects the body. Whether it was difficulty smiling, participating in small talk, asking for support, interacting with family and friends or changing one's posture to not be intimidating, the prison is 'carried' into life outside. Subsequently, around 50% of prisoners in Clarendon believed that they would re-offend in the future, similar to other local prisons (HMIP, 2022b) and male prisons nationally (HMIP, 2022a). Relatedly, violence has been the most common offence since 2002, accounting for nearly 30% of all convictions for people in prison (Ministry of Justice, 2023b). Prison violence may, therefore, be conceived as an 'interactive trap' (Neuber, 2011), a technique of power that perpetuates violence, inducing feelings of disrespect, retribution and further violence.

Prison 'security' is a fallacy, a misrecognition of its intention. Between 2018 and 2022, the use of force in Clarendon had no effect in reducing prisoner violence (IMB, 2020, 2022). Like many other prisons, violence and force remained high and constant between 2020 and 2022 (HMIP, 2022b; IMB, 2022). The rhetoric among many staff and prison policy and training that force provides security and a safer environment can be interpreted as *allodoxic* (Bourdieu, 1991), the learned *misrecognition* of security. Rather than providing protection from the threat of prisoners, force reproduced the threat in prisoners and staff, which perpetuates rather than resolves conflict. This was further demonstrated in the final 'show of force' by staff parading the handcuffed Jermaine around the prison. It reinforced the unequal security experienced by prisoners as staff communicated that Jermaine was

a risk to be controlled and that they were willing and able to use violence to control any threats to 'prison security'.

## The pandemic fallacy

> He [Dale] shouts to a colleague (Watford) to join us on the centre as we discuss how the use of force has apparently not changed during the pandemic: 'Why would it? We are still dealing with violent prisoners'. 'They still have to come out for domestics, yes it's for shorter, but that doesn't change how we work with them. We've still got to protect ourselves when the time's right'. 'It [the shorter regime] just seems to have concentrated the chaos into a short period'.
>
> *(Fieldnotes, 28 September 2020)*

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to redefine prison security. Faced with the threat of infection and adverse health outcomes, the prison service reoriented its aim from public protection to 'protecting the wellbeing of staff, prisoners, and children in custody' (HMPPS, 2021, p. 3). Rhetorically, health came first. However, with the introduction of 'population management strategies' (O'Moore, 2020) prisons performed a doxic 'semantic slide' (Wacquant, 2009), a linguistic reframing, like *violence* to the *use of force*, that maintained the status quo and control of prisoners. To 'preserve life' (HMPPS, 2020, p. 12) and 'maintain stability (order and control)' (p. 12, brackets in original) 'prison security' masqueraded as 'health security'. Prisons and their practices had not changed, only the discourse surrounding imprisonment.

The semantic slide legitimized more intensive control measures on prisoners. COVID-19 was conceived as a 'biosecurity threat' whilst staff and prisoners were both at risk of infection and the risk of causing outbreaks in prison (HMPPS, 2020) as the pandemic response turned into a military operation. 'Command mode' was initiated, where prison regimes were centrally coordinated from headquarters, and policies focussed on 'controlling' the threats by restricting physical contact between staff and prisoners. 'Control measures' were introduced nationally, such as isolation, reducing physical contact and *cohorting*. In-person meetings were replaced by virtual alternatives or suspended altogether as prisons stopped social visits, limited inter-prison transfers, exercise, and activities, such as education and employment, isolated new prisoners coming into a prison (reverse cohorting), isolated the infected in Protective Isolation and shielded the vulnerable in separate Units (O'Moore, 2020). There were further restrictions on parole hearings and access to resettlement, family and substance misuse services. Prisoners spent more than 23 hours in the cells each day (SAGE, 2021). The risk was reconfigured, but the restrictions on prisoner movement increased. To staff and

prisoners, such restrictions were legitimized in the name of the prison being 'COVID-secure':

> From the operational side, it was command-led, it was about maintaining security, stability and safety of the establishment.
>
> *(June, Activities, interview 5)*

> The principles are the same, what we are trying to do is manage to keep a COVID-secure prison whilst doing as much as we can. The priority hasn't changed really, I guess that's always been and will be for the foreseeable future, will be where we put our energy… people in custody are assumed to be a prisoner unless there is a clinical intervention that makes them temporarily a patient, but essentially they're prisoners.
>
> *(Sally, senior manager, interview 28)*

> With COVID, it's hard 'cause you're behind your door a lot… [but] here, your healthcare is all there, your health needs are there, they come get you from your cell and walk you to the meds room and it's done. It's a lot easier here than in the outside.
>
> *(Joel, prisoner, interview 17)*

> It's security-wise, they're keep us all away from each others, it's alright. Obviously, some landings you're allowed to associate with each other but mixing, they do try to keep us apart, that parts been good.
>
> *(Luke, prisoner, interview 23)*

Although the 'priority' of imprisonment had not changed, the 'control' of COVID-19 legitimized the restrictions among most staff and prisoners. This can be interpreted as a self-deception that, whilst their practices had not changed, their reasons had. Prisoners and staff reinforced the restrictive meaning of security and health to that of 'preserving life' and refused to acknowledge that COVID-19 could not be controlled. Without altering the way prison security was practised or configured, the pandemic response exacerbated the insecurity experienced by prisoners and the public. Once more, prison security was a fallacy.

Despite the apparent 'control measures', prisoners experienced disproportionately high death rates in custody during the pandemic (Braithwaite et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2022). In Clarendon, there were six reported outbreaks, at least 435 positive cases among prisoners, and three confirmed prisoner deaths caused by COVID-19 (IMB, 2021, 2022). Nationally, there were over 49,000 known positive cases of COVID-19 among prisoners across 130 prisons with over 300 deaths between March 2020 and February 2023, when the Ministry of Justice ceased collection of COVID-19-related

data (Ministry of Justice, 2023a). Prisons had little 'control' over the disease. Considering the design of prisons (lots of people with complex comorbidities interacting closely in overcrowded conditions), prisons may likely have acted as amplifiers and reservoirs of infection (SAGE, 2021), increasing the number of infections, enabling mutations, sustaining community outbreaks and seeding variants back into the wider community through staff and released prisoners. As Farmer (2005) wrote, better habitats for epidemics of airborne transmission 'could hardly be found' (p. 121), and an epidemic cannot be 'contained' by national boundaries any more than it can be 'contained by prison bars' (p. 127). Demonstrating the fallacy of prisons as an island of security, COVID-19 revealed their porosity.

The restrictions further isolated prisoners from their support system, such as family and friends, and widened social and health inequalities. Around 85% of prisoners across England and Wales experienced a 23-hour 'lockdown' during the pandemic (User Voice, 2022, June) as prisoners relied on staff for access to fresh air, referrals to health services, social contact and basic needs such as food, clothing and toiletries. Thus, all interviewed prisoners felt more and more distant from society.

> It's [prison] hurt me in many ways. I've lost my missus, my family over it all, it hasn't helped me in the slightest, it's made my mental health a lot worse. So for me, personally, it's a very unhealthy experience… I haven't spoken to my missus now for - well, my ex-missus now - 'cause I always phone her and make sure the kids are alright. I haven't spoken to her for about a week and a half now. I've got emails saying she's been in hospital and everything, and the emails took a week to come in, that's a week she thinks I don't care.
>
> *(Benny, prisoner, interview 14)*

> I want to do Maths, I want to do English, I want to do reading, even stuff like that, I want to be able to do it. When I get out of here, I want to be able to read my daughter a bedtime story. When she goes to school and comes home with homework, I want to be able to help her do it with the homework. I don't know how to do none of that, do you know what I mean? … I'm trying to do it now, but all the COVID is messing things up.
>
> *(Jerry, prisoner, interview 15)*

Benny explained how the pandemic experience had seen him lose contact with his partner and children, and Jerry described how physical restrictions inhibited his education. Subsequently, both prisoners felt insecure about their home life, which harmed their mental health and relationships. As this suggests, the harms to those imprisoned and their families are symbiotic

(see Wacquant, 2009; Minson & Flynn, 2021). Imprisonment harms the health and well-being of both parties, increasing mental and physical health and well-being issues, increasing education problems among children, deteriorating social relationships with friends and family and harming their financial situations (Wacquant, 2009). These harms were exacerbated during the pandemic. In 2022, fewer than 10% of Clarendon's prison population reported having an in-person or a virtual (online video) visit (HMIP, 2022a). Isolated in their cells, non-COVID health conditions in Clarendon among prisoners deteriorated as waiting times for healthcare also doubled (IMB, 2022). Between 2019 and 2022, the monthly average of self-harm incidents increased, self-inflicted deaths increased (IMB, 2022) and mental health problems among the prisoner population increased from around two-thirds to three-quarters (HMIP, 2022a). Again, Clarendon was indicative of the national prison landscape. Nationally, around 80% of prisoners had not received a visit in over six months by the middle of 2021, severely impacting family relationships and producing a greater sense of isolation (User Voice, 2022, June) as prisoner self-harm and deaths increased across England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2023b). With no extra resources or staffing to support prisoners, the pandemic response induced a 'universal trauma' and worsened the needs of prisoners (Wainwright et al., 2023). This insidious effect of imprisonment during the pandemic and the inability to control the virus exacerbated social insecurity among prisoners, their wider social network and the public. This deprivation of security was compounded by the continued use of force.

Force remained an 'inevitable' and 'unavoidable' response to feeling insecure in Clarendon. In July 2020, staff used force on average three times a day. This trend of use continued for months and years to come. Compared with a monthly average of 44 uses of force per 1000 prisoners in 2019/2020, Clarendon staff used force on average 55 times a month in 2020/2021 and 52 times a month in 2021/2022 (IMB, 2020, 2022). Rather than disrupting the doxa of prison security, the pandemic response reinforced it, demonstrating the embedded social conditioning of what 'prison security' means in the thought and practice of staff like Dale and Watford. Staff continued to justify the need and legitimacy for 'personal protection' on learned scientific and mythic principles of neutrality and objectivity, blaming 'troublesome prisoners' where 'you've got to use force when it's necessary' and 'a lot of what [force] happened couldn't be avoided' (Fieldnotes, 9 September 2020). Before and during the pandemic, force was still self-evident, self-legitimising and inevitable.

In summary, prisons performed a 'semantic slide' during the pandemic, altering the narrative of security, rather than its practice. COVID-19 was framed as a threat and prisoners and staff were both at risk and the risk of transmission. Subsequently, the 'risk climate' of prison security prevailed,

but prisons were unable to 'control' the virus. In the name of prison security, physical restrictions could not mitigate the design of imprisonment, as prisoners and the wider public were further deprived of security.

## Conclusion

Identifying that prisoners experience a deprivation of security is not new; however, there has been little discourse on its producing elements. This article conceptualizes prison security as doxic, reproducing the conditions in which it is viewed and experienced as normal and necessary. This shared belief in the scientific neutrality and universality of force to resolve insecurity is a fallacy, the product of a double-game strategy that legitimately empowers staff to use force and constrains other possibilities of action. As such, prison security did not, as intended, protect the public (or prisoners) but exacerbated the harms of imprisonment before and during the pandemic.

This interpretation provides opportunities to question the meaning of security in a prison setting and evaluate the value of interventions, such as force, in delivering 'security'. In its current form, prison is a 'double-edged sword' (Wacquant, 2009), hurting prisoners and the public. The use of force represents the prison and the wider system, and if prison security is inducing feelings and outcomes of unequal (in)security, a self-reinforcing cycle that only produces more harm, perhaps the solution is to reconfigure what prison and security mean and look like. Central to resolving the disconnect between 'prison security' and public protection is positioning prisoners not as *the* risk but *at* risk. In conclusion, this author invites readers to challenge their preconceived ideas and opinion about what prison is and what purpose it serves, and to consider what the prison aims to achieve and what it can be.

## Notes

1 Senior research fellow at the University of Essex and former Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor, Ministry of Justice (England and Wales). This paper is based on research data collected in pursuit of a PhD in 2020 and part-funded by HM Prison and Probation Service.
2 All names and places are pseudonyms to protect the identity of research participants, a requirement of access to the field.
3 This fieldwork extract is from ethnographic fieldwork. Quotes, observations and subsequent publication are based on informed consent provided at the time.
4 An 'escape' refers to a prisoner unlawfully gaining their liberty (for 15 minutes or more) by breaching the secure perimeter of a closed prison. It does not include those prisoners 'escaping' on escort from court or hospitals.
5 Prisoner(s) is the preferred term in this paper to denote all those incarcerated in custodial settings, compared with *convicts* or *offenders*, which refers to sentenced/'convicted' persons.

6 In March 2020, the Use of Force Instructors invited me to participate in the annual training for prison staff on SPEAR—an acronym for Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response, a new 'technique' for control and restraint of prisoners—and PAVA (synthetic pepper) spray.

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