

PRISONER PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The objectives of the research were to:

- (a) identify important aspects of the prison environment to aid in the design and implementation of new prison programs
- (b) to provide a baseline from which to assess the effects of new prison programs in general

1.2 The objectives were to be achieved by identifying features of prison and prison life which inmates judged as both important and (yet) relatively unsatisfactory. Prisoners were asked to rank a series of statements about features of prison and prison life in terms of:

- (a) descending order of importance; and
- (b) descending order of satisfactoriness.

The disparity between the ranking of a particular item on (a) and (b) could then be used directly for the purpose specified in 1.1(a) above and (by comparison with the measured disparity in other institutions) indirectly for the purpose specified in 1.1(b).

1.3 By forming composite scales of importance and satisfactoriness on different inmate characteristics (e.g. age, marital status, period in prison etc.) it was also hoped that the relative heterogeneity of inmate attitudes to the prison environment could be established. If scales of satisfactoriness and importance

constructed for individual subgroups of inmates in fact deviated significantly from composite scales for the whole sample, a case would be made for treating subgroups of inmates differently in respect of certain prison characteristics. The study was intended to address these questions.

2.0 Method

2.1 The original design envisaged testing a sample of approximately 250-300 inmates at a maximum security gaol. The reasons for preferring such a large sample were twofold:

- (a) the larger sample would ensure greater reliability of the scaling technique (1) to be employed; and
- (b) a large sample would have been necessary to make the construction of reliable scales for subgroups of prisoners possible.

In fact, for reasons beyond the control of the researcher, a sample of only 65 inmates were interviewed, thus rendering impossible many of the comparisons envisaged in the original design. The reasons for the difficulty is detailed in section 3.0 below. The remainder of this section describes the procedures actually adopted.

2.2 The interviewing of subjects was conducted over 3 days in the interview rooms of Goulburn Gaol. All inmates tested were from the maximum security section of that gaol. Interviewing usually began at about 9.00 a.m. in the morning and continued at 2.00 p.m. after a lunch break. There were four interviewers, working in pairs in adjacent rooms.

2.3 Each inmate interviewed was addressed in the following general terms:

"Well as you probably know we're from Mitchell College and we are interested in finding out about how inmates feel about some aspects of prison or life in prison. (The interviewer would then gesture toward a table on which were displayed a set of cards with statements printed on them). Basically all we would like you to do is have a look at these statements and pick out the one which you think refers to the most important aspect of prison, then go on to the next most important thing and so on down to the least important.

You don't have to do this of course, and we are not taking any names of anybody. But if you do help us it may give us a better idea of what inmates think about things in prison."

2.4 If the inmate consented to the interview (a total of 5 refused) he was then asked to disclose:

- (a) his age
- (b) the number of previous terms of imprisonment
- (c) the length of each term served
- (d) the time served in current sentence:
 - (i) elsewhere; and
 - (ii) at Goulburn; and
- (e) marital status ('marriage' was explained as including 'living together').

2.5 The 14 cards displaying the statements to be ranked were then set out in front of the inmate. (The cards were always shuffled between interviews and they were displayed as a group rather than in a line or a row. This was done to avoid any suggestion of a preferred or prior ordering of the statements in importance). The statements to be ranked were as follows:

- (a) opportunities for inmate recreation
- (b) freedom of movement in prison
- (c) quality of prison food

- (d) certainty of release date
- (e) frequency of visits permitted to inmates
- (f) quality of prison work
- (g) relations with prison officers
- (h) frequency of cell searches
- (i) handling of inmates' grievances
- (j) educational opportunities for inmates
- (k) fairness of prison discipline
- (l) fairness of classification criteria
- (m) relations with other inmates
- (n) amount of prison earnings

2.6 The inmate was then instructed in the following terms:

"OK, as I said, I want you to look through these cards and pick the one which refers to the most important thing about life in gaol.....the thing that matters to you most. Then pick the next most important and so on down to the least important thing in gaol."

2.7 As the inmate picked a card it was taken by the interviewer and passed to an assistant who recorded the rank assigned to the card. The inmate thus had a diminishing set of cards to choose from. The process of ranking the 14 cards usually took about 6-10 minutes. Occasionally the interviewer would have to explain a card, though this was fairly rare.

2.8 When this phase of the interview had been completed the interviewer passed the cards in separate files to the recording assistant and proceeded to explain the next phase of the interview in the following terms:

"Alright, now you've thought about these things on the cards in terms of how important they are to you. Now I want you to tell us how unsatisfactory they are in this gaol. I want you to pick the card which describes the most unsatisfactory thing about this gaol - it doesn't matter whether it is important to you or not - just pick the card that describes the most unsatisfactory thing in this gaol."

2.9 The (reshuffled) cards were then laid out in front of the inmate and the process described in 2.7 repeated. The inmate was reminded that he was now concerned only with what was the most unsatisfactory thing about this goal.

3.0 Problems in obtaining subjects

3.1 The interviews, with few exceptions, proceeded amicably.

Occasionally, inmates were suspicious, but (at least for the first 30-40 subjects) the assurance that the interviewers were not officers of the Corrective Services Commission soon removed any lingering doubts about our motives for seeking their opinion on aspects of prison life. No doubt the cooperation of inmates was enhanced by the presence of two women interviewers, but the opportunity to avoid the near freezing yards and enjoy the temporary comfort of a warm room also played a part. Inmates were generally reluctant to leave the interview room and often volunteered to elaborate on how prisons should be run. All 5 of the inmates who declined to participate (once in the interview room) did so without any querying of the purpose of the study or any explanation of why they did not wish to participate. (No explanation was sought as this was considered to be placing unfair pressure on the inmate to participate).

3.2 The first day of interviewing proceeded well. A total of 33 interviews were conducted and as word of the study spread around the prison, the number of inmates wanting to participate increased. To participate, however, inmates were obliged to approach officers for a pass to move into that area of the prison leading to the interview rooms. Once having obtained a pass, they were obliged to wait in a tunnel locked at both ends and without any form of seating. Conditions in the tunnel, if similar to those in the corridors outside the interview rooms, would have been very cold. Few inmates had any pullovers or coats on.

- 3.3 Towards midday of the second day large groups of inmates, tired of waiting in the tunnel, gave up and returned to the yards, where, in the words of one inmate 'at least you can see how cold it is'. By 2.00 p.m. that day the flow of inmates had reduced to a trickle and the supervising officer was approached with a view to seeking more inmates. He readily agreed to post a notice inside the prison and draw inmates and officers attention to it.
- 3.4 What happened after that is difficult to ascertain. There was an immediate increase in the number of inmates wishing to participate but the following morning the number appearing had reduced to one or two an hour. The few that came through said that they had been ridiculed by officers for participating in a 'gripe study.' Later, inmates voiced a different concern. Several inmates independently queried whether the interviews were not in fact trying to 'get at' some people. They were of course, assured that this was not the case. This allayed (or seemed to allay) their suspicions but they claimed the story had gone around the prison and no-one wanted to come as a result.
- 3.5 The interviewers waited in vain for most of the third day for inmates wishing to participate. Several approaches to the supervising officer were made in a bid to obtain more subjects but his efforts in this regard produced no further inmates. Given the cost of paying three research assistants and providing meals and accommodation for them, it was deemed inadvisable to continue. Data collection efforts were terminated and the Superintendent and assisting officers were thanked for their cooperation. A total of 65 inmates were surveyed out of a goal population in maximum security of 309.

Note : Just why inmate cooperation ceased after initial success is difficult to say. The stories provided by inmates provide one explanation but they are not verifiable. Certainly the officers spoken to, while not unduly friendly, were generally courteous. The full cooperation of the officers had been sought some time prior to the study in discussions with both the Chairman of the Corrective Services Commission, Mr. Vern Dalton and the Superintendent of Goulburn Gaol, Mr. Max Routley. While both the Chairman and the Superintendent verbally expressed reservations about the subject of the study, both in the event agreed to cooperate in conducting it.

4.0 Results

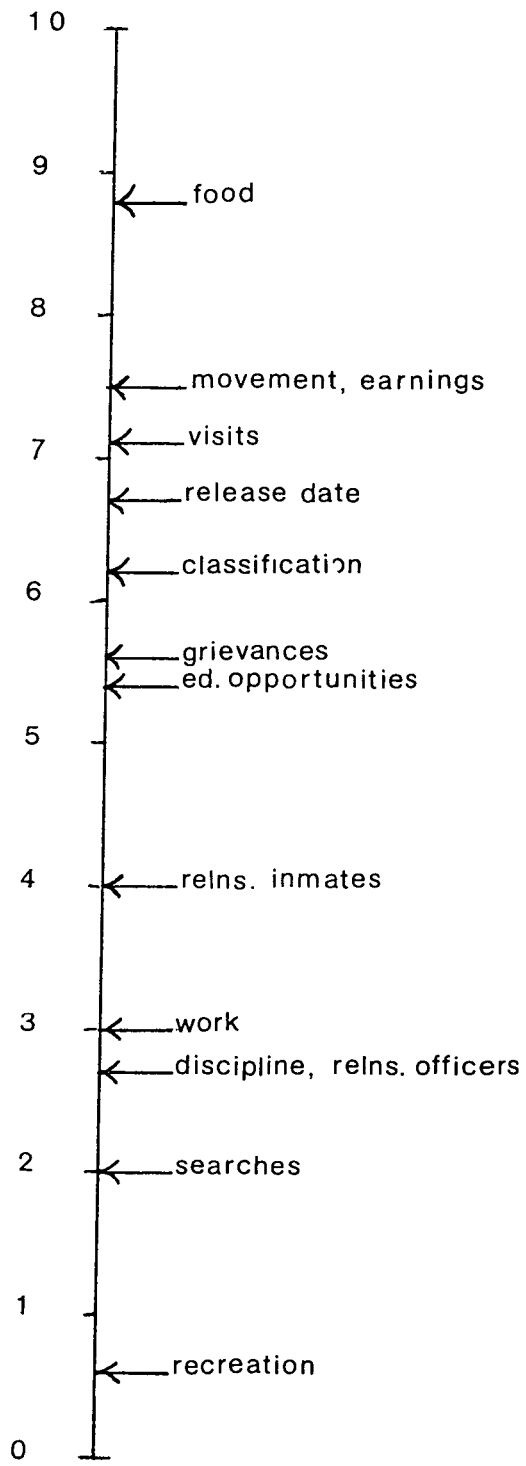
4.1 Following a technique described by Guilford (2) the subject rankings were converted to proportions. Table 1 below shows the proportions matrix for the dimension of importance. Both rows and columns of the matrix have been arranged in order of increasing importance. If the assumptions of Thurstone's Case V scaling solution (3) are accepted, then the proportions matrix may be converted to a matrix of 3 scores and an interval scale of the items constructed. Figure 1 shows the resulting scale. The items have been subjected to a linear transformation to facilitate comparisons between them. The most important item is evidently the quality of prison food ranging down to opportunities for inmate recreation as the item of least perceived importance.

Table 1

Proportions Matrix for Importance Data

	Recreation	Searches	Discipline	Relations Officers	Work	Relations Inmates	Education Opportun.	Grievances	Classification	Release Date	Visits	Movement	Earnings	Food
Recreation	.50	.57	.56	.60	.61	.59	.69	.70	.67	.75	.76	.78	.71	.81
Searches	.43	.50	.56	.45	.49	.59	.69	.70	.68	.65	.68	.70	.71	.74
Discipline	.44	.44	.50	.48	.52	.57	.53	.58	.66	.67	.70	.72	.70	.77
Relations Officers	.40	.55	.52	.50	.46	.56	.65	.67	.65	.62	.63	.65	.67	.69
Work	.39	.51	.48	.54	.50	.53	.63	.64	.62	.62	.64	.65	.65	.70
Relations Inmates	.41	.41	.43	.44	.47	.50	.48	.53	.52	.63	.63	.66	.73	.70
Educational Opportunities	.31	.31	.47	.35	.37	.52	.50	.44	.61	.55	.55	.56	.63	.62
Grievances	.30	.30	.42	.33	.36	.47	.56	.50	.56	.57	.53	.55	.59	.61
Classification	.33	.32	.34	.35	.38	.48	.39	.44	.50	.54	.54	.55	.58	.61
Release Date	.25	.35	.33	.38	.38	.37	.45	.43	.46	.50	.54	.54	.47	.52
Visits	.24	.32	.30	.37	.36	.37	.45	.47	.46	.46	.50	.55	.52	.52
Movement	.22	.30	.28	.35	.35	.34	.44	.45	.45	.46	.45	.50	.47	.60
Earnings	.29	.29	.30	.33	.35	.27	.37	.41	.42	.53	.48	.53	.50	.59
Food	.19	.26	.23	.31	.30	.30	.38	.39	.39	.48	.48	.40	.41	.50

figure 1: importance



- 4.2 Table 2 displays the proportions matrix for the dimension of Satisfactoriness. The matrix was constructed according to the procedure used for the proportions matrix for Importance. Because subjects ranked the items in terms of how unsatisfactory they were however, the rows and columns progress in order of increasing unsatisfactoriness. Figure 2 displays the scale obtained from the z transformation of the proportions matrix. The scale runs from 'quality of prison food', judged to the most unsatisfactory item, down to 'opportunities for inmate recreation', judged the least unsatisfactory item.
- 4.3 While there is some commonality between the scales of Importance and Satisfactoriness the relationship between the two is not strong, suggesting the existence of significant disparities between what inmates perceive as important in the prison environment and what they regard as most unsatisfactory. The quality of prison food is seen as both the most important feature of prison life and the most unsatisfactory. Interestingly enough, agreement also exists on the fact that opportunities for inmate recreation is both the least important and least unsatisfactory feature of prison life. Beyond this there seems to be some variation in the relationship between importance and satisfactoriness. Much of the disparity however, arises out of a greater heterogeneity of attitudes among inmates in regard to what is important, than exists in regard to what is unsatisfactory. This is most clearly illustrated in the allocation of first preferences over the items.
- 4.4 Table 3 below, displays the percentage of 1st preferences given to each item judged in terms of satisfactoriness and importance.

Table 2

Proportions Matrix for Satisfactoriness Data

	Recreation	Work	Relations Inmates	Education Opportun.	Release Date	Classification	Visits	Discipline	Searches	Earnings	Grievances	Relations Officers	Movement	Food
Recreation	.50	.56	.54	.50	.61	.56	.66	.64	.66	.65	.71	.73	.77	.81
Work	.44	.50	.53	.57	.48	.62	.51	.68	.70	.68	.74	.75	.71	.79
Relations Inmates	.46	.47	.50	.46	.57	.58	.60	.63	.69	.79	.66	.71	.76	.76
Educational Opportunities	.50	.43	.54	.50	.52	.61	.57	.72	.65	.73	.63	.69	.75	.75
Release Date	.39	.52	.43	.48	.50	.52	.61	.58	.60	.59	.65	.66	.65	.67
Classification	.44	.38	.42	.39	.48	.50	.52	.54	.59	.60	.59	.65	.72	.73
Visits	.34	.49	.40	.43	.39	.48	.50	.55	.57	.55	.62	.64	.62	.64
Discipline	.36	.32	.37	.28	.42	.46	.45	.50	.50	.54	.53	.58	.67	.69
Searches	.34	.30	.31	.35	.40	.41	.43	.50	.50	.51	.59	.58	.65	.68
Earnings	.35	.32	.21	.27	.41	.40	.45	.46	.49	.50	.53	.59	.67	.70
Grievances	.29	.30	.34	.37	.35	.41	.38	.47	.41	.47	.50	.50	.58	.61
Relations Officers	.27	.32	.29	.31	.34	.35	.36	.42	.42	.41	.50	.50	.55	.60
Movement	.23	.29	.24	.25	.35	.28	.38	.35	.35	.33	.42	.45	.50	.56
Food	.19	.21	.24	.25	.33	.27	.36	.32	.32	.30	.39	.40	.44	.50

figure 2: satisfactoriness

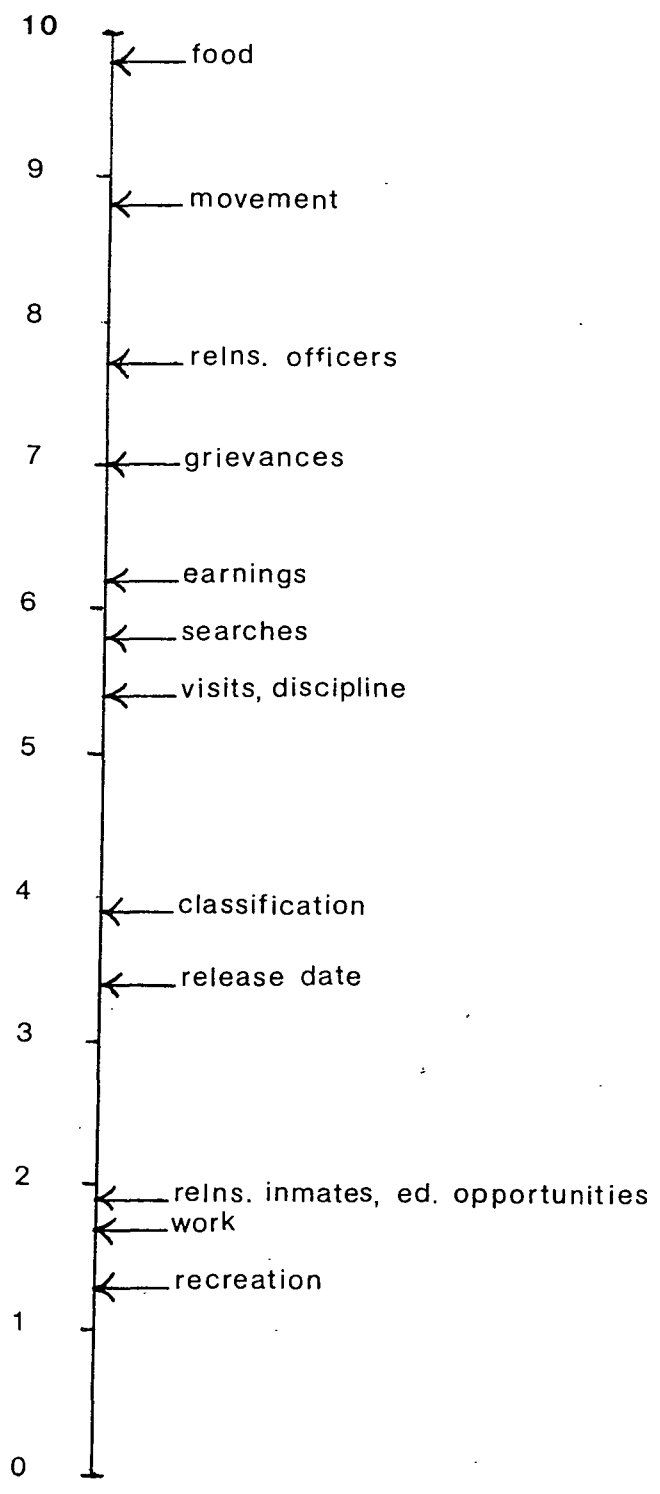


Table 3
Percentage Distribution of 1st Preferences

	<u>Percentage of 1st Preferences</u>		<u>Diff.</u>
	Importance	(Un)Satisfactoriness	Percentage
Food	16	29	+ 13
Movement	8	19	+ 11
Release Date	21	6	- 15
Grievances	6	5	- 1
Earnings	6	0	- 6
Searches	2	2	0
Visits	11	6	- 5
Discipline	0	2	+ 2
Classification	10	6	- 4
Relations Officers	5	11	+ 6
Relations Inmates	2	5	+ 3
Educational Opportunities	2	3	+ 1
Work	11	5	- 6
Recreation	2	2	0

It can be seen that while 1st preferences in regard to what is important cluster over five or six items (Food, Release Date, Visits, Classification, Work and perhaps, Movement), the 1st preferences in regard to what is unsatisfactory cluster over just three items (Food, Movement, and Relations with Officers). Had sufficient data been available it would have been interesting to examine the relationship between these trends and the categories of inmates listed in 2.4(a)-(e). Unfortunately, the small sample size attained effectively precludes useful comparisons being made among these subgroups.

5.0 Discussion

No effective prison program can be implemented without close attention to the needs and concerns of inmates. The frustration of these needs and concerns has often lain at the basis of much prison unrest. Nowhere was this point more dramatically illustrated than in the events leading up to the destruction of Bathurst Gaol in 1974. As early as 1970 inmates at the gaol had listed a set of grievances (4) which included restrictions on freedom of movement, the poor quality

of prison food, the unsatisfactory nature of certain employment arrangements and a request that prison sentences be backdated. The inquiry which followed paid no heed to the demands made by prisoners and in February of 1974 the inmates rioted destroying the gaol. While the event precipitating the riot was the sacking of prisoners in the Carpentry Shop

"The real discontent was based on conditions in the gaol.

Physically, the conditions at the gaol had not altered since the events of October, 1970" (5)

The Royal Commission into N.S.W. Prisons listed among the conditions referred to (6):

- (1) Poor educational opportunities and facilities
- (2) Poor food
- (3) Unnecessarily destructive searches
- (4) Poor recreational opportunities
- (5) Poor employment opportunities
- (6) Restrictions on freedom of movement

It was also clear that the unfairness of discipline in the prison and the inadequacy of existing grievance mechanisms were major causes of dissatisfaction among inmates.

The existence of such strong grievances over a long period creates a climate of discontent which easily spills over into violence when minor expectations are thwarted or conditions change even marginally for the worse. As Mattick (7) has argued:

"In any situation where a relatively small group of men control and direct a much larger group, the controllers depend, in a very real sense, on the passive acquiescence of the controlled. Such passivity is purchased by an effective sharing of power."

That sharing of power is arrived at by a sometimes tacit, sometimes official recognition of the needs, rights and interests of inmates and a determination within the limits imposed by containment itself, to avoid the gratuitous exercise of power for its own sake. In practice this becomes as mundane as providing decent food, avoiding administrative arrangements that have no apparent justification, and ensuring that discipline is fair, restrained and intelligible.

Close attention to inmate needs and interests is not as some would have it, simply a liberal capitulation to the unjustified demands of criminals. If the view is accepted that people are sent to prison as and not for punishment, the attention to inmate grievances has a second and moral justification. Where deprivation of liberty is the punishment it is incumbent on the gaoler to ensure that, as far as possible, inmates are accorded all the rights and dignities appropriate to anybody in society. The minimum possible disturbance in social and personal life should be the criterion by which prison administrative programs are devised. Thus whether the perspective is one of good prison administration, or the political justification for a particular form of administration, attention must inevitably focus upon the prisoner, his or her interests and his or her sources of grievance.

The present findings, limited though they may be, therefore give cause for concern. Although inmates did not state their absolute level of dissatisfaction or perceived importance, their preferences isolate the kind of mundane grievance which has sparked prison violence in the past. In ten years of complaint the quality of prison food is still identified as both the most important and yet the most unsatisfactory feature of prison life (among the features surveyed). Freedom of movement also still stands out as a factor of both considerable importance and strong relative dissatisfaction among inmates. Ironically these two features, of those surveyed, are perhaps the easiest to rectify. Neither of them would require either a major increase in funding or significant administrative reorganisation.

Among the other comparisons it is interesting to note that opportunities for inmate recreation is not judged as either very important or very unsatisfactory. This is somewhat surprising given the dearth of recreational opportunities provided at Goulburn Gaol as is the relatively low levels of importance and unsatisfactoriness associated with the quality of prison work. The latter may be explicable in terms of factors external to prison life. A large proportion of prisoners would have experienced long periods of unemployment prior to imprisonment and the devaluing of work may be a natural outcome of this experience, though this is only speculation.

The influence of external factors may also be present in relation to visits, which are accorded a fairly high level of importance, but are not rated highly unsatisfactory. Inmates who do have visitors are likely to find visits important and to regard their relative infrequency as unsatisfactory. But many inmates serving long sentences may lose their contacts with wife and/or family. Several inmates complained of just this fact. As a result, the frequency of visits allowed to prisoners may slip in its significance for inmates who do not receive them. This fact underlines the importance of relating data on inmates preferences to factors such as marital status, age and period of imprisonment. Without information on such relationships, data relating solely to preferences is difficult to interpret.

Among items considered relatively important among inmates, (apart from those already mentioned) amount of prison earnings and certainty of release date also figure prominently. Complaints about the amount of prison earnings also featured in grievances expressed at Bathurst Gaol during the disturbance there in 1970 and have remained a constant source of complaint among prisoners. The importance attached to it by inmates offers some support to the proposal considered at Bathurst Gaol of providing meaningful wages for inmates through more vigorous pursuit of commercial possibilities in local markets (8).

The certainty of release date while considered important by inmates was not rated relatively unsatisfactory. In pilot studies among medium security prisoners at Bathurst Gaol it had been an issue of some considerable discontent. Whether the difference lies in the longer average sentences of Goulburn inmates, the stage of sentence or the differing privileges and conditions in the two gaols is difficult to say. Certainly the fact that it is considered (relatively) satisfactory, though nonetheless important, may provide some assurance that this item is perhaps not an important source of discontent among inmates.

Another apparent anomaly appears in connection with inmates judgements concerning relations with officers. These were characterised as highly unsatisfactory but not relatively important. There is some reason for doubting the face-value of the latter judgement. Many inmates considering this item downplayed its importance with remarks, suggestive more of desire than conviction. One inmate after remarking that officers were of no importance whatever proceeded into a diatribe against them which in no uncertain terms belied his earlier statement. He was in no doubt about the relative unsatisfactoriness of his relations with them. It may well be that a subtler appraisal of this issue with inmates would disclose the fact the relations with inmates are considered both very important and highly unsatisfactory.

It is difficult to proceed further in the analysis of this data without giving oneself over wholly to speculation measured against anecdote. The results highlight certain areas of concern which obviously merit closer observation. Some issues, such as quality of prison food, might be judged relatively independently of other factors in prison, and may be remedied without further ado. Other issues, such as fairness of classification criteria, clearly require close examination in terms of age, period of imprisonment and so on before any reliable generalisations about their status can be made. Any further study would also need to look closely at the interaction of various grievances with one another. These interactions were ignored for the present purposes but would need close examination before policies based on separate issues considered by inmates were developed.

The results also offer suggestions as to improvements in the research design apart from the obvious need to gather sufficient data to make comparisons between subgroups of inmates possible. The technique of asking inmates to rank a series of items in terms of their relative importance and satisfactoriness is a quick means of establishing in general terms what the sources of inmate concern and discontent are. In order to more easily interpret the judgements of these items by inmates however, it would be useful to follow the ranking with a structured questionnaire examining in more detail the issues raised in the ranking. These need not be with the entire sample of inmates examined, but if performed with a certain number of inmates within each cell of the design it would greatly reduce any uncertainty about the inmates' own interpretations of the items.

Notes

- (1) The scaling technique is described in detail in J.P. Guildford, Psychometric Methods, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1954, Chap. 8.
- (2) see ref. (1) pp. 188 (NB R = 6).
- (3) Principally uncorrelated preferences and equal discriminial dispersions, c.f. LL. Thurstone. A Law of Comparative Judgement. Psychological Review, 1927, 34, 273-286.
- (4) see The Royal Commission into N.S.W Prisons, Government Printer, 1978.
- (5) see ref (4) pp.87.
- (6) see ref (4) pp. 87-88.
- (7) H. Mattick, The Prosaic Sources of Prison Violence, Aust. and N.Z. Journal of Criminology, 1973, 6, 1.
- (8) The proposal envisaged a pay-rate for inmates based on the commercial value of what they produced for the local market. It was discussed in meetings of the Implementation Committee for the new program to be implemented at Bathurst Gaol.