

Exploration of the Experiences of Prison Custodial Managers

Link to article: [IMPact | Exploration of the Experiences of Prison Custodial Managers | Web](#)
Digital Object Identifier (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.82406/z1xx-z075>

Tia Beasley¹ and Lauren Smith²

¹ MS Forensic Psychology Student Researcher

² Associate Professor
School of Psychology, Sports Science and Wellbeing
University of Lincoln

Abstract

Custodial managers are an under-researched demographic within the prison workforce that play an essential role in the day-to-day running's of prisons, from operational oversight to staff support. This cross-sectional study aimed to investigate the occupational experiences of prison custodial managers by exploring the wellbeing and career progression of individuals currently in the custodial manager role. Using qualitative methods, including interviews and thematic analysis, the research investigates their perceptions of workplace culture, emotional wellbeing, and barriers to advancement. The overall findings of the study found that participants commonly described struggles in progressing in their roles due to limited opportunities and vacancies. Participants further identified weaknesses such as a lack of female representation, resources, and inconsistent/informal training. This study highlights the need for additional supportive tools, such as guided reflective practice, to help recruit, retain and support custodial managers in their job in prison management.

Keywords: Prison, Custodial managers, Progression, Workplace Wellbeing, Work culture.

Introduction

This project was supported by and conducted through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Scheme (UROS). UROS is a competitive scheme, developed under the Student as Producer model, that provides students from the University of Lincoln with

a bursary and the opportunity to develop their own research by working with academics (University of Lincoln, 2025). By working with academics, students can expand their knowledge in their field of interest, as well as gaining the opportunity to develop research skill essential to their course. Throughout this project, many different skills such as transcribing, qualitative data collection and analysis, as well as academic writing were developed; all of which are essential skills in research. The principal research question of this project explores the occupational experiences of prison custodial managers. Within this, the key focal areas explored their lived experience and perceptions of wellbeing, progression, culture, barriers, and successes within their role.

Project Background

Within the last few decades, the purpose of prisons has shifted to prioritise rehabilitation over punishment (Jewkes & Gooch, 2019; Tsimmerman, 2024) causing further ambiguity about the roles of individuals working in custodial environments. Whilst the priorities of prison have shifted, prisons still form a quintessential part of the Criminal Justice System and hold the power to shape the life course of people detained within them (Bierie & Mann, 2017). To successfully impact individuals detained in prisons, they require healthy and supported workforces who can function within the complex working environment. Prisons can be complex to work in, due to unpredictability and complicated scenarios that arise within the prison walls, such as high levels of suicide (Office for National Statistics, 2023), self-harm (Kent et al., 2024) and overcrowding (Mason et al., 2025).

Research based on individuals working in prisons is well developed (Bryans, 2000; Crawley & Crawley, 2013; Levins, 2024). Research projects have been conducted about the experiences of prisoners (Plugge et al., 2008; Wright et al., 2023), prison officers (Crawley, 2004; Crawley & Crawley, 2013), and Governors (Crawley, 2008; Faulkner, 2011; Nichols et al., 2024). However, limited literature exists about custodial managers and the experiences they have within their role. Custodial managers are junior managers within prisons (Pope, 2024). The societal shift from retribution to rehabilitation changes the priorities of staff including those of custodial managers. This UROS project will explore the wellbeing and progression experiences of custodial managers in their role. It will explore their perceptions of wellbeing; their progression needs and how the workplace culture affects them.

Literature Review

Whilst there is limited literature on custodial managers, research has found that there are high levels of burnout and low levels of support seeking (Costa et al., 2023; Mason et al., 2025; Stöver, 2014). Reflective supervision models are becoming more established in prisons and have been adopted into custodial settings in the UK to

provide greater support to staff. The use of reflective supervision models provide custodial managers with a way to normalize support seeking behaviours, by providing them with the opportunity to freely express their emotions to help reduce burnout. Uwins (2022) explored the experiences of custodial managers who used Guided Reflective Practice (GRP) within youth offending institutes. GRP is a reflective process that is both structured and facilitated to allow individuals to reflect on their emotions, experiences and decisions, as well as the outcomes of those decisions (Marshall et al., 2022). The study found GRP to be an effective tool in assisting custodial managers in creating a safe space, where individuals were able to open up about their emotions without any fear of repercussions that can present themselves in a prison environment. Furthermore, GRP was able to show improvements in self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, and leadership skills despite facing cultural resistances. Uwins' work demonstrated the importance of the environment and expectations within custodial institutions. It showed how those factors equate to how custodial managers perceive and experience their roles.

The environment in which custodial managers work is unpredictable. Other research into custodial managers explored the implications of role ambiguity and the impact it had on staff wellbeing and interpersonal relationships. Role ambiguity refers to when the behavioural expectations within a job are vague, inconsistent or unclear (Carter & Harper, 2017). Research has found that custodial managers often face role ambiguity when attempting to balance operational duties and rehabilitative goals (Pope, 2024). Despite custodial managers essential roles focusing on the maintenance of the custodial environment, they also faced blurred and vague boundaries, understood as diluted roles, and diminishing responsibilities. This can result in low job satisfaction as they felt unsupported and devalued (Mason et al., 2025). The same can be seen for other jobs within custodial roles. Ainslie et al. (2022) explored the implementation of reflective supervision in probation services and found that operational managers struggle with role ambiguity. Whilst this study was not directly into custodial managers, it looked at a similar demographic who work within the same environment and experience the same pressures custodial managers face, finding cross sector relevance in using GRP to support the emotional safety and leadership development withing custodial roles.

Methodology

For this project, ethical approval was required from two separate institutional boards: the University of Lincoln board of ethics (Reference: 2025_19609) and from the HMPPS National Research Committee (Reference: 2024_1590). Ethics is required from both the university and the prison service due to different priorities. The university main priority is the safety and protection of participants, as well as the maintenance of academic standards Whereas the prison also has to take into consideration operational and data security impact.

A cross-sectional study was used to collect data from custodial managers. Participants were recruited via an email which was shared to custodial managers by the assistant to the Governing Governor of the participating prison. The only criteria for the study were that participants had to work for the participating prison in the role of a custodial manager. Potential participants were emailed the link to a sign-up form, a participant information sheet and consent form to participate. They were invited to participate in an individual semi-structured interview. These took place online via teams and lasted approximately one hour. Interview time length was dependant on the length and depth of participant answers. Participants were asked several open-ended questions regarding their experience and perceptions of wellbeing, progression, culture, barriers and successes in their role as a custodial manager.

Initially the intention was to recruit up to 20 custodial managers. In the end, responses were only collected from 5 custodial managers, due to time constraints. From the 5 participants, demographic information cannot be provided to protect their anonymity as details such as their age would identify them due to the lack of diversity in the sample. Data collected from the interviews were analysed using a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To do this the data was divided and categorized into smaller groups of relating information. The division of similar pieces of data allowed for common themes to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

This is a pilot study for a larger scale project conducted into the experience of custodial managers, with 12 prisons being involved (Category B-C). The results of this project represent a smaller part of data from a single Category B prison that will be used in further research and future publications alongside data from the additional 11 prison establishments. It is not possible to provide detailed results, or any direct quotes from participants provided during the interview process, that at this stage, as it could make participants identifiable. However, some themes from results that can be shared, were that participants commonly described having struggles trying to progress in the role of custodial officers. They found the opportunities were limited and could be difficult to gain access to due limited vacancies. Participants also acknowledged other area of weaknesses within the role, such as a lack of female representation, lack of resources and a noted inconsistency/informality of training for the role. Whilst a lot of weakness were identified, participants did identify some positive areas about the role or the community they work in. Comments referred to the support network they have access to the care teams, governor support and the support of fellow custodial managers. Participants further commented on the autonomy of the prison and how they all have to work together to succeed. However, maintaining the balance of authority and support could be challenging, where custodial managers were often responsible for delivering unpopular news from senior management to officers. Findings from this pilot study will contribute toward the main study and fed back to the prison, with the hopes of implanting necessary changes to support custodial managers in their job and shed light on how challenging their job can be.

UROS Experience

Participating in my UROS project has provided me with the opportunity to work with academics, who not only have previous experience from within the prison system, but continue to research various aspects of relevance. Working closely with them has helped me to not only understand the planning and preparation behind a research project but provided me with the skills as a researcher to execute research that will assist me in my thesis during masters. As a result of this, I believe I will be able to achieve a higher grade in my masters, not only my thesis but within several of the forensic modules.

Hearing first hand experiences from custodial managers has also given me an insight into practitioners' experience of what prison life is really like for staff. This has helped me understand the environment I aspire to work in, whilst also acting as a stepping stone in joining the prison services by providing me with in-depth insight into the institutional processes. In addition to this, hearing the experiences of the custodial managers has inspired me to continue to investigate their experience in my thesis, as it has brought to light key aspects of prison life, and the wide range of scenarios they face.

Listening to and transcribing the interviews conducted with the custodial managers has expanded my knowledge on prison terminology used by officers. The ability to understand the abbreviations used will not only aid in future research projects but will support me in potential future careers. Furthermore, using interviews as the method of data collection has helped me develop my transcribing skills, which prior to this project I had not really had the opportunity to develop. Whilst I have learnt how much longer qualitative data collected via interviews takes to process and analyse, it has helped me to develop my time management and ultimately improved my ability to conduct research.

Challenges within the project

Originally the research was set to take place with participants from two prisons. However, schedule conflicts and time restraints led to the removal of one of the sites from the participation pool. In addition to the reduced number of participants due to the removal of one prison, certain pieces of data provided by participants also had to be removed to maintain anonymity of the small sample. This is a result of the limited participants as custodial managers often have certain aspects of their jobs which are identifiable. This includes, but is not limited to, demographic information, job descriptors and other personal information. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews and data being collected, identifiable information had to be removed from the results to protect the participants. Whilst this project has been unable to showcase some of the eye-opening information provided by the participants, the data collected is being used in other research projects, to help make much needed changes to policies to support custodial managers. Furthermore, future projects into this area will be able

to extract information from a larger number of participants across multiple sites and will be able to comment more on some of the areas highlighted within this report.

Conclusion

From the result of this project, we can conclude that custodial management role in prisons requires further development, as they play a fundamental role in maintaining prisons but often go unacknowledged. Their job is filled with a variety of struggles, especially in terms of progression and training, with participants feeling limited by the actions they can take to progress. Custodial managers can experience role ambiguity and often feel uncertain but ultimately possess the support network to work through such challenges and continue to function autonomously.

In summary, the findings of this project aid the development of understanding of the experience of custodial managers but highlight there is still room for further research. The knowledge from this study will be combined with feedback from custodial managers in other prisons and be part of a separate report that focuses on collating their experience to coproduce recommendations and a toolkit for supporting the wellbeing and development of custodial managers within their roles.

References

- Ainslie, S., Fowler, A., Phillips, J. and Westaby, C., 2022. 'A nice idea but....': Implementing a reflective supervision model in the National Probation Service in England and Wales. *Reflective Practice*, 23(5), pp.525–538. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2022.2066075>(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14623943.2022.2066075>)
- Bierie, D. M., & Mann, R. E. (2017). *The history and future of prison psychology. Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 23(4), 478.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Bryans, S. (2000). Governing prisons: an analysis of who is governing prisons and the competencies which they require to govern effectively. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39(1), 14-29.
- Carter, M.J. and Harper, H., 2017. *Role ambiguity. In: R. Scott and S.M. Kosslyn, eds. The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Wiley. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314942307>(<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Carter->

[10/publication/314942307_Role_Ambiguity/links/5c4f7dba299bf12be3eb2ddf/Role-Ambiguity.pdf\)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/jcp-10-2023-0067/full/html)

Costa, V., Silva, D., Martins, C. and Ferreira, A. (2023) 'Job stress and burnout among prison staff: A systematic literature review', *Journal of Criminal Psychology*, [online] Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/jcp-10-2023-0067/full/html>

Crawley, E. M. (2004). Emotion and performance: Prison officers and the presentation of self in prisons. *Punishment & society*, 6(4), 411-427.

Crawley, E. (2008). Prison Governors: Managing Prisons in a Time of Change.

Crawley, E., & Crawley, P. (2013). Understanding prison officers: Culture, cohesion and conflicts. In *Understanding prison staff* (pp. 134-152). Willan.

Faulkner, H. (2011). *Actor-Directors: The Working Lives of Prison Governors* (Doctoral dissertation, Durham University).

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative health research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.

Levins, A. (2024). The prison as a space of non-life: How does a typical prison sentence intervene in what really matters to people? *The British Journal of Criminology*, 64(4), 931-946.

Jewkes, Y., & Gooch, K. (2019). The rehabilitative prison: An oxymoron, or an opportunity to radically reform the way we do punishment? In *The Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice* (pp. 153-166). Routledge.

Kent, H., Magner-Parsons, B., Leckie, G., Dulgar, T., Lusiandari, A., Hogarth, L., Williams, H. and Kirby, A. (2024) 'Profiles of vulnerability for suicide and self-harm in UK prisoners: Neurodisability, mood disturbance, substance use, and bullying', *PLOS ONE*, 19(1), e0296078. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296078>

Marshall, T., Keville, S., Cain, A., & Adler, J. R. (2022). Facilitating reflection: a review and synthesis of the factors enabling effective facilitation of reflective practice. *Reflective Practice*, 23(4), 483-496.

Mason, R., Smith, L. and Harrison, K. (2025) 'Support for staff wellbeing and development when working in prisons: A narrative rapid evidence review', *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01924036.2025.2497374>

Nichols, H., Saunders, G., Harrison, K., Mason, R., Smith, L., & Hall, L. (2024). It's not ok to not be ok... when you're a prison governor: The impact of workplace culture on

prison governors' wellbeing in England, Scotland and Wales. *Incarceration*, 5, 26326663241253698.

Plugge, E., Douglas, N., & Fitzpatrick, R. (2008). Patients, prisoners, or people? Women prisoners' experiences of primary care in prison: a qualitative study. *The British journal of general practice*, 58(554), e1.

Pope, L., 2024. *Experiencing Offender Management in Custody (OMiC): A qualitative study of staff perspectives in four male closed prisons*. HM Inspectorate of Probation. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation>

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) *Drug-related deaths and suicide in prison custody in England and Wales: 2008 to 2019*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/drugrelateddeathsandsuicideinprisoncustodyinenglandandwales/2023-01-26>

Stöver, H. (2014) 'Prison staff under stress: Causes, consequences and health promotion strategies', in Enggist, S., Møller, L., Galea, G. and Udesen, C. (eds.) *Prisons and Health*. Springer, pp. 175–182. Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-017-7558-8_16

Tsimmerman, M., 2024. *Rehabilitation in the Criminal Justice System: Shifting from Punishment to Progress*. *Applied Social Psychology*. Available at: <https://sites.psu.edu/aspsy/2024/10/20/rehabilitation-in-the-criminal-justice-system-shifting-from-punishment-to-progress>

University of Lincoln (2025). *Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme– Lincoln Academy of Learning & Teaching*. [online] Available at: <https://lalt.lincoln.ac.uk/student-as-producer/student-as-researcher/undergraduateopportunities-research-scheme/>

Uwins, N.S., 2022. *Exploring the experiences of Custodial managers who have engaged in Guided Reflective Practice as part of their role working in a Youth Offending Institute*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Roehampton.

Wright, K. A., Young, J. T., Matekel, C. G., Infante, A. A., Gifford, F. E., Meyers, T. J., & Morse, S. J. (2023). Solitary confinement and the well-being of people in prison. *Social Science & Medicine*, 335, 116224.