



Monday 11 May 2015 – Afternoon

GCSE SOCIOLOGY

B673/01/CS Applying Sociological Research Techniques

Duration: 1 hour



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Investigation 1 – A study (2013) by a 45 year old male probation officer in Durham.

Title: Prisons as a solution to crime

Hypothesis: 'Prisons do not help to reduce crime.'

I have worked with offenders for over 20 years. During this time I have seen the prison population in the UK increase dramatically and it seems that most prisoners continue to commit crime after leaving prison. This suggests that prisons are not working because they do not solve the problem of crime.

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My aims were to find out:

- What causes people to commit crime
- How prisoners feel about being in prison
- Why prisoners continue to commit crime after they have been released.

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Primary Research

Method 1

I decided to use a self-completion questionnaire to find out the views of the prisoners. I needed to keep this short and simple because some prisoners are not good at reading and writing (although they could get help from other prisoners). This meant using mainly closed questions, but I also wanted some open questions to get qualitative data.

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Some of the questions in my questionnaire were:

1. How long is your prison sentence? 0–6 months [] 7–12 months []
 1–5 years [] Over 5 years []

2. Have you learnt any skills which will help you to get a job when you are released from prison?
 Yes [] No []

3. Have you learnt things in prison which will help you to commit more crime when you are released?
 Yes [] No []

4. What is your view of prison life?

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I also asked questions about the types of crimes the offenders had committed, whether they would continue to commit crime and how they felt about their victims.

Sampling

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As I was not allowed access to the prisoners, I gave 50 questionnaires to the prison governor of a local category B male prison. He passed them on to 5 prison officers who then chose 10 prisoners each to fill them in. I asked for this to be a cross section of prisoners.

Although random sampling or a systematic sampling method might have been better, I felt my sampling was successful as I received back all 50 questionnaires. It seemed that no-one had refused to fill them in. However, I had to ignore 20 as some answers were silly for people in a category B prison (eg some said they were mass murderers). Other prisoners exaggerated or said they were innocent.

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Before my research I conducted a pilot study. I gave questionnaires to 3 people I work with, and to my wife and daughter. This proved my questionnaire was ok so I was able to go ahead with my research.

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Method 2

I did semi-structured interviews to find out what non-offenders think of criminals. I chose for my sample two people who work with offenders.

Person A – the views of a male prison officer friend (55) who works in a Category B male prison.

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Some comments he made were:

'In my view, prisoners have an easy life, free of the responsibilities that everyone else has to deal with. However, they are bored and there is not the money to provide education so they have to spend most of each day locked up in their cells'.

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'I feel sorry for their victims as some of the prisoners are very violent and don't really care about how people have suffered because of the criminals' actions'.

'I see the same men returning to prison. They just seem to teach each other how to commit crime and most of them are drug addicts. If they tried harder, they could get jobs when they leave prison. In my view, prison does not work'.

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Person B – the views of a female probation officer (26) who works with me.

Some comments she made were:

'I really enjoy my job supporting people who are released from prison but I do find it sad at times. Most offenders have had a really bad start in life with poor experiences of family life and school'.

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'I am interested in the schemes which encourage offenders to meet their victims. It seems to me that many prisoners do care and understand how they upset their victims. However, they feel they have little choice but to commit crime and prison does not work to stop them'.

'Few have any qualifications so they commit crimes because they are poor. There is not enough money put into education in prison so they can't get jobs when they leave. Prisons don't seem to stop crime'.

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Secondary Sources

Official statistics can be very useful for investigating how successful prisons are.

Source 1

% of people who re-offended within 12 months after the end of their sentence.

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Type of sentence	% Who re-offended
Community sentence	34
Prison sentence (less than 1 year)	57
Prison sentence (1–4 years)	38

Adapted from the Ministry of Justice data 2011

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Source 2

The media is also a useful source of information about crime. I selected a sample of two TV documentaries and made notes. These should give me accurate information about prisons. Both used a small number of case studies of prisoners.

A) 'Newsnight' (BBC2, 2006 11pm)

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I remembered watching a report on TV about the Danish prison system. This was completely different to prisons in the UK. I was really pleased to find this programme on the internet.

The report was about Ringe Prison in Denmark. This was described as a high security prison for people who committed serious and violent crimes. Surprisingly, the prisoners were not kept behind bars. However, they were watched by CCTV cameras.

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Prison in Denmark is seen as a place to reform people so they don't commit more crime. This is seen as better for everyone.

The prisoners with a job continued to go out to work. Those who were unemployed were educated and taught skills for work.

Prisoners had their partners and children living in the prison with them. They had to do their own housework, buy food in the prison shop and do their own cooking.

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This system made sure people had jobs when they left prison and kept contact with their families.

The prisoners did not find this a good life. They were keen to leave as they said losing their freedom was the punishment.

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The prison seemed to work. They said only one third of prisoners from Ringe prison re-offend but in Britain this is two thirds ie twice as many.

B) 'Lifers' – Cutting Edge (Channel 4, 2012 9pm)

This TV programme was about Gartree Prison in Leicester, a prison with 700 prisoners and more 'lifers' (600) than any other prison in Britain.

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The programme used case studies of a sample of 8 inmates.

Through these case studies, the documentary gave details about each individual's life, crimes and how they felt about their crimes and punishments.

It seemed to me the inmates were very happy with their lives in prison and had little feeling for their victims. It also seemed they were getting a good deal and getting an education for free – no university fees to pay!

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Some comments were:

Kieron – *'If I hadn't done the murder, I wouldn't have got qualifications'*.

David (enjoying studying for an art history degree) – *'Art takes me to a place where everything is beautiful'*.

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Lance – *'I've got a TV and a Playstation. I've got it nice. I wouldn't like to be out there at all now'*

Shaun – *'I've now completed a degree in maths.'*

This programme told me a great deal about prisoners and life inside.

Conclusion

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I think I have achieved one of my aims: to find out how prisoners feel about being in prison. However, my research has not stopped and I am still working on the other aims.

Investigation 2 – A trainee journalist, aged 20 in Birmingham, 2014.

I always wanted to be a journalist. Now I have my dream job working as a newspaper reporter for a local paper. I know that to get on in my career and make a name for myself, I need to write articles which are exciting and will get people interested. 120

Gang culture and drugs seem to be issues everyone is worried about. These would make good stories for the paper! The only way I can get to know about these is to get into a gang. I could then find out their norms, values and the way the gang 'works', and if they are involved with drugs. 125

As a young black male, brought up in Birmingham, and with some friends in gangs, I decided I was the right person to do this. Also, my knowledge of research methods from my A level Sociology course will be useful for my primary methods. I will try to make sure my data is valid.

I decided I needed some background information and secondary data.

Source 3 130

Background information – Talk by a sociologist

I went to a talk by a senior lecturer in sociology at Teesside University. He has written about youth gangs and he talked about his plan to research gangs in Newcastle but couldn't find any! (I think I will find one in Birmingham that I can get into).

What a great bloke! He was really down to earth, tattooed and with a working class accent. He also swore which surprised me! 135

I learnt about collecting qualitative data through participant observation. He told some amusing stories about taking part in their nights out at the pub with some tough criminals who were willing to help with his study. They talked openly about their activities and views about crime. Whilst in the pub he had to be 'one of them', drink (a lot!), speak like them, seem to have the same values and be careful not to ask questions. Only a bloke like him could get away with it! 140

Source 4

The work of two sociologists:

1. James Patrick – ‘A Glasgow Gang Observed’ (1973)

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In the 1960s, James Patrick (not his real name; he kept his identity hidden) worked as a teacher in a secure unit for young offenders and became friends with one of the inmates (Tim). Tim belonged to a violent gang in one area of Glasgow. When Tim was released he got Patrick into the gang so he could study the gang members without them knowing. First he taught Patrick how to dress and speak like the gang. Patrick observed them for 4 months, taking part in burglaries and fights. Unfortunately, when the gang became suspicious because he would not carry a weapon, he had to flee Glasgow! He wrote up his observation from memory and waited for about 10 years before he published it.

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2. Dick Hobbs – Research into the drug trade

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He conducted a study for the government in 2007. The aim was to find out how the illegal drug trade works. The sample of 230 drug smugglers (of whom 222 ended up being interviewed) is one of the biggest pieces of qualitative research done. His sample of convicted drug smugglers came from 22 prisons across the UK. All had sentences of 7 years or more as the study was about high level dealers. Each interview lasted 90 minutes.

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He wanted to use a random sample but there is no sampling frame for drug dealers! He did what he described as purposive sampling because he deliberately chose drug dealers who had been given long sentences in prison. He interviewed those who offered to take part so this was also volunteer sampling. Hobbs had to check they had been given sentences of over 7 years but this was hard to find out.

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Hobbs found that sometimes the people were given 20 years for just carrying the drugs. Other people involved in the drug trade had loads of information about the high level dealers and how the drug trade works. This would have been useful to Hobbs. However, they got caught for a smaller crime and only got a short sentence of less than 7 years.

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Still, he hoped he could make some accurate generalisations.

One of the things he did find was that prison wasn't much of a deterrent. They accepted the possibility of going to prison as 'part of the game'. The thing that really worried them was having their assets taken away:

“The idea of coming out having spent 10 to 12 years inside – having no car, no money, family gone, back to the bare bones. That seemed to worry them far more.”

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My view is that it is good that the government can take away all the money the drug dealers make!

My Primary Research

Method 3

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I used all the information I had gained to help me to carry out my own research. I needed a typical gang to study.

I asked my mate if he would take me out with his gang members. Over a couple of weeks I spent several days and nights with them. The gang was big, over 100 but I spent most of my time with about 20 lads, all black like myself. In fact, all the gang members were black and lived on the same estate in Birmingham. This 20 were all about the same age as me although the age range of the whole gang was about 11 to 30.

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The older ones had the highest status and competed with each other to be the leader. They also carried guns and were making a lot of money from drugs. They tolerated me being around because of my mate but I think they were suspicious of me because I hadn't 'proved' myself.

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The younger ones ignored me as they were busy trying to impress the tough gang leaders by learning the skills of crime and taking risks. There were a few females, not gang members but girlfriends. I avoided talking to them as I was afraid of being seen as chatting them up. I realised that messing with this lot was not a good idea!

The gang members had a language of their own and I had to ask what some words meant. For example, I found that 'slipping' meant a gang member going into a rival gang's territory and this could lead to being beaten up, stabbed or shot. I found out things I never knew went on. This would have made an observation schedule useless.

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To be honest, I was glad when the 2 weeks were up! I felt like an outsider and stood out as I did not feel comfortable wearing the 'uniform' of the gang. I am not like them. However, I did not think the police or a rival gang would see it in this way!

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Overall

I still haven't written my article. The best part of my research was the observation of the gang but telling all the readers of the paper what they got up to might not be a good idea.



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