



Understanding Social Climate and Behavioural Outcomes in Young Offender Institutions: A Mixed-Methods Study of Young People and Staff Perspectives

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Abstract

Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) house some of the most vulnerable children in society, many of whom present with complex trauma, developmental needs, and disrupted attachments. Despite this, the social and relational environments within YOIs remain underexplored. This doctoral research aims to investigate the social climate of a YOI in the United Kingdom through a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives from both young people and prison officers. Quantitative data will be collected using the validated Essen Climate Evaluation Schema (EssenCES) to assess perceptions of safety, support, and cohesion. Qualitative interviews will explore lived experiences of relationships, emotional safety, and institutional culture. Additionally, anonymised adjudication data will be analysed to determine whether negative perceptions of social climate are associated with higher levels of disciplinary incidents. By combining self-reported and operational data, this study seeks to identify relational and environmental factors that influence wellbeing, behaviour, and rehabilitation. The findings will contribute to policy and practice aimed at creating safer, more developmentally appropriate, and trauma-informed custodial settings for young people, aligning with current HM Prison and Probation Service priorities for improving decency, safety, and relational trust within the youth secure estate.

Keywords: adjudications; prison climate; rehabilitation; relationships; youth justice