

'Depth, Extremity and Intensity at the Terminus of the Prison System'

Ben Crewe

Abstract

In England and Wales, around 50 prisoners considered particularly dangerous or difficult to manage are held in four Close Supervision Centres (CSCs). These units represent the 'deep-end' of the system, with depth defined as 'the extent to which a prisoner is embedded into the security and control systems of imprisonment (King and McDermott 1995: 90). Based on on-going research across the CSC system, this paper seeks to characterise the experience of CSC imprisonment, and refine a framework for the conceptualisation of prison life, based on the ideas of 'depth', 'weight' and 'tightness' (Crewe 2011). First, it highlights a distinction between depth of isolation from the outside world and distance from freedom. Second, with regard to 'weight', it describes the lightness of the units relative to normal wings within high-security establishments, but also the complexity of staff-prisoner relationships, which it characterises as a mirage of authenticity. Third, it explains how CSC prisoners deal in very different ways with being subject to intensely 'tight' forms of penal power. It concludes by arguing that the units are marked by various forms of intensity, resulting from the interaction between the orientations of extreme individuals and their location at the terminus.