

The Health and Wellbeing of Prison Governors in England, Wales, and Scotland

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As readers of the PSJ know, often from first-hand experience, prisons are not ordinary places of work, with roles across all grades being both physically and emotionally demanding. While ‘domestic’ tasks can include escorting prisoners around the jail, the unlocking and locking of cells, processing applications, and carrying out cells checks,¹ prison work also consists of other more challenging responsibilities such as dealing with disturbances and fights, restraining inmates for their own safety, and supporting prisoners with mental health problems or who are under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.² In addition, officers can be physically assaulted, subjected to hostility and threats, and spend much of their time in an unpredictable environment, notwithstanding having to cope with incidents which can only be described as traumatic. It should therefore come as no surprise that such experiences can negatively impact the health and wellbeing of those who work in prisons.

In terms of the negative impact on prison officers, research has shown how they are thought to be at an increased risk of work-related stress, when compared to the general population, which has been argued to negatively affect not just health and wellbeing, but also job satisfaction, with all of these factors increasing the risk of burnout.³ With reference to the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, the World Health Organisation explains that burnout occurs as a

result of chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed and is characterised by a) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, b) increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job, and c) reduced professional efficacy.⁴ Officers are reported to be coming to work when they are unwell,⁵ with many officers also showing signs of poor mental health including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.⁶ Many of these issues are discussed in other articles in this special edition, however despite what we know concerning the challenges of prison work for officers, less is known about the experiences of prison work for governors and operational managers. Our research in this article is therefore not focused on prison officers, but on the health and wellbeing of prison governors and prison operational managers. As has been the case for some years, the prison estate continues to operate in the wake of turbulence caused by a multitude of crises,⁷ and this has been compounded by the challenge of delivering a significantly altered regime in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Being a particularly under researched area, it was therefore an important and opportune time to capture data on the wellbeing of those in senior management positions in prisons in England, Scotland, and Wales.

The research on which this article was based therefore explored the health and wellbeing of governor grade (bands 6-11) staff in England, Scotland, and Wales, with the data collected in 2021. The

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 5. Kinman, G., Clements, A. J., & Hart, J. (2019). When Are You Coming Back? Presenteeism in U.K. Prison Officers. *The Prison Journal*, 99(3), 363–383.
 6. James, L., & Todak, N. (2018). Prison employment and post-traumatic stress disorder: Risk and protective factors. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 61, 725-732.
 7. Ryan, M. and Sim, J. (2016). Campaigning for and campaigning against prisons. In: Jewkes, Y., Crewe, B. & Bennett, J. (2016) *Handbook on prisons*, 2nd edition. Oxfordshire, England: Routledge.

research team, comprised of six academics,⁸ conducted semi-structured interviews with 63 members of the Prison Governors Association (PGA).⁹ Representative of the demographics of the broader PGA membership, 68 per cent of the participants were male and 32 per cent female, the average (mean) age was 49.7 years old, and 95 per cent identified as White British.¹⁰ The participant sample represented all HMPPS regions, including all four HMPPS prison security categories, the Scottish Prison Service, the women's estate, the juvenile secure estate and HMPPS headquarters. In addition, participants represented a range of roles including Head of Function (Operations, Security, Residence, Safety, Reducing Offending), Deputy Governors, Governing Governors, Controllers, and a range of headquarters strategic leadership and project-specific roles. Due to the breadth of managerial titles, throughout this article the word 'governor' is used to cover all roles. The interview questions concerned the state of the participant's health and wellbeing in the past year, the strategies they had used to manage their own health and wellbeing and also those strategies they had used to help their staff. We also asked how their work impacted on their home life, acknowledging when we were asking these questions the context and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we asked governors whether their feelings towards their job role had recently changed.

Twelve main themes were identified from the interviews which were grouped under four top-level themes: 'Workplace Culture', 'Exacerbating and Mitigating Factors', 'Impact' and 'Fears, opportunities and suggestions for the future'. This article will begin by reporting some of the core findings concerning the health and wellbeing of the research participants, with further discussion then focused on workload challenges; work/life balance and the impact on governors' families; and finally, the prevalence of a so-called 'macho culture'. Despite the pervading influence of the pandemic at the time of

data collection, participants were keen to stress that while the pandemic had exacerbated some stresses and challenges, it was not the cause of these issues, which for many, were deep rooted across the prison estate.

Health and Wellbeing

As noted in the introduction, all interviews in the study began by asking participants to describe their health and wellbeing at work over the previous 12 months, with the overwhelming response being that it was poor. Exhaustion and stress were frequently reported, with both being linked to a range of mental and physical health issues. Many participants referred to

multiple workplace stressors, identifying a range of issues that were being experienced simultaneously. The very nature of prison work was seen as acting as an instigator for these multiple stressors which, in addition to the core themes discussed later in this article, also included reduced staffing resource; having responsibility for life and death situations; increased suicidal ideation and self-harm amongst staff; a reducing number of experienced staff; frequent criticisms and scrutiny; and a distinct pressure to '*just get on with it*' (PGA 52).

Due to the origins of work-related stress being multiple in nature, staff reported feeling overwhelmed and struggled to contain their problems despite feeling that they should be kept

private. Some participants reported that they were just surviving until they reached the end of their career, while others had taken the conscious decision to stop working towards or 'chasing' promotion in order to manage the stress:

I'm not interested in doing that anymore. I don't want to be promoted . . . I don't need the money . . . so I'm not chasing that anymore . . . I'm not going to work the stupid hours I used to work (PGA 13).

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8. In addition to the two authors the team also included Dr Lauren Smith, Rachael Mason, Dr Lauren Hall (University of Lincoln) and Dr Gary Saunders (University of Nottingham).

9. Favourable opinion for undertaking this research was obtained from the University of Lincoln Human Research Ethics Committee on 23rd April 2021 (Ref: 2021_6526). Participants were advised that their contribution was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any point (until 1-week post-participation) without giving a reason, and that their interview would be confidential with any identifying information not being included in the research dissemination process.

10. Demographic information about the ethnicity of other participants has not been included for reasons of participant confidentiality.

Another commonly reported source of stress was the technological infrastructure:

Our work would be 10 times better if our technology was better . . . the network, is absolutely appalling . . . you can sometimes miss emails for two days and then they all come flying through, the computers freeze and different things like that. And if you're in the middle of a word document or on a policy that can go and unfortunately, when they reset it, you lose everything you've done. We are using Outlook 2003 and we're now in 2021 (PGA 32).

The frequency and duration of time spent in meetings was also a workload stressor for some of our participants:

We spend more than 25 hours a week in meetings . . . In reality, a Governor couldn't even start any work until 10 (PGA 39).

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic at time of interview, many participants also understandably reflected on the experience of working during such an unprecedented time. For those who were shielding, this had involved a dramatic shift in their working environment:

. . . sat at home working on a computer . . . has been a massive change . . . it was sudden, and I've got to be honest, it did affect me, because things have gone from 100 miles an hour to like five miles an hour . . . and it was really, really difficult to come to terms with . . . now managing nobody and not interacting with anyone. . . So, it's, been a massive transition (PGA 29).

For other participants, the experience of working during the COVID-19 pandemic was strongly characterised by fear. In addition to being fearful of transmitting the virus between the workplace and the home and concern for workplace colleagues and prisoners, many came into work on a daily basis 'expect[ing] it to become an outbreak site' (PGA 32). Linked to this, some participants also described feeling alone and unsupported. Apart from these COVID-19 specific factors however, as previously stated, governors

were keen to note that the broader issues, challenges and stressors faced in their working lives pre-dated the pandemic and had been a pervading part of their working environment for quite some time.

Workload Challenges

The challenging nature of working in a prison environment is well acknowledged and this section focuses more closely on the amount of work that prison governors felt that they were expected to undertake. In terms of this volume, the overriding viewpoint from many of our participants was that they were having to

work many more hours than their contractual 37 in order to complete their work. Estimated time spent undertaking work ranged from between 45 — 60 hours per week, with this potentially being higher when the person was also undertaking duty governor functions:

Everyone says we're all hours and we are all hours, but it's based on a 37-hour week, but you will struggle to meet anyone who ever does 37 hours . . . I did duty governor last night. So technically I worked from 7.30 yesterday morning and I should have finished at 9 but we had 2 late receptions in, so I finished at quarter

past 10, and then I was in at half seven for handover this morning and that's without a break (PGA 32).

As detailed above, working such long hours had led many governors to experience stress and long-term exhaustion, with this being exacerbated by the fact that in order to complete these hours, participants were often going without lunch or any kind of meaningful break. One participant explained how they 'tended to work through lunch' (PGA 16), with this also echoed by another 'So, [I'll] work and eat at the same time' (PGA 37).

Even where governors knew that this overworking was making them ill, some felt that if they did not work these long hours that this would actually make them feel worse. As one participant explained:

I'm employed to do 37 hours a week, [but] it would make me ill knowing all the work I wasn't doing and couldn't do. So, it's a rock

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and a hard place . . . It's not okay. But . . . people that I speak to and confide in, they're doing the same . . . so as much as I would want to say, right, that's my 37 hours done. I know I couldn't do it because the job requires significantly more than that (PGA 17).

This general overworking thus appeared to have two consequential influences on governor mindset and experience: that 1) as long as other colleagues are overworking it's fine for me to also overwork and 2) because everyone is overworking, a general expectation of such long hours is cyclically imposed. In terms of the expectation of overworking this was specifically mentioned by one of the governors in relation to having a lunch break:

. . . it makes me annoyed that there seems to be an expectation that people work through their lunch. And I really struggle with when people put meetings in over lunchtime and don't even ask you and there's just an expectation you will do it. And I don't see that as reasonable . . . if exceptionally you have to have a meeting, then you should be saying to people, look, I'm really sorry, there is no other time. Would you mind on this one occasion doing it? Rather than just putting it in the diary and expecting us to be there (PGA 5).

Another common issue in relation to overworking was the fact that in direct comparison to bands 3-5 prison officers, prison governors were not paid any extra for this overtime or alternatively were not credited with time off in lieu (TOIL). One described how when they had previously worked in a prison and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were 'easy doing 60 hours . . . but . . . you don't get any extra pay. You don't . . . win any prizes' (PGA 12). This unfairness of effectively working for free was also emphasised by other participants:

Well, they just expect you to do the hours and you just can't get those hours back. Others

can get them back on TOIL, payment plus or whatever. And non-operational staff get it back through Flexi. But operational governors don't have that option at all. So, the extra we work are dead hours because we're never going to get them back. Free hours for them (PGA 28).

Work/Life balance

Working such long hours inevitably had a negative impact on many of our participants work/life balance with many describing situations where they were not able to fully participate in normal family life. In some cases, this was because even when they were at home, they were just too tired, 'by the time I went home, I was so tired, home life didn't really exist' (PGA 15) or because they increasingly felt that they could not switch off:

I don't believe when you're a strategic manager . . . that you can leave that work at work. I don't know if some people think that we're all machines, and we can just switch on and just switch off, [but] that's impossible (PGA 21).

Another participant talked about the sacrifices which they had had to make because of the job and sadly how such sacrifices, looking back had been a mistake:

. . . the biggest sacrifice is when we had a daughter, I was commuting into London every day. And I'd leave at five o'clock in the morning. Sometimes didn't get home till midnight . . . and I did that for 10 years. And I look back now, and I think, oh my God, I missed the first 10 years of her life, and there's nothing I can do about that. You know, I beat myself up on a regular basis. And I try and invest more into my granddaughter as a bit of payback. So, she's got the benefit of what my daughter never had. So, that's probably the biggest mistake (PGA 17).

This feeling of regret was also echoed by another who said how in relation to their children they had 'missed out on a lot' (PGA 36). The way in which the job had negatively impacted on home and family life, especially in relation to children, was also mentioned by others:

I'm away from the home a lot. I've nearly always had an hour's travel one way or another for the last 15 years. So, you know, when the kids were younger, it's difficult to get to parents' evenings and I missed taking the kids to school. And as I've got older, your kids remind you of things you didn't do . . . so there's an impact on my family (PGA 47).

Others focused on how the job and the tiredness and stress caused by it had made them less sociable at home:

I remember getting told off by my youngest son . . . we were on a long walk, and, we were having a lovely time. And then I had a phone call. And clearly, I had a lot of stuff going on in my head and things that I was worrying about, and he basically told me that I was being grumpy and not very sociable (PGA 35).

So, my husband used to work for the prison service . . . he's genuinely interested in hearing about my day. And I just don't have it in me some days to share. So, it's actually made me a bit more introspective. And you know, that's probably impacted on the steady state of our relationship. I hope my kids don't pick up on it, but they probably pick up on short moods some days (PGA 3).

Also of concern was the situation where because of wanting to be '100 per cent present and engaged at work, and 100 per cent present and engaged in support mode for my husband . . . and 100 per cent present and supportive of the children' (PGA 3), for many there was no time or energy left for themselves. Comments in this regard included: 'I need a bit of time for me' (PGA 4), 'it feels like you're constantly worried about everybody else rather than yourself' (PGA 5) and:

I spend a lot of hours in work. And when I'm away from work, I need to put time with my

family first. And so, time for me comes third. At best. So, my normal fitness routine has fallen by the wayside. My diet has taken a nosedive (PGA 3).

Self-care and personal wellness were therefore either non-existent or at the bottom of a long list of other priorities.

Interestingly some governors spoke about how they were trying to change. One said how he was trying to protect his lunch hour more, while another explained how:

When I look back in my early days, I got things completely wrong. It was all work and I look back on that, and I think I'm wiser now. And I try and share that, with all the younger people . . . I'm far more aware and alive to, you know, the work life balance (PGA 17).

Expectations of investment beyond return and the need for change in this regard feed more broadly into themes concerning the cultural climate, discussed

further in the next section, exemplified by one participant who stated how:

I think there's an expectation when you're a manager, that you just jump in and there is an expectation to work stupid hours and achieve what they want you to achieve and actually you do have to work longer hours than your contract, but I think there has to be that self-responsibility to be able to say to senior managers, no I'm not doing it. But people don't. Because people think if they stand up and say I'm not doing that anymore, that will ruin their career and that they'll never get on. Currently that's not in my thought process anymore. People think have you gone mad, you've almost gone sideways . . . but [now] it's about work/life balance, it's not all about career and money (PGA 53).

Prison Culture

Prison work is stressful, and at governor level it comes with high levels of responsibility, little meaningful time off, and little time to spend on self-care, socialising, and wellness. While this situation is

concerning enough, many governors additionally explained how the working culture within the prison service made the situation many times worse. One described this as a *'macho culture [which] rightly or wrongly . . . doesn't want to accept that we suffer from stress, or anxiety'* (PGA 46), while another spoke about how *'the prison service has a massive problem with what I would call toxic masculinity . . . [where] there is a lack of safe spaces'* (PGA 37). The working environment which many of our participants found themselves in therefore meant that they could not open up and talk about their mental health or how they might be struggling with their workload because to do so would be showing signs of weakness. As one participant explained *'if you were to open up and say something, you could potentially affect your reputation or your career, or your progression'* (PGA 17). Rather than acknowledge that they were not coping, governors when asked whether they were okay would answer:

'Yeah' because that's what we say. That's, what being in this environment is, in the prison service. You have to say you're alright. You see somebody or you cut somebody down from hanging or slitting their wrists and somebody will ask if you're alright because that's process and then, you know, this male dominated environment you go, 'yes, I'm alright.' And then you go home, and you struggle at home. So, we're not good. We're not good at coming forward and talking about our issues (PGA 40).

This was further explained by the same participant when they said: *'it's like in a restaurant when somebody asks if the food's alright, and if you say no, they don't know what to do because you're supposed to say yes'* (PGA 40).

Another interesting view was the sense of pride felt by some that they did not take a sick day or that they did not need the wellbeing support that was provided by HMPPS, with this view shared by a few of our participants:

I think there's a sort of sense, certainly, amongst older and longer standing staff, that I cope, this is how I deal with things. I'm a copier. I don't need any of that. And not a sense of shame in the sense that they would

look down on somebody else using that service, but certainly a sort of sense of pride in that I don't need that sort of stuff (PGA 1).

I haven't had a day sick in 27 years . . . I got quite proud of my sick record. So, I protected it, if you like, you know, behaved in a way that meant that I didn't go off. And I looked down on people who did as being, you know, somehow less dedicated and less committed (PGA 41).

I think there's still that thing about with governors, and we all stick our chests out. And we're superhuman, and we don't need that. So, I think that is partly our fault (PGA 23).

Conforming to this prevailing culture meant that for many, emotions and feelings were thus locked away and ignored:

My manner of dealing with it is a classic sort of male approach and very much a military approach as well. An issue goes in a box, I'll deal with that and probably have a little bit of an explosion, [but] it will go in a box, and it gets put in that cupboard. Unfortunately, sometimes the lid comes off the box. And eventually it's inevitable that lids will come off most of the boxes, but it's out of the way it's dealt with, it's compartmentalised . . . [however] the lids have been rattling quite a lot over the last year (PGA 36).

Locking away emotions and being fearful in terms of opening these boxes was also mentioned by another participant who spoke about it being *'like Pandora's box'* (PGA 21). He continued:

. . . you're almost damned, if you do, damned if you don't take the lid off. You don't know what's going to [come] out and can you live with it? Maybe you can and maybe you can't. Well, I'm alright at the moment, I suppose I'm making a half decent effort of it. But I think it will come out at some stage . . . it's the taking the lid off (PGA 21).

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Not seeking wellbeing support can however be counterproductive, not just for the individuals concerned but also as we have seen here for the general prison culture, because the less that support is sought the more this macho culture is continually perpetuated.

Conclusion: Burning Out?

The current state of the wellbeing of prison governors in England, Scotland and Wales indicates high levels of burnout. While this research did not consistently find evidence of reduced professional efficacy, there were a significant number of reports from participants of feeling physically and mentally exhausted and as will be discussed elsewhere in this special edition, evidence of employee disenchantment.

Workload pressures, difficulty in establishing a healthy work/life balance and the exacerbating factor of working in a 'macho culture' all contribute to physical and mental health issues experienced by those responsible for the secure operation of their establishments, and for the safety of those who live and work within them. The answers to these problems are not simple. While HMPPS do offer different forms of wellbeing support, governors often told us how they were not appropriate for them, but even if they were that most people would not access them for fear of being seen as not coping. Governors are thus expected to 'put [their] big girl pants on' (PGA 13) and 'just get on with it' (PGA 52). Until we see a change in this 'toxic masculinity' (PGA 37) culture, concerns over the health and wellbeing of those working within the prison sector are likely to remain.