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# Isolated and Invisible: The Barriers to Implementing Constructive Resettlement Approaches in Two English Young Offenders Institutions

Youth Justice

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## Abstract

The custodial estate for children aged 10–17 years across England and Wales faces a number of challenges. This article focuses on the perceptions of Resettlement Officers in two Young Offender's Institutions (YOIs) in England on the challenges of their role: successfully reintegrating children from custody into the community using 'Constructive Resettlement' approaches. The findings will present a range of internal barriers encountered by Resettlement Officers that leave them feeling isolated, invisible and misunderstood. Finally, implications for future policy and practice will be considered.

## Keywords

children, prison culture, reintegration, resettlement, Young Offenders' Institution, Youth Custody, youth justice

## Setting the Scene: Resettlement Officers and the Children's Custodial Estate in England and Wales

Concerns about the incarceration of children in trouble with the law are both long-standing and recognised internationally (Willow, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states, in Article 37, that the imprisonment of children should only ever be applied as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period (UNCRC, 1989). Article 40 (1) requires nation states to treat children in a way that promotes their reintegration into society. The treatment of children in custody has troubled policy-makers for several decades, raising the question of whether the juvenile custodial estate, in its current form, is fit for purpose (Willow, 2015). Indeed, in 2017, the Chief Inspector of Prisons

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stated that he did not believe that any Young Offenders Institute or Secure Training Centre could be deemed safe enough to hold children (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), 2017). Features such as the use of physical restraint (Gooch, 2015; Hart, 2008; Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2008), the loss of liberty (Sykes, 1958) and solitary confinement (Gooch, 2016) and bullying and violence (Butler, 2008; Gooch, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2016) have led several scholars to conclude that children's experiences in custody amount to institutionalised abuse (Gooch, 2015) and a violation of children's rights (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2019).

There have been attempts by the UK Government to address some of these concerns. Following The Taylor Review (2016) of the Youth Justice System, the UK Government committed to phasing out YOIs and replacing them with Secure Schools. However, progress has been slow, with the first secure school opening in 2024. Levels of physical restraint remain high, isolation from peers and self-harm episodes remain high (Justice Select Committee, 2021). Indeed, the Youth Custody Service (part of the UK Government Department – Ministry of Justice) reported in 2021 that levels of restraint and self-harm were at a 5-year high across the youth custodial estate, noting a 19% increase in the use of restrictive physical restraint to over 7500 incidents in the previous 12 months (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Levels of bullying and violence remain a significant challenge within some YOIs following the initial decrease during the Covid lockdown in 2020 (Hazel and Purton, 2023).

The youth custodial estate has been facing significant challenges for many years. Much of the recent political attention has been on how it managed through the pandemic, with a particular focus on the physical and mental health of children; access to education; time out of cells; and contact with friends and family (HMIP, 2020). Much less is known about the views, experiences and perspectives of Resettlement Officers working within this environment. Resettlement Officers carry out an important role within custody, namely, to effectively plan and support children to successfully reintegrate into the community upon release. The aim is for Resettlement Officers to work closely with children in YOIs from the moment they arrive, through to several months after their release. There are often practical barriers to working with children as outlined, which will be explored in this article. This also requires working with a range of agencies from both within and outside custody. This unique perspective is often missed, but this article seeks to correct this deficit. The article will first set the scene by outlining how the custodial estate in England and Wales is structured; and defining key roles within the custodial estate. It will then go on to consider the literature in this area, focusing on the prison officer role and culture before outlining the research design. Finally, key findings will be presented from the interviews, and future implications will then be considered for practitioners, policy-makers and future research.

### *Resettlement Officers and Constructive Resettlement*

Resettlement Officers work with a caseload of children from the moment they arrive at the Young Offender's Institution (YOI) until they are released from custody. Their role is to work with the child to help them prepare for release from custody by ensuring that they have the best possible support package in place to help them make the 'identity shift'

away from offending and successfully reintegrate into the community. It is important to acknowledge, at the outset, that the concept of ‘identity shifts’ occurring with children are contested, and that much of the literature in this area has been focused on adults (e.g. Maruna, 2001). The focus on supporting children to make an identity shift is rooted in ‘Constructive Resettlement’, an approach developed by the Youth Justice Board (the statutory body with responsibility for the management and oversight of the youth justice system in England and Wales). This article is based on data derived from an evaluation of Constructive Resettlement training, which had been delivered to Resettlement Officers in custody. The training sought to outline a new approach to effectively support children as they prepare for release from custody. The 1-day training covered the principles and approaches of Constructive Resettlement, and Child First Justice. Building on the work on the ‘Beyond Youth Custody’ (Hazel, 2017) project, Constructive Resettlement emphasises the importance of helping a child develop their social capital, building a relationship with children, by promoting their individual strengths and capacities as a means of developing their pro-social identity (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2018), and moving away from a ‘pro-offending’ identity (hence the ‘identity shift’). Therefore, Constructive Resettlement emphasises the importance of working with (not to) children, and focusing on their future to enable them to fulfil their potential (YJB, 2021).

Constructive Resettlement is part of the Youth Justice Board’s recent move towards ‘Child First Justice’ (Case and Browning, 2021) which seeks to *‘put children at the heart of what we do. The youth justice system should treat children as children, see the whole child, including any structural barriers they face and focus on better outcomes for children’* (Youth Justice Board, 2022: 2). It has been established, at a national strategic level, as the ‘guiding principle’ for the whole Youth Justice system, including the youth custodial estate, which is managed by the Youth Custody Service (a separate department within the Ministry of Justice). Child First Justice seeks to recognise that children are developmentally different from adults and should be treated as such (tenet one); promote individual children’s strengths and capacities (tenet two); collaborate with children wherever possible in decisions that impact their lives (tenet three); and maximise the use of diversion from the youth justice system to avoid criminalisation (tenet four) (YJB, 2024). Some of the ‘tenets’ of Child First Justice are proving more challenging to operationalise in YOIs. Tenet one, for example, is challenging, given that YOIs are prisons built for the adult population that have been ‘re-rolled’ for children. The physical environment and prison regime broadly continue to mirror the adult estate. The Constructive Resettlement approach provides an opportunity to advance tenets two and three within custody. However, significant barriers remain, some of which will be considered in this article. More recently, attention has focused in the academic literature on operationalising tenet three across youth justice services as the challenges of collaborating with children where significant power imbalances exist have been highlighted (Hampson et al., 2024).

Both Child First Justice and Constructive Resettlement focus on the importance of an identity shift towards a pro-social identity, further developing the work of the Beyond Youth Custody Programme (Hazel, 2017). However, there are some subtle differences between the two ideas, namely that Child First Justice recognises the developmental difference of children, and Constructive Resettlement is partly informed by adult-based

notions of desistance (e.g. Maruna, 2001). These differences require further exploration and consideration in the literature.

The Constructive Resettlement approach draws on Maruna's (2001) conception of desistance from offending as a process involving a shift in self-identity from offender to non-offender, and Bourdieu's (1986) work on social capital, which is theorised as relationally dependent processes (Weaver, 2015) that are most effectively defined as 'processes of social interaction' (Bankston and Zhou, 2002: 286). Social capital can also include an individual's access to networks, institutions and social structures that provide a person with more opportunities to desist from offending. This implies that the quality of relationships between the child and their friends, family and professionals may be among the most important elements in supporting desistance (Weaver, 2015). A lack of access to social capital makes desistance from offending difficult (King, 2013; McNeill et al., 2012), and can be influenced by power inequalities factors such as social class, ethnicity and gender. Therefore, the role of the Resettlement Officer, according to the Constructive Resettlement approach is to support a child to both make the identity shift to a pro-social identity and to develop their social capital to support desistance and ensure a successful reintegration into the community following release from custody.

### *A note on terminology*

It may also be helpful at the outset to define and distinguish a number of key terms related to job titles and functions within the custodial estate. First, 'operational' refers to prison staff (usually qualified Prison Officers) with responsibility for the functioning and security of an establishment. Such staff must be always present in the establishment, meaning staff often work unsociable hours (including overnight and weekends). 'Non-operational' prison staff are typically staff who do not have direct responsibility for the running of an establishment, but work in a range of support roles, such as education, healthcare, substance use, psychology and so on. This group of staff typically work Monday to Friday during the day and do not wear a prison uniform. The Resettlement Officer's role is non-operational but is typically staffed with those of both operational and non-operational experience. However, the understanding is that if a practitioner is from an operational background, they are taken off the 24/7 shift pattern and work non-operational hours so that they can devote their time to the resettlement role.

Before embarking on a discussion of the views of Resettlement Officers in YOIs, it is important that an overview of the Children's Custodial Estate in England and Wales is outlined. When sentenced to custody, children are placed in one of three establishments (Day et al., 2020): a Secure Children's Home (for boys and girls aged 10–17); a Secure Training Centre (for boys and girls aged 12–17) or a Young Offender Institution (for boys aged 15–18 – although several girls are currently held in the Keppel Unit at Wetherby YOI). The latest data shows that there are currently 86 children in Secure Children's Homes; 57 children in Secure Training Centres; and 454 children in YOIs (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Secure Children's Homes are typically more focused on welfare, rather than punishment, and have a higher ratio of staff as they tend to be reserved for the most vulnerable children. Secure Training Centres are smaller than young offender institutions

(YOIs) and, when developed, the aim was for STCs to have a focus on education and training. YOIs bear many similarities to an adult prison, adopting broadly the same operating model as its adult counterpart. Most children sentenced to custody in England and Wales are placed in YOIs. The focus of this article will be on the perceptions and experiences of Resettlement Officers in YOIs.

## **The Existing Literature – The ‘Prison Officer’ Role in the Youth Custodial Estate**

The prison and wider prison officer role has been the subject of recent media attention, following the portrayal of life in a Men’s (in 2021) and then Women’s (in 2023) prison in Jimmy McGovern’s BBC Drama ‘Time’. Prison officer and the wider prison staff roles have become a focus of research in the last 30–40 years, with most of the literature exploring the prison environment and its impact on its residents (Einat and Suliman, 2021). For example, the recently published ‘Good Prison Officer’ (Brierley, 2023) draws on stories and narratives of people who have served custodial sentences and seeks to make a range of recommendations to create a rehabilitative culture within prison and make the work of prison officers ‘easier’ (Brierley, 2023: 8). Further, much of this attention has been on the prison officer and staff role within the adult estate, rather than the children’s custodial estate. The extant literature focuses on a number of key areas including burnout and stress; the prison officer culture; and care v control.

### ***Burnout and stress***

It may come as little surprise to discover that working within a prison can be challenging, leading to higher-than-average levels of stress (Steiner and Wooldredge, 2015) compared with other similar populations such as police officers (Klinoff et al., 2018). It is recognised that ‘there are many factors outside of the officer’s controls that place strain on their day-to-day roles’ (Brierley, 2023: 8). Indeed, much of the literature in this area has focused on the stressful working conditions (Einat and Suliman, 2021; Hogan et al., 2006) and their impact on prison staff (Lovell and Brown, 2017). Prisons contain traumatised people dealing with a range of issues including experiences of victimisation, abuse and loss (Bowler et al., 2018; Nolan et al., 2018; Vaswani, 2014; Williams et al., 2010). Vaswani and Paul (2019) argue that working with trauma is the ‘business’ of the prison workforce, who often feel unequipped and ill-prepared for some of the more ‘therapeutic’ demands of the role due to a lack of training in this area, leading to burnout and stress. In turn, this can create job detachment and depersonalisation of people in prison as a way of coping with working in such an environment, and a long-term effect on the personality of prison officers (Vaswani and Paul: 2019).

Within the youth custodial estate, Perry and Riciardelli (2021) have argued that high levels of occupational stress can leave prison staff emotionally vulnerable when working with children, leaving them unable to enjoy some of the more positive aspects of their work (Kolb, 2014). They found that ‘repeated exposure to high-needs youth becomes a source of physical and mental exhaustion’ (Perry and Riciardelli, 2021: 1035).

The consequences of occupational stress and burnout in prison staff appear to be far-reaching, and extend beyond impacts on health and job satisfaction, to decreasing levels of conscientiousness after several years of working in the prison environment (Einat and Suliman, 2021). This trend, the authors argue, is opposite to that found in other studies in Western countries, which have indicated increased levels of job conscientiousness after entering employment (Einat and Suliman, 2021: 175). The implication of this is that despite entering employment with the prison service with high levels of motivation prison staff become ‘steadily burned out, cynical, disorganised and lacking commitment to the prison service’ (Einat and Suliman, 2021: 176).

This is impacting on the retention of frontline prison officers with more than one in seven officers leaving in the year ending June 2023 (His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), 2023a). Rates of staff absence due to illness remain high, with the most common reason being ‘mental and behavioural disorders’ accounting for 35% of all absences (HMPPS, 2023b).

### *The prison occupational culture*

Despite the many challenges of working in the prison environment, a strong occupational culture has been found to exist among prison officers in particular (Liebling, 2008). Although a contested concept, the main features of the prison officer culture are generally accepted to be insularity, machismo and a hierarchical relationship with prisoners (Bennett, 2012: 198). It is considered likely that the very challenging conditions during the Covid pandemic may have strengthened the insularity element of the occupational culture, given the extended period of lockdown across YOIs and lack of contact with external agencies during this period, and contributed in part to an invisible dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Crawley, 2004). The ‘us’ referred to operational prison officers, and the ‘them’ category applied to a number of different groups within the custodial environment.

The first ‘us and them’ divide appeared between operational prison staff and managers/Governors and to have emerged from operational staff feeling unsupported by senior prison managers, resulting in a lack of faith in their ability to both understand the challenges of their role and effectively advocate for them (Halsey and Deegan, 2017). It has been highlighted that this contributed to high levels of stress and frustration within the role and a perception that operational staff were undervalued (Frost et al., 2022). Further, there was evidence that prison operational staff were held personally responsible for the conditions in which people in prison are held, when in reality they had very little control over such conditions (Perry and Riciardelli, 2021). It has therefore been argued that people in prison and prison operational staff are both ‘subordinate to the inherent coercive control of carceral powers and structures informed by political governance’ (Perry and Riciardelli, 2021: 1028). It has already been established, above, that prisons are in a state of crisis with both children and adults living in appalling conditions and the apparent responsabilisation of operational staff for this will only intensify the high levels of stress, burnout and job dissatisfaction.

Although evidence has been found of a strong occupational culture among operational staff, this also applies to divides *within* the operational staff group. For example, other

divides within the prison staff group were also evident suggesting that within the Prison Officer Culture, subcultures may also emerge based on experience, or whether you are 'operational' (and wear a uniform) or 'civilian' (and do not wear a uniform). The experience-based divide appeared to be between new, young officers and established, often older, members of staff *as 'new recruits derided 'old dinosaurs' and 'dinosaurs' grumbled about new recruits. In the quietness of the interview room, new recruits disclosed that they felt bullied by other officers'* (Crawley, 2004: 414).

Supporting the 'us v them' theme in the literature, it has been found that non-operational staff are viewed as 'outsiders' (Crawley and Crawley, 2008), although this did vary between establishments, often on the basis of how strongly operational staff aligned themselves with the traditional officer culture (Liebling, 2008). Mills et al. (2012) found that this made civilian staff feel that they were *'guests in a host environment, dependent on the cooperation of prison staff to fulfil their service remit'* (Mills et al., 2012: 398). Showing care for people in prison was also deemed to be culturally unacceptable (Mills et al., 2012) in more 'traditional' establishments. The tension between care and control is considered below.

### *Care and control*

A conflict between care and control was evident among operational prison staff, causing great stress and tension (Nylander et al., 2011). This conflict has dominated the area of prison officer research (Barcinski et al., 2017; Halsey and Deegan, 2017; Tait, 2011; Urwin, 2018). The tension between different ways of working with children in custody has been framed using Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, as frontline practitioners struggle to navigate a range of external forces and in particular 'how battles between those who accrue/retain power and those who contest dominant discourses are "played out"' (Creaney and Burns, 2024). Within the custodial setting, 'care' typically focuses on building relationships and the welfare needs of a person in prison, whereas 'control' focuses on the management of behaviours and security of the prison regime. Several 'dominant discourses' of working with children and adults in custody have been developed which broadly fall into the care or control paradigms. For example, the 'Good Lives Model' is a strengths-based, future-oriented therapeutic care-oriented programme designed to address sexually harmful behaviours. However, risk-based approaches focus less on care and more on the control and management of children and adults in custody and the community, often limiting their chances of successful reintegration following release (Donnelly, 2018). Risk-based approaches seek to identify causes within the context of risk factors and focuses firmly on preventing and controlling the crime 'problem' through risk assessment and management. Therefore, if one could identify risk factors that increase the probability of a person or child committing a criminal offence, a person's risk of reoffending could reduce if they received the correct 'intervention' to address this (Farrington, 2002). The risk factor prevention paradigm has dominated criminal justice practice in England and Wales for over 30 years. Although it has enabled youth justice practitioners and policy-makers to identify some of the individual factors that contribute to criminal behaviours, the risk paradigm has been heavily criticised in recent years for its flawed methodology (Case and Haines, 2009), its labelling effect (Bateman, 2020), and the adultisation and responsabilisation of children (Haines and Case, 2015).



Despite the pre-dominance of risk management and control, care has been one of the main priorities within policy of the prison service (HMPPS, 2023a) for many years (Frost et al., 2022; Pilling, 1992). The rhetoric, however, does not reflect the reality on the ground, where frontline staff struggle to balance competing discourses. Generally, where an officer was found to be able to balance caring for people in prison and controlling behaviours, this was linked to their own individual ability to resist the ‘us’ vs ‘them’ culture, outlined above (Halsey and Deegan, 2017). It is noted, however, that this tension has emerged in more recent years as the requirements of modern prisons have changed, with expectations that an establishment can simultaneously maintain security and the safety of people on prison, plan for resettlement and meet the complex needs of the custodial population (Halsey and Deegan, 2017). This has contributed to the development of specialist officer roles that require different skills to the generic wing officer role (Halsey and Deegan, 2017). Unfortunately, it has been argued that as long as rehabilitation remains the confines of ‘specialist officers’, rather than integrated into the day-to-day roles of all operational prison staff, the main purpose of prisons will be punishment, rather than rehabilitation.

One of the ‘specialist roles’ described above is the resettlement officer (also referred to as the throughcare support officer and reintegration officer), which forms the focus of the findings and discussion of this article. Maycock and McGuckin (2020) found that the main task of a throughcare support officer in a Scottish adult prison was building relationships with people in prison and community partners, and thus building up a person’s social capital, to enable a successful transition ‘through the gate’. The quality of relationship between resettlement officer and person in prison had the potential to be a ‘strength’ that could contribute to eventual desistance (Maycock and McGuckin, 2020). Focusing specifically on the children’s custodial estate, Olaitan and Pitts (2020) note that the challenges facing young people and their resettlement workers are ‘formidable’ (p. 89), noting the high proportions of children who, upon release, do not have a place to live, do not have an education placement and need continuing help with mental and emotional health. This was despite the fact that an inspection into resettlement work in youth custody in England and Wales found that ‘all the YOI case managers we spoke to were interested in the welfare of the children they were working with, and worked hard to promote it’ (HMIP, 2019: 26).

The limited research on care and control in the children’s custodial estate has found that, although there is a tension, it is not as pronounced as in the adult estate, and that the majority of staff supported both rehabilitation (care) and custody (control) (Blevins et al., 2007). It is thought that this is because the children’s custodial estate has a more of an ‘underlying rehabilitative mission’ than in adult prisons (Blevins et al., 2007). It is noted that the requirement to balance care and control in the children’s custodial estate may have become more challenging in recent years in England and Wales due to changes to the both the numbers and complex needs of children it accommodates (Tarrant and Torn, 2021). As the numbers of children in custody have reduced considerably, there is a greater concentration of those with complex needs and challenging behaviours (Wood et al., 2017).

Caring for traumatised children in custody can be emotionally draining, leading to compassion fatigue (Tarrant and Torn, 2021). This may help further explain why there are high levels of burnout and stress among prison staff. However, a study on a specialist unit

for vulnerable children in a Young Offenders' Institution found that a more caring culture was created as a result of the higher staff-to-child ratio than the main prison population. This allowed staff to get to know the children and build relationships with them (Tarrant and Torn, 2021). Equally, in Secure Children's Homes, where the units are smaller and staff-to-child ratio is higher, children reported experiencing higher levels of care and better relationships with staff (Day et al., 2020). This aligns more closely to the Children's Rights framework, which advocates for the best interests of the child and that rehabilitation and restoration must be prioritised over the more traditional aims of the criminal justice system, such as retribution (Kilkelly et al., 2023: 10).

There is little doubt that working in prisons is extremely challenging, with strong evidence emerging of burnout, stress and tensions between both groups of staff and methods of working. There are some commonalities between the adult and children's prison estate, but there are some subtle differences. Within the children's prison estate, the tension between care and control does not appear to be as pronounced as the adult estate, and there appears to be some encouraging evidence from specialist units within YOIs that suggest higher staff-to-children ratios benefit the quality of relationships between children and prison staff. This article advances this understanding by focusing on the views and perspectives of Resettlement Officers about their role, the challenges within the current prison estate, and the impact that this has on the children they work with.

## Research Design

The study from which this particular article is drawn adopted a qualitative approach using 1:1 semi-structured interviews. They were conducted with 10 Resettlement Officers based in two YOIs in England as part of an evaluation, by the author, of a project, funded by the Youth Justice Board in England and Wales, that sought to trial the 'Constructive Resettlement' approach to supporting children on release from custody. Ethical clearance was secured from Keele University. All Resettlement Officers in two English YOIs were trained in the Constructive Resettlement approach by youth justice staff. Email addresses were provided by the Resettlement Team Managers of all Resettlement Officers who had attended the Constructive Resettlement Training. It was not possible to interview other prison staff as they had not received the CR training. Using a convenience sampling technique, Resettlement Officers (24) in both YOIs were contacted by email, with the information sheet and consent form attached, and asked to participate in the research. Ten Resettlement Officers responded positively to the request and volunteered to partake in an interview, which were subsequently arranged over Teams due to Covid restrictions. Although perhaps more convenient and less costly, there is always a risk that conducting interviews virtually, rather than face to face, could compromise the opportunities for empathic engagement. The interviewer tried to alleviate this risk wherever possible by adopting a warm, friendly and 'chatty' style in an attempt to try and connect with participants over the online platform. This seemed to work well, and the semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed the researcher to verbal and non-verbal responses that may produce helpful data in the subsequent analysis. There is also a risk, as the participants volunteered their time, of bias as only those with strong opinions may respond

positively to the invitation (Bryman, 2012). Attempts were made to alleviate this risk through careful questioning when strong opinions were expressed to fully understand the context surrounding where the views came from, and to ensure that this context was included in the coding and analysis that followed the data collection.

In terms of a breakdown of participants, five participants identified as male and five identified as female. Seven of the participants moved to the Resettlement role after spending several years working as a uniformed prison officer, five of whom had more than 10 years' experience with the Prison Service. The three staff who came into the role from a non-prison background had varying levels of experience as a Resettlement Officer, with one new to the role, and the remaining two having over 9 years' experience. Just two out of the sample of 10 Resettlement Officers had less than 5 years' experience in their role.

Immediately prior to commencing the interview, the researcher checked that the participant still consented, and made it clear that the process was entirely voluntary. An interview schedule containing 'prompts' and 'probes' was used to facilitate a conversation, the pace and direction of which was largely determined by the interviewee. The aim in the interviews was for the exchange to feel like a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984) and less like a structured question and answer session. All interviews were recorded on Teams and deleted immediately after transcription. All interviews were anonymised at the point of transcription. Data was transcribed and checked for accuracy.

The author adopted a recursive and reflective approach to analysis, which included taking account of some of the challenges of data gathering as a result of Covid restrictions. Adopting inductive reasoning, data was organised and coded in NVivo, utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis which involved familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching within the codes and data for themes and sub-themes; reviewing and reorganising themes; and finally mapping, naming and defining key themes, which are outlined below. This approach recognises that data is produced as a result of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Charmaz and Bryant, 2007). It is therefore recognised that the nature of the interview, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, and the setting can all impact on the data.

The findings are based on the perceptions of a group of Resettlement Officers working in two Young Offender's Institutions in England. Although they reflect the experiences of this group of officers, they may not be representative of all Resettlement Staff across the custodial estate.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Doing 'Resettlement' constructively? The importance of relationships*

Research participants described building relationships with children as the most important feature of their role. This is supported by the literature in this area (Maycock and McGuckin, 2020), which emphasises the importance of relationship-based practice as a form of social capital over and above programme intervention (e.g. Creaney, 2014):

*'But it's just getting to know them, and I think it's so important because that then helps as a starting point of what we can put in place for them as well, and to discuss with social worker, family and the YOT'. (Resettlement Officer 4)*

One Resettlement Officer explained that part of getting to know the children involved having a different conversation that focused on their aspirations, something that they were not used to:

*'Basically, you know reach for the stars, don't limit yourself you can do these things yeah and I found it probably going off tangent here, but really I found it quite noticeable that the boys were, you know, with their own self-identity is limiting themselves of what they could possibly achieve. It's like they've already written themselves off'. (Resettlement Officer 7)*

It is encouraging that Resettlement Officers were focused on, and understood, the importance of building caring relationships with children while embracing the principles of Constructive Resettlement. This further supports the literature that highlights the focus of non-operational staff on care, rather than control of children (e.g. Blevins et al., 2007). Resettlement Officers are viewed by operational staff as the 'care bears' or the 'cuddly ones' of the children's prison estate, which appears to have contributed to an invisible dividing line between both groups of staff, in a similar way to the occupational split between civilian and operational staff. This finding will be explored in detail towards the end of this section. It is worth highlighting at this point that there is evidence of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice at play here as staff 'in the thick of it' are expected to navigate the tensions between a range of competing discourses about how best to support children in custody, which, as highlighted above, has been framed as a form of symbolic violence (Creaney and Burns, 2024). However, this divide seems to arise, at least in part, from the focus of Resettlement Officers on caring for children, rather than controlling their behaviours. It also suggests that the strategic commitment of the Youth Custody Service to 'Child First Justice' (Case and Browning, 2021) through the implementation of a 'Constructive Resettlement' approach may be requiring prison staff to practice at odds with occupational cultures, potentially alienating them from their peers.

Constructive Resettlement, as outlined above, involved planning for a child's release and resettlement from the moment that their time in custody commenced:

*'Yeah, it's all about having things in place. Working from the get-go on plans..'. (Resettlement Officer 3)*

Following the training, all interviewees were asked to explain what they understood by 'Constructive Resettlement'. Answers varied, but the majority focused on the importance of involving families and the wider community, planning for a child's resettlement from the moment of receipt into custody, building relationships with the young people, and an individually tailored approach:

*'So, the words constructive resettlement. . .we already sort of doing it in a way, but it just wasn't sort of promoted in in that way. So the pathways -you all you talk about these from day one and the first meetings is accommodation where you where you're going to live education, what you intending to do, what your goals, what do you want to do. . .supporting families, contact with families so. . .we were always told from day one part of our role was to establish these things at the very first meeting. Don't leave it all till the end'. (Resettlement Officer 3)*

*'What I sort of understand constructive resettlement to be is as you say literally starting from day one. Yeah, identifying what the boy wants. . .It's literally what, What do you want? Just being very transparent. Yeah, these are our suggestions. What are your suggestions? What? What do you want to do? Yeah, involving your involving family'. (Resettlement Officer 8)*

### **Doing 'Resettlement' constructively? A new framework?**

Most, if not all, Resettlement Officers found the Constructive Resettlement training useful (training outline provided on p. 3) as a 'refresher' but felt that they were already practising much of Constructive Resettlement and that it did not teach them anything new:

*'And if I'm honest, when we all sat through that training, and as much as it was great, it was telling us to suck eggs because we do that, we love our jobs, we we're in that job for a reason and that that that's what we do. We know it in and out'. (Resettlement Officer 7)*

The phrase 'teaching us how to suck eggs' was used on several occasions when asking officers whether they found the Constructive Resettlement training to be useful. There was a general perception that they already knew how to effectively do their job, and the training offered, at most, a useful refresher and new framework by which to understand their role. Indeed, community youth justice officers echoed this finding, drawing on the similarities between Constructive Resettlement approaches and other care-based approaches to working with children, such as trauma-informed practice and the Good Lives Model (Day, 2023). There was no real mention of 'identity shift', which is the core focus of Constructive Resettlement, which suggests that the core message of this approach may have been lost in the months since the training, and practise norms and cultures may have replaced them. This is not unusual and previous research has found similar challenges with community-based youth justice staff, as a general culture shift away from risk and towards child first meets a number of similar barriers (Hampson, 2018; Day, 2023).

The main focus of all interviews was on the internal barriers and obstacles to effectively reintegrate children into the community. Many of these barriers were long-standing:

*'I remember basically getting the feeling that we are doing now and that is constructive resettlement, but not everybody else is doing it, so it makes it difficult'. (Resettlement Officer 2)*

There was a sense that it was operational staff and those in other parts of the Prison that would particularly benefit from the Constructive Resettlement training:

*'It's everybody else that doesn't understand, that doesn't grasp that and doesn't have perhaps an awareness or an interest. And it's them that needs that, not us'. (Resettlement Officer 6)*

The above Resettlement Officer refers to all resettlement staff in custody as 'us', and remaining custodial staff as 'them', suggesting that, at least from the perspectives of resettlement staff, there is an invisible divide that seems to be premised on the view that all other prison staff do not have in interest or knowledge of their work and role, which

appeared to have existed since the creation of the Resettlement Officer role. This will be explored in more detail below.

A number of themes emerged in relation to the sense of isolation experienced by Resettlement Officers from general prison staff, including Prison Officers, and they are presented as: Invisible and 'Care Bears'.

### *Invisible*

There was a shared perception among all Resettlement Officers that there was not a sufficient understanding or prioritisation of resettlement among senior prison managers and governors. Rather the focus and priority appeared to be on ensuring children had sufficient time out of their cell:

*'I think at the minute our governor seems to be very child-focused. But again, his main focus is time out of room, which is great. And of course we want the kids to have as much time out of room'. (Resettlement Officer 7)*

It is entirely understandable that the focus of Governors, as part of the 'managerial claw-back' (Bennett, 2023: 1), was on ensuring children are 'unlocked' and given more time out of their cells following the significant criticism from inspectors about this issue levelled at YOIs during the Covid lockdown (HMIP, 2020). However, as YOIs returned to a 'normal' regime, it was felt that resettlement was still not given enough priority, and this appeared to be a long-standing issue predating Covid:

*'It's never been from management or from . . . certainly from higher management it's never been seen as a priority. I don't think this department, the Resettlement Department has ever been given the priority that it should have been'. (Resettlement Officer 8)*

There was some suggestion that the Resettlement Officer role was invisible in custody:

*'Well, I don't think they even know that we're a caseworker. To be fair, I think we are . . . we don't exist. You know, that's how bad it is'. (Resettlement Officer 2)*

The disconnect between Resettlement Officers and prison management appears to support the research highlighting a divide between operational staff and senior managers (e.g. Halsey and Deegan, 2017). The findings also chime with the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic violence whereby Resettlement Officers appear to be experiencing 'a process of misrecognition whereby domination is unperceived, as there is little challenge to relations of power, resulting in the social order continuing' (Creaney and Burns, 2024: 37). There was also suggestion of a lack of worth and recognition of the role of Resettlement Officers as interviewees expressed their frustration at Operational Grade Resettlement Officers being pulled from their role and placed on operational duty to help with staff shortages across the estate. This was occurring more frequently since the pandemic and the recent challenges with staff retention (highlighted at the top of this article) and further eroding and undermining the role and work of resettlement staff:

*'But we've just been told because we're operational to keep our diaries free Monday and Friday. Now just to support the main site staff through summer and short staffing. So well, so I challenge my manager and said, fair enough, I understand we're operational, so I always respond to alarms but Monday to Friday surely should be kept for meetings with external teams, resettlement interventions'. (Resettlement Officer 10)*

The sense of invisibility was held by all participants across two YOIs. This further impacted on their abilities to focus on resettlement in their roles as they outlined below that they felt unable to support their children 'through the gate' on release and that operational wing staff misunderstood the resettlement role and often treated them as generic caseworkers.

This supports the literature highlighting tensions between care and control (e.g. Barcinski et al., 2017; Halsey and Deegan, 2017; Tait, 2011; Urwin, 2018), with operational matters (which are often related to risk assessment and management such as security) taking priority over the non-operational, and more 'caring' roles within the YOI being side-lined (such as healthcare and education) (e.g. Nylander et al., 2011). This links to the dichotomy highlighted above between Child First Justice, (which focuses on a child's welfare needs, and encourages working collaboratively with a child to prioritise their strengths, recognising that they are a child not an adult, and diverting them away from the criminal justice system wherever possible); and Risk Management (which focuses on the risk management and control of a child's behaviours, and involves looking at historical risk factors in a non-collaborative way) (Day, 2023; Hampson, 2018). The tension for youth justice community-based practitioners between Child First Justice and Risk Assessment and Management has been highlighted in a previous article (Day, 2023). It is evident that this tension is apparent in custody, and could offer a potential explanation for the divide that appears to exist between operational and non-operational staff in YOIs. Further, evidence continues to emerge of practices such as continuing high levels of pain-inducing restraint which are not in line with Child First Justice (Paterson-Young, 2022).

Resettlement Officers also expressed a desire to support children 'through the gate' more, having the freedom to take children on ROTLs (Release on Temporary Licence) to support their resettlement, and also to visit them and attend meetings post release:

*'Things like getting more involved, you know, working out in the community, and you know more. Us going to meetings or going out on ROTL with the boys are going out to you know, build stronger relationships with youth offending teams. It's not. I mean, it's as I've told you, I've been in this job itself for over 15 years and these things have always been an objective always, but they've never come to fruition'. (Resettlement Officer 9)*

The lack of focus and priority on resettlement from Prison Management appeared to filter down to operational staff, and created a culture in which Resettlement Officers' focus on Constructive Resettlement and Child First approaches to working with children were often at odds with the rest of the prison:

*'It was just getting everybody else on board with it where the issue was'. (Resettlement Officer 3)*

As stated above, the disconnect and sense that there was a lack of support from senior prison managers appeared to contribute to a general perception that Resettlement Officers

were invisible to senior prison managers and viewed as ‘Care Bears’ by operational prison officers.

### Care bears

There was evidence of a divide between Resettlement Officers and operational staff, particularly wing staff in YOIs:

*‘It’s a very much of them and us situation. Yeah, it is a shame, I think, from things I’ve heard . . . The wings think that we’re busybodies interfering, do-gooders and we’re just getting in the way of the regime’.* (Resettlement Officer 4)

The perception of non-operational staff as ‘outsiders’ (Crawley, 2004) in caring roles that are deemed ‘culturally unacceptable’ (not acceptable to the prison officer culture) (Mills et al., 2012) by operational prison officers is well established in research. Further, the interviews highlight that not only is the work of Resettlement Officers culturally unacceptable, but it is also disruptive and interferes with the smooth running of the prison regime. This is problematic as the Youth Custody Service (2023) (Government body with responsibility for managing the youth custodial estate in England and Wales) states that its aim is to ‘*create a safe, decent and nurturing environment that provides outstanding levels of care and support for all children in custody*’, yet established prison officer cultures and practices appear to be hampering progress in this direction. In an attempt to further diminish the role of Resettlement Officers, they reported across both institutions that they had been referred to as ‘do-gooders’, ‘the cuddly ones’ and ‘the care bears’ by wing staff:

*‘We’ve been called other things . . . here’s the cuddly ones’.* (Resettlement Officer 9)

*‘We’re referred to as care bears . . . And I feel like I, I appreciate their role (wing staff) and the stuff that they’ve got to do. But then I sometimes don’t feel that that’s reciprocated’.* (Resettlement Officer 7)

*‘We’re known as do-gooders and doing that mollycoddling side of things. . . that has been commented upon’.* (Resettlement Officer 3)

For those who may not be familiar, ‘Care Bears’ are a soft toy from the 1980s whose main role was to love, nurture and care for their owner. The reference to Resettlement Officers as ‘cuddly’, ‘do-gooders’, ‘busbodies’ or ‘Care Bears’ appears to reflect a perception of their role as soft, caring and interfering with the main business of the prison. There appears to be a disparaging tone that reflects a view of the caring roles within custody as of less importance and disruptive to the ‘core’ business of the prison, which is to maintain control and security. The diminishing of the resettlement role appears to be acting as a significant obstacle to Resettlement Officers doing their job effectively, and thus appears to undermine the wider focus and prioritisation of resettlement by central Government policy-makers such as the Youth Justice Board and Youth Custody Service.



This view of Resettlement Officers appeared to have created a barrier and tension with wing operational staff:

*'So main res (wing staff) and resettlement should be working together and there's a great big barrier down the middle'. (Resettlement Officer 5)*

One of the main tensions appeared to relate to a misunderstanding of the role of Resettlement Officers as generic caseworker/ personal officers. This meant that Resettlement Officers often received many requests from both wing staff and the young people to complete a range of general minor tasks that were outside of their resettlement remit. This took time away from their main role, and when Resettlement Officers tried to 'pushback' on these requests, this appeared to heighten the tension:

*'Or that if boys want something, like ask resettlement, they'll do that. They'll do that, so everything is just batted back to us and that isn't within our job role. It should be your officers doing it on the wings'. (Resettlement Officer 2)*

Sometimes the Resettlement Officers admitted themselves that they will complete the requested wing-based tasks anyway, often out of a sense of duty to their young person and the commitment that they have to them, but admitted that this creates a '*rod for everybody's own back*', as it further added to the perception of Resettlement Officers as 'care bears' and took them away from their resettlement role.

It is apparent that the prison officer culture and apparent prioritisation of control (risk assessment and management of behaviour) over care is generally hampering the development of Child First Justice and other welfare-based approaches in custody. It can also be understood as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977) by which the role and responsibilities of Resettlement Officers are diminished and mocked as their practice challenges the established social order in prisons (Creaney and Burns, 2024). More specifically, it is creating a divide between staff tasked with operational duties, and staff tasked with a care-based role, such as Resettlement Officers.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

The passion and care for the children came through strongly from all Resettlement Officers. However, it was apparent that they were working in a prison system facing crisis, among a general working population experiencing stress (Steiner and Wooldredge, 2015), burnout (Einat and Suliman, 2021) and compassion fatigue (Einat and Suliman, 2021). Building on the literature in this area, evidence emerged that Resettlement Officers understood the importance of, and cared deeply about, their role. This article has highlighted that the Resettlement Officers in this study are frustrated at a prison system that leaves them feeling isolated and invisible, thus undermining the development of constructive resettlement approaches. This is due to the views of participants that their role is not prioritised by senior prison managers, resulting in them feeling invisible. The article also highlights the impacts of some of the tensions in YOIs and that this contributed to a diminishing of their more caring role by operational staff who mocked them as 'care bears' and

'busybodies' who interfere with the core business of the prison: control. It has been suggested that the diminishing and mocking of the resettlement role in prison can be understood as a form of symbolic violence, as Resettlement staff struggle to carry out the caring elements of the role which appear to be challenging the established prison officer social order. Further, these tensions and challenges appeared at odds with the Youth Justice Board and Youth Custody Service's wider guiding principle of Child First Justice, and more specific focus on resettlement through the rollout of the Constructive Resettlement approach. It was evident that Resettlement Officers were often completing this work 'in spite of' a number of significant internal barriers. It is important that those with responsibility for youth custody services at a policy and practice level consider how to overcome these barriers and tensions to ensure that the crucial work to successfully reintegrate children from custody into the community is given the priority it deserves.

There are a number of implications for policy-makers and practitioners. For example, the Youth Custody Service should consider rolling out the Constructive Resettlement training to all Governors and frontline staff in YOIs to increase their understanding of Child First approaches to working with children in custody. It would be beneficial for YOI Governors to consider how staff can build effective working relationships among their staff group and increase their understanding of the role of Resettlement Officers. Further consideration should be given to protecting the Resettlement Officer role to ensure staff are not moved to operational tasks when the prison regime demands it. Finally, the Youth Custody Service should work closely with the Youth Justice Board to consider how the prison staff culture may be hindering the development of both Child First Justice and Constructive Resettlement across YOIs, and steps that could be taken to address this. Further empirical study examining the impact of prison officer culture on the progress of Constructive Resettlement and other Child First programmes in YOIs would be beneficial.

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## Note

1. Although outside the scope of this article, a range of external barriers to resettling children into the community were also identified including accommodation, risk-averse education providers, lack of visits from outside agencies to assist with resettlement and limited communication with youth offending service officers.

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