

Written evidence submitted by Prisoner's Education Trust

## **Education Select Committee inquiry: Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds**

### **Response from Prisoners' Education Trust**

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) works with all prisons across England and Wales, funding distance-learning courses in levels and subjects which learners would otherwise be unable to access in prison. Since 1989, we have given more than 40,000 awards to people in prison – equipping them with skills and qualifications to build brighter futures. We also carry out policy work, evaluating and monitoring the quality of education in prisons.

#### **Backgrounds of people in prisons: Social disadvantage**

Many people in prison come from (multiply) disadvantaged backgrounds. Results from the Ministry of Justice's Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) study, published in 2012 found that of a representative sample of newly sentenced prisoners:

- 24% had been in care at some point while they were growing up.
- 29% had experienced abuse; 41% had observed abuse.
- 37% had a family member who had been found guilty of a criminal offence. About 30% of these family members had been in custody.
- 15% had been homeless prior to custody. 44% had been in their prior accommodation for less than a year and 28% had been in their prior accommodation less than 6 months.<sup>1</sup>

In the youth estate, some of these statistics are even more pronounced. HM Inspectorate of Prison's (HMIP) 2018-19 survey of children in custody in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and Secure Training Centres (STCs), based on inspections of 5 YOIs and 3 STCs, found that 52% of respondents reported having been in care

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Justice. 2012a. *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*. London: Ministry of Justice (pp. ii & 11); Williams, K., Poyser, J. and Hopkins, K. 2012. *Accommodation, homelessness and reoffending of prisoners: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) survey*. London: Ministry of Justice (p. 1).

while they were growing up.<sup>2</sup> And in the 16-21 age group, almost half of young men and two thirds of young women in prison have been in care.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no consistent national data collected about social class, income and poverty in relation to the backgrounds of people in prison, which is a significant gap. However, it is clear that the majority of people in prison are more disadvantaged economically in comparison to the general population. Although now almost twenty years old, the Social Exclusion Unit's report on reducing re-offending (published in 2002) reported that over two-thirds of people were unemployed at the time they entered prison, over 70% were in receipt of benefits, and almost half had a history of debt.<sup>4</sup> Further, research has shown a correlation between countries' rates of imprisonment and the level of income inequality. The UK has the highest rate of imprisonment in Europe and also has one of the highest levels of income inequality.<sup>5</sup>

### **Backgrounds of people in prison: Ethnicity**

Over 27% of the prison population is from an ethnic minority (compared to 13% of the general population).<sup>6</sup> Conversely, then, white people make up 87% of the general population while making up only 73% of the prison population.

The disproportionality among children and young adults in prison is even higher. Over half of children in custody are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. The population of white children in custody has been steadily decreasing over the last five years, while the BAME population has remained almost constant.<sup>7</sup> In 2015, it was estimated that BAME young adults aged 18-24 represented 19% of the general population, while they represented 33% of the prison population.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons. 2020. Children in custody 2018-19: An analysis of 12-18-year-olds' perceptions of their experiences in secure training centres and young offender institutions. London: HM Inspectorate of Prisons. <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/02/Children-in-Custody-2018-19-Web-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee. 2016. The treatment of young adults in the criminal justice system: Seventh report of session 2016-17. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmjust/169/169.pdf> (para 22).

<sup>4</sup> Social Exclusion Unit. 2002. *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (pp. 53 & 105)

<sup>5</sup> The Equality Trust. No date. Imprisonment. <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/imprisonment>

<sup>6</sup> Sturge, G. 2019. UK prison population statistics. London: House of Commons (p. 11).

<sup>7</sup> Youth Custody Service. 2020. Youth custody report – March 2020. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/883432/youth-custody-report-march-2020.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/883432/youth-custody-report-march-2020.xlsx)

<sup>8</sup> Kneen, H. 2017. An exploratory estimate of the economic cost of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic net overrepresentation in the Criminal Justice System. London: Ministry of Justice. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/642551/davi](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642551/davi)

## Former educational experiences and learning needs of people in prison

The majority of people in prison have had negative educational experiences while growing up. In the MoJ's SPCR study, 59% of the participants reported having regularly played truant from school, 63% reported having been suspended or temporarily excluded, and 42% reported having been permanently excluded or expelled. This has implications for life chances, rehabilitation and resettlement. The study, which was longitudinal, found that prisoners with these issues were more likely to be reconvicted on release than those without.<sup>9</sup>

People in prison also have high levels of additional learning and other needs. Over a third (34%) have self-identified as having a learning difficulty or disability.<sup>10</sup> International research also suggests that approximately 25% of people in prison (in comparison to a 2.5% prevalence rate in the general population) meet the diagnostic criteria for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), although many have not been diagnosed.<sup>11</sup>

Only 50% of the prison population in England, compared to 86% of the general population, is assessed on arrival in prison as having literacy skills at Level 1 or above – i.e. the 'functional skills' the Skills for Life programme deem necessary for people to have in order to succeed in most types of employment. The figures for numeracy are less differentiated from the general population, with 51% of the latter having skills at Level 1 or above, compared to 43% of those in prison.<sup>12</sup> There are no statistically significant differences in literacy and numeracy assessment results between people in prison of different ethnicities.<sup>13</sup>

## Statistics on disadvantage and ethnicity

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[d-lammy-economic-paper-short-summary.pdf](#) (p. 9)

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Justice. 2012a (p. ii).

<sup>10</sup> Skills Funding Agency. 2018. *OLASS English and maths assessments by ethnicity and learners with learning difficulties or disabilities: Participation 2014/15 to 2017/18*. London: Skills Funding Agency.

<sup>11</sup> Young, S. et al, 2018. Identification and treatment of offenders with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in the prison population: a practical approach based upon expert consensus. *BMC Psychiatry*, 18, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Creese, B. 2016. An assessment of the English and maths skills levels of prisoners in England. *London Review of Education*, 14(3), pp. 13-30 (p. 18).

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education and Ministry of Justice. 2018. OLASS English and maths assessments: participation 2017 to 2018.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/765593/201718\\_OLASS\\_English\\_maths\\_assessments\\_participation\\_demographic\\_tool.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765593/201718_OLASS_English_maths_assessments_participation_demographic_tool.xlsx)

The MoJ's SPCR study, which usefully compared statistics for BAME and white prisoners, highlights some revealing trends in relation to disadvantage and ethnicity.

These include:

- Prisoners from a white background were more likely to report having observed violence in the home than prisoners from a BAME background (42% vs 32%).
- White prisoners were more likely than BAME prisoners to have a family member with a conviction for a non-motoring criminal offence (40% vs 23%).
- White prisoners were more likely to have family members with alcohol problems than BAME prisoners (21% vs 6%); similarly with drug problems (15% vs 8%).
- White people were more likely to report having played truant at school than BAME people (62% vs 44%), to have been suspended or temporarily excluded from school (65% vs 53%), as well to have been expelled or permanently excluded from school (44% compared with 30%).
- White prisoners were less likely to have been in paid employment in the month prior to custody than those from a BAME background (30% vs 38%).
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of prisoners from a BAME background reported having a qualification, compared to around half (51%) of prisoners from white groups.<sup>14</sup>

As is evident across these statistics, white people in prison tend to have a higher prevalence of particular forms of disadvantage. However, these figures need careful interpretation and, crucially, must be considered in relation to the fact that BAME people are significantly over-represented in the prison system.

Take, for instance, school exclusions. Statistics for England and Wales show that in the general population, the highest rates of permanent school exclusions are experienced by Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller young people, followed by Black Caribbean and mixed White/Black Caribbean (36, 29, 28 and 27 per 10,000 pupils, respectively), while the rate for white British pupils is 10 per 10,000.<sup>15</sup> Given that minority ethnic groups are significantly over-represented in prison, it is certainly not the case that educational disadvantage has a less negative effect on outcomes for BAME individuals, nor that they are less likely to experience it. Rather, BAME individuals are more likely to be criminalised and to end up in custody whether they have experienced educational (and other forms of) disadvantage or not. The Lammy Review presented a wealth of evidence demonstrating institutional discrimination against BAME people by different

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<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Justice. 2012a. (pp. 10, 11, 13, 14-15, 8); Ministry of Justice. 2012b. *The pre-custody employment, training and education status of newly sentenced prisoners: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*. London: Ministry of Justice (p. i).

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education. 2020. Pupil exclusions. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/absence-and-exclusions/pupil-exclusions/latest#permanent-exclusions-by-ethnicity>

sections of the criminal justice system, from over-policing of BAME communities, including the disproportionate use of stop and search, particularly of Black people, to disparities in sentencing in the courts - whereby, for instance, BAME defendants are more likely to receive prison sentences for drug offences than white defendants.<sup>16</sup>

We must also bear in mind the absence of figures on economic disadvantage. The only figure which specifically points to this factor in the SPCR data is particularly revealing: while people from BAME backgrounds were more likely to have qualifications than white people in prison, they reported a lower average income in their last job compared to white respondents (£230 per week compared with £250). This points to the institutional racism which BAME people experience in the labour market, part of the structural inequality that minority ethnic people experience in most areas of British society, including in the health, housing, and education sectors, and, as already mentioned, in the criminal justice system.<sup>17</sup>

The prison system, then, captures some of the most vulnerable people in society – disproportionately those that have experienced violence and abuse as children, those who have been in local authority care, those who have lived with drug and alcohol addiction in the home, those who have experienced homelessness and/or mental health problems. Many of these adverse experiences are inextricably linked to wider structural inequalities, in particular poverty/class inequalities and racism. Structural inequalities and adverse life experiences too often lead to disrupted and difficult educational experiences (in which the education system does not meet the needs of marginalised learners), ultimately leading to poor educational outcomes for many children and young people. This in turn leads to further barriers to employment, education and training, and ultimately to a life in which basic material needs, health (including mental health) and safety can be accessed. The fact that so many vulnerable people end up in prison is an indictment of the failure of society to adequately support them in non-punitive ways.

What the data does not evidence is that being white in any way contributes to experiences of disadvantage – rather it does the opposite. Despite experiencing other disadvantages which make people vulnerable to being captured by the criminal justice

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<sup>16</sup> Lammy, D. 2017. *The Lammy review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System.*

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf) (pp. 5 & 17).

<sup>17</sup> Di Stasio, V. and Heath, A. 2019. Are employers in Britain discriminating against ethnic minorities? Summary of findings from the GEMM project. [http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Are-employers-in-Britain-discriminating-against-ethnic-minorities\\_final.pdf](http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Are-employers-in-Britain-discriminating-against-ethnic-minorities_final.pdf); Cabinet Office. 2017. Race disparity audit: Summary findings from the ethnicity facts and figures website. London: Cabinet Office.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/686071/Revised\\_RDA\\_report\\_March\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686071/Revised_RDA_report_March_2018.pdf)

system, white people are less likely to end up there (with the exception of GRT communities, see below). The effects of educational disadvantage, in other words, has less of a negative impact on white people than it does on those from ethnic minorities. Whiteness, in general, is a protective factor, and when white pupils are left behind it is for other reasons.

## **Gypsy, Romany and Traveller communities**

According to the government's official ethnic group categorisation, 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' belongs to the white ethnic group category. However, it is important that Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) communities are not rendered invisible via this categorisation. GRT communities are marginalised and discriminated against within the UK (and elsewhere), and are in this sense 'racialised' as a minority group, experiencing high levels of social exclusion and poverty.<sup>18</sup> Children from GRT backgrounds experience among the highest levels of educational disadvantage. As mentioned previously, they have the highest rate of permanent school exclusions. Over 60% of GRT children (under 18) live in households where nobody has a qualification, compared to just 10% for all other ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup> People from GRT communities are also overrepresented within prisons. While according to the 2011 census, 0.1% of the population identifies as Gypsy or Irish Traveller, the statistics available from HMIP suggest that 4-5% of prisoners identify as such.<sup>20</sup> This disproportionality is higher in the youth estate: in HMIP's survey of children held in 5 Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs) and 3 Secure Training Centres (STCs) in 2018-19, 9% of respondents identified as being from a Traveller background.<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Experiences of disadvantage – particularly multiple disadvantage shaped by structural inequalities – often have a negative impact on children's educational experiences and outcomes. This in turn renders people vulnerable to a life of precarity and powerlessness – and to experiences of criminalisation. This is true for white people as it

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<sup>18</sup> Burchardt, T., Obolenskaya, P., Vizard, P. and Battaglini, M. 2018. Experience of multiple disadvantage among Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children in England and Wales. CASEpapers (208). London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE. <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper208.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid (p. 31).

<sup>20</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons. 2014. *People in prison: Gypsies, Romany and Travellers*. London: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (p. 5).

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/02/Children-in-Custody-2018-19-Web-1.pdf>

is for Black, Asian and minority ethnic children. However, racism compounds and produces disadvantage for BAME children and communities in a way which it does not do for white people, with the exception of GRT communities. Therefore, it is not useful to identify white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds as a distinct group for policy intervention, unless such a policy intervention is specifically targeted at pupils from GRT backgrounds explicitly. Such a focus diverts attention away from tackling racism in the form of structural discrimination which impacts the life chances and opportunities of Black, Asian and other minority ethnic people.

Within general society, BAME communities experience higher rates of poverty and deprivation, school exclusions and criminalisation.<sup>22</sup> White identity, on the other hand, mitigates against the harshest effects of disadvantage.

## Recommendations

- Many people in prison have experienced multiple forms of disadvantage, including poor educational experiences and outcomes. Yet education in prison can be transformative and is a key part of rehabilitation. Prison education needs to be better funded and resourced in order to better support prison learners. This is particularly urgent during the Covid-19 lockdown, when face-to-face education in prisons has been stopped and prisoner learners do not have internet access.
- Education policy interventions should focus on addressing disadvantage and discrimination, and in particular structural inequalities – i.e. class inequality, racism, discrimination against disabled people, etc – and it is particularly important that such interventions address how different forms of discrimination and disadvantage intersect and compound each other.
- Support and resource is needed for disadvantaged learners which is not punitive and which works against the criminalisation of people from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. Specific approaches and strategies are needed for prisoner learners with poor prior experiences of education. Staff and teachers need support and training to implement these.
- Structural racism in the education system and the criminal justice system against Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (including GRT communities) must be tackled.

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<sup>22</sup> Office for National Statistics. 2018. People living in deprived neighbourhoods. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/people-living-in-deprived-neighbourhoods/latest>; Department for Education. 2020; Lammy. 2017.

- Better data on prisoners' experiences of class and poverty is needed. Currently, we have much stronger data for school pupils and to some extent for other students in adult education than for prison learners. There should be data linking the education and criminal justice systems, so that we can clearly see the impact of early experiences (e.g. pupils receiving free school meals, pupils who are excluded) and any link with being involved in the criminal justice system.
- The criminal records system needs reforming so that young people with prior convictions have better chances of employment and education
- Universities' widening participation strategies need to include people involved in the criminal justice system and former and current prison learners.

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