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Managing an ageing prison population

Identifying and addressing the physical, mental health and social care needs of ageing prisoners is vital to improve the UK's prison service, say Northumbria criminologists.

In a paper submitted to the Ministry of Justice Select Committee on older prisoners, Louise Ridley and Charlotte Bilby, Senior Lecturers in Criminology at Northumbria University, have outlined their ongoing work to explore the management and needs of an older prison population.

Ten percent of the UK's prison population is over the age of 50 and the over 60s are the fastest increasing group within the prison estate – with this

group growing by 128% in one decade. However, Louise and Charlotte argue that the way prisons – designed to hold young and fit prisoners – deal with the issues faced by older men and women is sorely lacking in the majority of prison facilities.

The academics have worked with professionals in HM Prison Service North East, the National Offender Management Service and associated professionals from healthcare and elder care organisations to gather data and information about the specific and particular requirements for rehabilitating ageing prisoners.

To date the work has identified that there is an overwhelming need for a national strategy that addresses the experiences or needs of the older prisoner. As part of this strategy tailored training and education programmes need to be developed that enable older prisoners to engage and feel there is something to be gained from participating. There also needs to be greater awareness and adjustments for the chronic illnesses, mobility difficulties and emotional problems that affect ageing prisoners.

The findings from their activities within North East prisons have been submitted to and published by the Ministry of Justice and will be used to inform a national response to the needs of older prisoners.

Louise Ridley said: “The prison population in England and Wales is not only increasing, but it is ageing. Increased use of life sentences and the creation of indeterminate sentences mean that the number of older prisoners is growing.

“Our current research will consider how prisons in the North East of England manage and deal with the impact of punishing, rehabilitating and looking after older prisoners, and will enable good practice to be shared outside of the region for potential national impact on policy and practice.”

As part of their ongoing research, the academics will hold workshops that share information on topics relating to social and health well-being and care of older prisoners. The workshops will consider how HMPS and partner organisations, such as health care trusts, Care UK, local authorities and third sector organisations, address issues associated with older people.

Charlotte Bilby said: “Our contribution will ensure that activities to address

the needs of the North East region's older prisoners are informed by the latest academic expertise and the practice of professionals so that changes can be made."

The paper can be viewed at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmjust/writev/olderprisoners/olderprisoners.pdf>

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk