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The Crime and Deviance Channel

Chris.
Livesey



Prison and Prisoners

The Social Characteristics of Convicted Prisoners

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One of the initial things students learn when studying theories of crime is, quite correctly, that our ability to draw conclusions about “crime, criminals and criminality” on the basis of those convicted of crimes is somewhat limited.

This follows, of course, from a number of relevant ideas, not the least of which being that:

- Not all convicted criminals are sent to prison.
- Only a small proportion of criminal acts are reported to and / or recorded by, the police (the “*dark figure*” of crime).
- Of those who commit criminal acts, only a minority are ever convicted and imprisoned.

On this basis, therefore, students are generally warned-away from the idea that analysis of those who actually are convicted and imprisoned can tell us anything useful about crime and criminality.

The conclusions to be drawn from such a comparison are, of course, a matter for debate...

This tends to be further compounded by the idea that neither quantitative nor qualitative analyses of convicted prisoners are likely to advance our knowledge of these concepts in any meaningful way.

As we’ve suggested, this is not necessarily a bad thing (in the way that any *uncritical* use of data about those convicted of crime is a bad thing).

However, the key here is *uncritical* since it is clear that if we use data about convicted criminals *critically* - and not with an eye to somehow confirming our theories about the nature of crime and criminals - some very useful information about a range of ideas relating to power and control in our society can be generated.

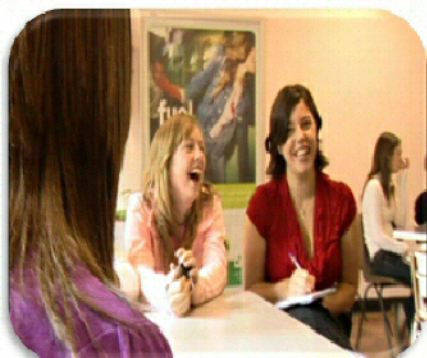
With this in mind, therefore, it can be illuminating to compare a range of social characteristics of those who are imprisoned in our society with the general population itself.

Source: “Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners”: Social Exclusion Unit, 2002

Characteristic	General population	Prison population
Ran away from home as a child	10%	Males: 47% Females: 50%
Taken into care as a child	2%	27%
Regularly truanted from school	3%	30%
Excluded from school	2%	Males: 49% Females: 33%
No qualifications	15%	Males: 52% Females: 71%
Numeracy at or below Level 1 (level expected of 11 year-olds)	23%	65%
Reading ability at or below Level 1	22%	48%
Writing ability at or below Level 1	No direct comparison	82%
Unemployed for at least 4 weeks before imprisonment	5%	67%
Homeless	1%	32%
Suffer from two or more mental disorders	Males: 5% Females: 2%	Males: 72% Females: 70%
Suffer from a psychotic disorder	Males: 0.5% Females: 0.6%	Males: 7% Females: 14%
Drug use in the previous year	Males: 13% Females: 8%	Males: 66% Females: 55%
Hazardous drinking	Males: 38% Females: 15%	Males: 62% Females: 39%
Has a family member convicted of a criminal offence	16%	43%
Left school at 16 or younger	32%	Males: 89% Females: 84%
Attended a special school	1%	Males: 23% Females: 11%
Long-standing illness or disability	Males: 29% aged 18–49	Males: 46% aged 18–49

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