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# **Using Specialised Prison Units to Manage Violent Extremists: Lessons from Northern Ireland**

## **Abstract**

The use of specialised prison units (SPUs) as a means of countering violent extremism and radicalisation is growing in popularity in many jurisdictions. Yet, little is known about their ability to prevent radicalisation in the long-term, limit the spread of violent extremism or promote de-radicalisation and disengagement. This paper begins to explore these issues by reflecting on the over 40 years of experience that Northern Ireland (NI) has had in this area. It is argued that the international community tends to have an incomplete understanding of: 1) why SPUs were created and installed in NI, 2) how their regime, conditions and underlying rationale changed over time and 3) the long-term consequences that SPUs have had on the spread of violent extremism, de-radicalisation and disengagement. This paper seeks to make an original contribution to this literature by highlighting the role psychological, situational, social and political factors played in shaping the effectiveness of SPUs in NI. By providing a more in-depth analysis of why SPUs in NI entrenched extremism rather than promoted disengagement or de-radicalisation, other jurisdictions will be encouraged to reflect on how these factors may affect the success of their own SPUs in countering violent extremism.

Keywords: Terrorism; Imprisonment; De-radicalization; Disengagement; Countering Violent Extremism; Specialised Prison Units.

Increasing attention has been paid to the role that prisons can play in radicalising and/or countering violent extremism (Silke 2014; Warnes and Hannah 2008, 402-411; Hamm 2013). While some have argued that prison radicalisation and violent extremism is a serious threat which must be addressed (Culthbertson 2004, 15-22), others have been more circumspect, questioning its prevalence (Jones 2014, 74-103). Concerns about the potential influence violent extremists may have on the wider prison population has led to international debates over how such prisoners should be managed (Neumann 2010; Jones and Morales 2012, 211-228; King and Resodihardjo 2010, 65-84; Hamm 2013; Silke 2014). In these debates, the experience of Northern Ireland (NI) is often referred to (Neumann 2010; Silke 2014; Sumpter 2016). This paper reflects on NI's experience of using specialised prison units (SPUs) to question their ability to prevent radicalisation and the spread of violent extremism. The paper makes an original contribution to the literature by highlighting the factors that can influence the effectiveness of SPUs by shaping their regime, and consequently, their ability to promote disengagement and de-radicalisation. The paper begins by providing a brief overview of existing research on violent extremism, de-radicalisation, disengagement and the potential role that SPUs can play in managing these behaviours. Next, the experiences of NI during and after the conflict are reflected on to provide a fuller understanding of why SPUs were adopted, how they changed and developed over time, as well as the long-term consequences that have been associated with their use. Lastly, some critical insights are offered in the hope of aiding other jurisdictions in their attempts to use SPUs to counter violent extremism.

### **Extremism, Disengagement and De-Radicalisation**

Violent extremism has been defined by Horgan and colleagues (2016: 13) as a “willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of political, social, or ideological nature”. Research indicates that: 1) identity, 2) group loyalties, 3) feelings of State marginalisation, discrimination or injustice, 4) having opportunities to engage in extremism and 5)

feelings of reward for doing so, are risk factors for involvement in violent extremism (Silke 2008, 99-123; Horgan 2014). In particular, social and group dynamics appear to play a key role in extremism (Doosje and others 2016, 79-84; Silke 2008, 99-123; Horgan 2014; Schuurman and Bakker 2016, 66-85). Research suggests that if people are exposed to extremist views and begin to isolate themselves from those expressing moderate or conflicting views, they can become more extreme in their cognitions and more willing to engage in risky behaviours (Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004; Silke 2008, 99-123). In recent decades, governments have strengthened their efforts to counter violent extremism and have increased their development of, and investment in, de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes (Weine and others 2016, 1-14; Aldrich 2014, 523-546; Selim 2016, 94-101; Silke 2014; Schuurman and Bakker 2016, 66-85; Koehler 2016). De-radicalisation refers to the process of attempting to change an individual's cognitions, while disengagement focuses on changing an individual's behaviour (Bjørge 2009, 30-48; Horgan 2009). Research indicates that there is not a straightforward relationship between the behaviour and attitudes of violent extremists, as individuals can engage in violent extremism without expressing radicalised cognitions and disengage from violent extremist without changing their cognitions (Della Porta and La Free 2012, 4-10; Ferguson 2016, 1-23; Horgan and others 2016, 1-15; Schmid 2013; Sukabdi 2016, 56; Horgan and Altier 2012, 83-90). For this reason, Horgan (2014) cautions against becoming overly focused on using de-radicalisation programmes as the primary means of countering violent extremism, arguing instead for more attention to be paid to disengagement.

Horgan and his colleagues have developed a theoretical framework for understanding disengagement (Horgan 2014; Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014, 647-661; Horgan and others 2016, 1-15; Bjørge and Horgan 2009). They propose that disengagement can be understood by examining how 'push' and 'pull' factors interact with feelings of commitment (Horgan 2014; Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014, 647-661; Horgan and others 2016, 1-15; Bjørge and Horgan 2009). 'Push' factors refer to negative events/circumstances which make continued involvement in violent extremism unattractive (Bjørge and Horgan 2009). Examples of push factors may include

disappointment with the ideology/actions of other extremists, inability to cope with the realities of extremism, burnout or having unmet needs (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014, 647-661). 'Pull' factors refer to events/circumstances which offer an attractive alternative to violent extremism (Bjørge and Horgan 2009). For instance, family, education, employment opportunities, positive interactions with moderates, as well as financial incentives and amnesties can offer enticing 'pulls' away from violent extremism (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014, 647-661).

Drawing on Rusbult's (1980; 1981) investment model, Horgan and colleagues theorise that commitment to violent extremism is affected by the feeling of satisfaction individuals obtain from their involvement in such activity, the availability and quality of alternative identities/activities and how much time, energy, peer networks, etc. people have invested into this behaviour (Horgan 2014; Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014, 647-661; Horgan and others 2016, 1-15; Bjørge and Horgan 2009). They argue that those who are no longer satisfied with their involvement in violent extremism but have limited alternative identities and have invested heavily in these activities may remain committed to extremism, despite the presence of push and pull factors (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014, 647-661). For example, people can be dissuaded from attempting to disengage from violent extremism because they fear the loss of group identity and status provided by extremist peers (Horgan and others 2016, 1-15). In addition, they can face physical threats and violence if they attempt to leave the group or renounce their former beliefs (Horgan and others 2016, 1-15; Koehler 2015, 36-50; Ferguson 2016, 1-23).

Research has identified prison as one location in which some individuals can become radicalised and involved in violent extremism, although there remains some dispute about the prevalence of this occurrence (Hamm 2013; Useem and Clayton 2009, 561-592; Culthbertson 2004, 15-22). Some have argued that prisons can enhance the spread of extremism, if violent extremists are allowed mix freely with other prisoners, as they fear that prisoners who are angry and marginalised may be especially vulnerable to radicalisation (Basra, Neumann, and Brunner 2016). In this regard,

SPUs can be appealing due to their ability to restrict the movements of violent extremist prisoners, while simultaneously facilitating the delivery of de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes (Contrôleur General des Lieux de Privation de Liberté 2016; Hamm 2012, 4-9; Federal Public Service Justice 2015).

### **Using SPUs to Tackle Violent Extremism**

While some jurisdictions have chosen to use SPUs to counter violent extremism and promote de-radicalisation and disengagement, others have chosen to integrate violent extremists into the general prison population or disperse them across a small number of prisons (Neumann 2010; Silke 2014; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2016). Reasons for these differing choices include previous experience of managing violent extremists, size of the prison estate, availability of resources, the political context and wider societal views about the cause for which these individuals are fighting for (Jones and Morales 2012, 211-228; King and Resodihardjo 2010, 65-84; Silke 2014; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2016). The strategy of integration and/or dispersal usually seeks to encourage disengagement by weakening the social and group processes influencing an individual's commitment to violent extremism, as well as emphasising push and pull factors towards disengagement (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2016; Silke 2014). Of course, not all jurisdictions integrate or disperse violent extremist prisoners for these reasons. Some have little choice but to adopt such strategies as they are restricted in their ability to use SPUs due to insufficient resources, poor facilities, staffing issues and overcrowding (Jones and Morales 2012, 211-228; Osman 2014, 214-229).

In jurisdictions that have adopted SPUs, they have varied in their culture, ethos and regime (Neumann 2010; Silke 2014). While many have sought to balance security concerns with rehabilitative efforts, the reality is that many jurisdictions differ in the emphasis they place on security, the conditions they hold these individuals in and the extent to which they restrict interaction and

communication (Hamm 2012, 4-9; Jones and Morales 2012, 211-228; Neumann 2010; Porges 2014, 169-182; Ramakrishna 2014, 197-213; Veldhuis and Lindenberg 2012, 425-443; Barkindo and Bryans 2016, 1-25; Prison Review Team 2011a). The criteria used to identify and place individuals in these units also varies. For instance, prisoners in NI self-request placement in SPUs while other jurisdictions select individuals based on their offence, previous efforts to radicalise others or because they have volunteered to participate in a de-radicalisation or disengagement programme (Hamm 2012, 4-9; Ministry of Justice 2016; Porges 2014, 169-182; Barkindo and Bryans 2016, 1-25). Consequently, there is no current internationally agreed upon rationale underpinning the use of SPUs or their regime (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2016).

Nonetheless, there is some evidence to suggest that the policies used in G8 countries are starting to be adopted in other jurisdictions, contributing to a normalisation of practice and the growing use of SPUs as a consequence of this (Monaghan 2015, 381-400; Ministry of Justice 2016; Sukabdi 2016, 56; Barkindo and Bryans 2016, 1-25; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2016). Accordingly, it is worth reflecting on the potential long-term ability of SPUs to limit the spread of violent extremism, prevent radicalisation and promote de-radicalisation/disengagement. In this regard, NI can offer some useful insights given its experience of using SPUs for over 40 years. By providing a fuller understanding of how SPUs affected de-radicalisation and disengagement efforts in NI, existing international practice in this area can be enhanced. In particular, this paper makes an original contribute to the literature by highlighting the factors that shaped the use of SPUs and their regime, affecting the extent to which the SPUs began to entrench extremism rather than promote disengagement or de-radicalisation.

### **Reflecting on the Experience of NI**

Since the formation of NI, the imprisonment of both those suspected of being involved in violent extremism without a trial (e.g. internees) and those remanded/sentenced to prison for offences they

claim were politically motivated (e.g. prisoners) has posed challenges (McEvoy 2001; McConville 2013). To increase its relevance to other jurisdictions, and due to space restrictions, this paper will only focus on the difficulties faced in managing violent extremist prisoners in NI from 1968 onwards.

### *Rationale Behind the Adoption of SPUs in NI*

Tensions between the Catholic and Nationalist minority and the Protestant and Unionist majority in NI began escalating rapidly from 1968 onwards (Ellison and Smyth 2000; English 2003; O'Dowd, Rolston, and Tomlinson 1980; O'Leary and McGarry 1996). A desire to reduce discrimination and marginalisation led to the emergence of a civil rights movement but this movement was viewed with suspicion by many in the Protestant and Unionist majority (Ellison and Smyth 2000; O'Leary and McGarry 1996). Among the Protestant and Unionist majority, some believed that the movement was being used by "extremists and troublemakers for the purpose of preaching violence and stirring up hatred amongst the people" (Ellison and Smyth 2000: 60). A heavy-handed, oppressive response by the State to this movement contributed to perceptions of police brutality, State illegitimacy and widespread anger among Catholics and Nationalists (O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Ellison and Smyth 2000; Conflict Archive on the Internet 2016a). This led to rioting, negative international media coverage, withdrawal of Nationalist politicians from the NI government, the adoption of a policy of civil disobedience by the Nationalist political party and a public plea from the Irish government to protect the rights of Catholics and Nationalists in NI (O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Ellison and Smyth 2000; Conflict Archive on the Internet 2016a). Reforms were introduced but resistance to these reforms led to counter marches by the Protestant and Unionist majority, contributing to further violence, rioting and disorder (O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Ellison and Smyth 2000; Conflict Archive on the Internet 2016a). The introduction of the British Army in 1969 and internment in 1971 further aggravated events due to their disproportionate use against Catholics and Nationalists, many of whom were believed to be innocent of the offences they were charged with (Ellison and Smyth 2000; O'Leary



and McGarry 1996; Taylor 2001). This deteriorating situation contributed to a growing belief that that use of violence to achieve political, social and/or ideological goals was justifiable, as was evidenced by the growing number of people joining paramilitary organisations and an increasing willingness to support the activities of these paramilitary groups (Taylor 2001; English 2003). It was against this social and political backdrop that prisoners entered the NI prison system.

The importation model states that prisoners import their personality, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs from the community into prison (Irwin and Cressery 1962, 142-155). In other words, behaviour in prison is not only shaped by the nature of the prison environment but also prisoners' experiences in their communities (Irwin and Cressery 1962, 142-155). In NI, this meant that as growing numbers of people were imprisoned from 1968 onwards, violence, rioting and paramilitary activity became an increasing problem for NI prisons (NIPS 1970; NIPS 1972). While imprisoned, members of paramilitary organisations continued to follow orders from their paramilitary leaders, with Republican paramilitary members actively seeking to undermine the authority of prison officials, obstruct the prison regime and advance their political agenda (O'Rawe 2016; Smith 2014; McKeown 2001; Moloney 2010). Events outside of the prison also strengthened their commitment to their cause as they continued to feel that the group they identified with was being mistreated and as they gained status and the support of their peers for being willing to 'defend' their neighbourhoods (O'Rawe 2016; Smith 2014; McKeown 2001). Hence, the psychological characteristics and motivation of these prisoners differed to 'ordinary' prisoners, with their experiences prior to imprisonment playing an important role in shaping these characteristics and motivations.

Ni prisons were not prepared to deal with prisoners who were willing to work together to challenge the authority and legitimacy of the prison system or manage a rapid increase in the prison population. NI prisons were over a 100 years old and had not been designed to manage the number of people being imprisoned (NIPS 1970). To address the accommodation shortfall, cell-sharing was rife and classrooms were taken over and turned into dormitory-style, temporary accommodation (NIPS

1970; NIPS 1972). As the prisons became progressively overcrowded, conditions deteriorated and NI prisons no longer had the capacity to deliver rehabilitative programmes (NIPS 1970; NIPS 1972). Bullying and violence escalated as the overcrowded conditions hindered staff surveillance and there was insufficient staff to cope with the numbers imprisoned (NIPS 1970; NIPS 1972). More prison staff were employed but they were inexperienced and, in some cases, began work with minimal security checks and no prior training (NIPS 1970; NIPS 1972). As a result, staff were ill-equipped to deal with the challenges they were presented with, coping as best they could while 'learning on the job'. Unfortunately, these situational factors contributed to a lack of governance by prison staff, which was exploited by paramilitary prisoners as they began to use their own influence to control prisoners. The diminished ability of prison staff to provide order and control, gave paramilitary prisoners an opportunity to gain power within the prison system, which they used to future destabilise the prison regime and enhance their own position.

In addition, the small size of the prison estate meant that internees were held in the same establishments as prisoners but had access to additional entitlements (NIPS 1972; NIPS 1973; NIPS 1975). This intensified the desire by paramilitary prisoners to have the political nature of their offences recognised so they could avail of these additional entitlements (NIPS 1972; NIPS 1973; NIPS 1975; McEvoy 2001). In May 1972, a hunger strike was begun and by July they had been granted 'special category' status (McEvoy 2001). 'Special category' status was de facto prisoner of war status (McEvoy 2001). It meant that prisoners who claimed their offences were politically motivated were housed separately from ordinary prisoners in SPUs and given additional entitlements similar to the internees (McEvoy 2001; Gardiner 1975). It was this decision to grant 'special category' status which created SPUs in NI and allowed prisoners with similar extremist views to be housed together, with minimal staff supervision and limited restrictions on their movements and interactions.

The political reasons for the decision to grant 'special category' status have been attributed to a desire by the British government to resolve the conflict in NI and rebuild its international

reputation following the negative worldwide attention events in NI had generated (McEvoy 2001; O'Leary and McGarry 1996). Following the outbreak of the conflict in 1968, the patience of the British government had gradually diminished with NI politicians as they were slow to implement reforms, were unable to control Protestant and Unionist opposition to the reforms and as the media coverage of the repressive tactics used by the NI government caused political embarrassment (O'Leary and McGarry 1996). The ability of the British government to continue to portray itself as distant from events in NI was no longer tenable after 'Bloody Sunday' and in March 1972 direct rule was imposed (O'Leary and McGarry 1996). The decision to grant 'special category' status was, therefore, not taken by NI politicians. Given the polarised nature of NI politics, it is unlikely that elected Unionist and Protestant NI politicians would have supported this decision. Instead, in an effort to restore Britain's international reputation, as well as peace and order, the British government granted this concession as part of a wider effort to secure a cessation of hostilities and the creation of a power-sharing government (Taylor 2001; McEvoy 2001). The granting of 'special category' status (and consequently the development of SPUs in NI) was, therefore, used to entice paramilitaries into ceasefire negotiations, encourage Nationalist and Catholic politicians to consider participating in a power-sharing government and to avoid further public unrest (McEvoy 2001; Taylor 2001; O'Leary and McGarry 1996). It was only after these efforts failed that 'special category' status and the use of these SPUs began to be phased out.

For many in the international community, the challenges experienced by NI were primarily due to the use of SPUs which allowed extremists to be housed together with minimal restrictions on their movements and interactions (Jones and Morales 2012, 211-228; Warnes and Hannah 2008, 402-411; Neumann 2010; Culthbertson 2004, 15-22; Hamm 2013). However, such an analysis fails to recognise that the limitations of the existing prison system were already providing these individuals with an opportunity to amass power and influence before the introduction of SPUs. Overcrowding, staff shortages, poor prison design, inadequate facilities, limited staff training and restricted surveillance played an important role in providing an opportunity for violent extremists to import

paramilitary control tactics into prison and attempt to undermine and destabilise the prison system. As such, the experience of NI cautions against the use of SPUs as a 'quick fix' solution to wider issues of staffing, order, control and overcrowding, which may be facilitating the spread of violent extremism in prison. Although SPUs may initially appear as a cost-effective solution to prison systems that are overcrowded, have reduced resources, poor facilities, problems with order maintenance and/or limited staff surveillance, they will not diminish the potential for others to become radicalised or amass power/influence elsewhere in the prison system, if these issues are not addressed. Indeed, the introduction of SPUs was initially viewed as an attractive solution by some government officials as they believed that it could help resolve the accommodation pressures facing the prison system and isolate the influence of these prisoners (Crawford 1979; McEvoy 2001).

It is also evident that social and political influences significantly shaped the behaviour of paramilitary prisoners, the introduction of SPUs and the SPUs regime. Events occurring within NI society (both before and after imprisonment) acted to strengthen the commitment of paramilitary prisoners to their cause and reduce opportunities to develop alternative identities. Similarly, the support and encouragement of families, friends, peers and fellow prisoners made continued involvement in violent extremism possible, while reducing dis-engagement due to the potential to be excluded or marginalised by these groups. The desire by the British government to resolve the conflict in NI and repair their international reputation also meant that they were more amenable to granting 'special category' status in the expectation that it may facilitate peace and the establishment of a power-sharing government. The introduction of direct rule made it possible for the British government to take this decision as it is unlikely that NI politicians would have granted 'special category' status to these prisoners at that time. Accordingly, the experience of NI demonstrates how policy decisions about SPUs and their regime can be influenced by the achievement of political objectives and the image politicians and government officials are seeking to project to a local and international audience.

### *Evolution of the SPUs in NI*

While the creation of the SPUs brought some initial respite to overcrowding, inadequate facilities, staffing shortages, control issues and prisoner protests, these problems persisted (NIPS 1973; NIPS 1975). By 1974, 71% of all males in NI prisons were housed in temporary, dormitory-style accommodation with minimal staff surveillance (Gardiner 1975). Insufficient staff numbers meant that staff rarely entered these areas, exacerbating the lack of staff governance over prisoners (Smith 2014; McKeown 2001; Butler, Slade, and Dias in press). Paramilitary prisoner leaders took over control of these areas, re-creating leadership structures that mirrored paramilitary organisations in the community (Gardiner 1975; Butler, Slade, and Dias in press). Paramilitary prisoners were expected to follow their orders or risk being disciplined if they did not (McEvoy 2001; McKeown 2001; Smith 2014; Moloney 2010). Only the leaders spoke with prison staff and they preferred to speak directly with management, creating distant relationships with prison staff (McKeown 2001; Smith 2014; McEvoy 2001). These distant relationships meant that prison staff were unable to effectively challenge extremist ideology and behaviour, although insufficient staff training meant that staff were ill-prepared to encourage disengagement and de-radicalization, even if relationships had been improved (Prison Review Team 2011b; Northern Ireland Office 1977; NIPS 1975).

Between the granting of 'special category' status in 1972 and 1974, efforts were ongoing to establish a power-sharing government (Aveyard 2016; O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Conflict Archive on the Internet 2016c). By 1974, it was clear that these efforts were unsuccessful due to widespread Unionist opposition and the challenges different political parties faced in making compromises that were acceptable to their constituencies (Aveyard 2016; O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Conflict Archive on the Internet 2016c). Following this failure, new security measures were introduced in 1975 and 1976 to criminalise the actions of paramilitaries and normalise the criminal justice system (Aveyard 2016; O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Taylor 2001; English 2003). The introduction of these new security measures was perceived by many as an attempt to re-frame the political narrative from one which

recognised the political nature of the conflict to one which denied it (English 2003; Ellison and Smyth 2000; O'Dowd, Rolston, and Tomlinson 1980; O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Taylor 2001; McEvoy 2001). Instead of recognising the role the behaviour and policies of the British government played in the conflict, the British government was believed to be attempting to portray events as occurring because of warring criminal factions within NI (English 2003; Ellison and Smyth 2000; O'Dowd, Rolston, and Tomlinson 1980; O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Taylor 2001; McEvoy 2001).

As part of this new approach, the decision was taken to no longer grant 'special category' status to newly convicted paramilitary prisoners from 1976 onwards, as the political status of these prisoners undermined the new narrative emphasising the criminality of paramilitary members' actions (Gardiner 1975; McEvoy 2001). It was argued that the granting of 'special category' status had been a mistake which had weakened the ability of prisons to maintain order (Gardiner 1975). Newly convicted paramilitary prisoners were to be integrated into the normal prison population and subjected to the same regime and conditions as 'ordinary' prisoners, while paramilitary prisoners imprisoned before 1976 remained in the SPUs (McEvoy 2001). This decision to discontinue the granting of 'special category' status and gradually fade out the existence of the SPUs was believed to be part of the British government's political agenda to portray itself as 'neutral' or 'above' the conflict rather than an integral part of it and, for this reason, was resisted by many paramilitary prisoners (McEvoy 2001; O'Dowd, Rolston, and Tomlinson 1980; McKeown 2001; O'Rawe 2016). Republican paramilitary prisoners began resisting this political re-framing in 1976 by refusing to wear prison clothes (known as the blanket protest) and, when this protest resulted in little change, they sought to increase the pressure on prison and British authorities by engaging in a 'dirty protest' in which they refused to wash and smeared excrement on cell walls (McEvoy 2001; McKeown 2001; O'Leary and McGarry 1996; O'Rawe 2016). When the dirty protest also resulted in little change, hunger strikes were used in 1980 and 1981 to demonstrate their continued resistance to this policy (McEvoy 2001; McKeown 2001; O'Leary and McGarry 1996; O'Rawe 2016).

The decision to withdraw 'special category' status had a substantial impact on prison culture and de-radicalisation and disengagement efforts. Levels of violence, intimidation and threats towards prison staff and their families escalated, with 20 prison staff being murdered because of their profession between 1976 and 1981 (Department of Justice Northern Ireland 2016). Prison staff and paramilitary prisoners became increasingly drawn into a zero-sum game, with both groups witnessing deaths, intimidation and harassment, which increased their negative perceptions of each other and tainted their future interactions and relationships (Prison Review Team 2011b; McEvoy 2001). Paramilitary prisoners and prison staff began to dehumanise and demonise each other, creating a security focused, restrictive regime in which human rights violations could and did occur (McEvoy 2001). This minimalist, restrictive and oppressive prison regime made de-radicalisation and disengagement harder and facilitated the development of a culture of 'them' versus 'us', increasing violent extremism identification and group loyalties, as well as promoting continued commitment and investment in extremism (Prison Review Team 2011b; McEvoy 2001). These events marginalised more moderate views, contributing to a more divisive, extremist narrative on all sides, hindering de-radicalisation and disengagement as individuals became more committed and invested in their cause due to the significant costs involvement in these activities was having on them and their families (McEvoy 2001; McKeown 2001; Smith 2014). Accordingly, these situational factors interacted with the psychological characteristics and motivations these prisoners had originally entered prison with to harden their endorsement of violent extremism.

Events in NI again captured the international media's attention during 1981 when ten Republican paramilitary prisoner hunger strikers died protesting against the British government's withdrawal of 'special category' status (McEvoy 2001). These events led to international condemnation of the British government's handling of events, protests, riots, the widespread mobilisation of Catholics and Nationalists in support of Republican paramilitary prisoners and the election of a Republican prisoner on hunger strike to the British parliament (McEvoy 2001; English 2003). Similar to the introduction of internment and 'Bloody Sunday' in the early 1970's, Nationalists

and Catholics were again mobilised and sympathetic to the Republican cause, with Republican paramilitary membership and activity increasing (English 2003).

The handling of the 1981 hunger strike by the British government backfired by glorifying the Republican cause, increasing violence and civil disorder, contributing to the electoral success of pro-Republican candidates and expanding the number of people becoming involved in violent paramilitary activity (English 2003). This reinforced the political nature of the conflict and undermined the British government's attempts to portray events as occurring due to warring criminal factions that had little support within the wider population (O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Taylor 2001; English 2003). The political success experienced by pro-Republican election candidates is also credited with giving rise to the adoption of the 'armalite and ballot box strategy', which saw the use of violence and politics to achieve a united Ireland (English 2003). However, these events were not driven solely by the treatment of Republican paramilitary prisoners as the failure to tackle structural inequality towards Catholics by the British government gave credence to Republican paramilitary arguments that NI was unreformable, with politicians being perceived by Catholics and Nationalists as being more interested in rhetoric rather than substantive change (O'Leary and McGarry 1996). In this context, the use of violence was again justifiable as Catholics continued to feel discriminated against and marginalised, despite Unionist NI politicians no longer being in power, with the 1981 hunger strike acting to magnify and focus these feelings.

Following the 1981 hunger strike, there was a political desire to reduce the political unrest caused by paramilitary prisoners as the British government sought to restore devolution (McEvoy 2001; Conflict Archive on the Internet 2016b). As a result, a greater emphasis was placed on trying to manage paramilitary prisoners to minimise their disruptive influence on the prison system as well as the political system (McEvoy 2001). Nonetheless, paramilitary prisoners continued to pose order and control issues, especially following the escape of 38 paramilitary prisoners from the Maze prison in 1983 (Hennessey 1984). Following this escape, it was recommended that high risk paramilitary



prisoners should not be detained in any one location for too long, instead being frequently moved from one location to another to minimise their disruptive influence and ability to plan and organise (Hennessey 1984). However, instead of disrupting the ability of these prisoners to organise, the use of this tactic was credited with strengthening the leadership and planning skills of all paramilitary prisoners, as other prisoners sought to develop these skills to fill the leadership gap that emerged when a prisoner was moved (McEvoy 2001). In addition, while prison authorities denied that paramilitary prisoners were again being held separately by their paramilitary organisation following the 1981 hunger strike, it became obvious that these prisoners were being held separately due to a series of intimidations, threats, protests and political lobbying that both Nationalist and Unionist paramilitary prisoners had organised (McEvoy 2001). While the prison authorities seemed to accept that paramilitary prisoners would continue to be held in SPUs in the Maze prison, they resisted the use of SPUs in other parts of the prison system as they believed that the separation of paramilitary prisoners from 'ordinary' prisoners aggravated rather than resolved order and control issues (McEvoy 2001).

This situation continued until the closing of the Maze prison in 2000 (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2004). While political efforts were again ongoing to try to achieve peace in NI and restore devolution, it was not until 1998 that the Good Friday Agreement was signed (Bew and Gillespie 1999). Following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, a power-sharing government was established and powers were devolved to the NI Assembly in 1999 (Bew and Gillespie 1999). Most paramilitary prisoners held in the Maze were released in 2000 as part of the Good Friday Agreement and the Maze prison was closed (McEvoy 2001). However, a small number of paramilitary prisoners remained and these prisoners were transferred to Maghaberry prison (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2004). At that time, Maghaberry prison ran an integrated regime, with paramilitary prisoners being integrated into the normal prison population (McEvoy 2001). Nevertheless, protests began to occur as paramilitary prisoners sought to be held separately from the normal population (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2004). These protests

grew in strength as the number of paramilitary prisoners increased and as religious and political parties lobbied the government to introduce SPUs at Maghaberry prison, against the advice of prison experts (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2004). These protests took place during a time of political uncertainty as the NI Assembly had collapsed and it is believed that SPUs were introduced in Maghaberry prison during 2003 to avoid another Republican prisoner hunger strike which would derail attempts to re-establish the NI Assembly and threaten the peace process (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2004).

Nowadays, paramilitary prisoners in the SPUs at Maghaberry prison form roughly 4% of the prison population (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland 2016). They are not granted 'special category' status but their entitlements are similar, although they are detained in cellular accommodation and subjected to more restricted movements, increased monitoring and greater surveillance and security (Prison Review Team 2011b; McEvoy 2001). Nevertheless, they continue to pose order and control challenges and the treatment of these prisoners has been used by Republican paramilitary groups to justify the killing of prison staff, most recently in 2016 (Prison Review Team 2011b; Department of Justice Northern Ireland 2016).

The use of SPUs in NI has, therefore, been intertwined with and shaped by politics, with a recent review of the NI prison system concluding that from 1980's onwards, government officials and politicians were more interested in managing the problems posed by paramilitary prisoners and restricting their influence politically, rather than directly challenging their power and influence in prison (Prison Review Team 2011a; Prison Review Team 2011b). This created a costly prison system, which buried problems rather addressed them and cultivated a culture of denial and compromise with paramilitary prisoners (Prison Review Team 2011a; Prison Review Team 2011b).

### *SPUs and Their Long-Term Consequences*

SPUs in NI have been introduced, discontinued and then re-introduced (McEvoy 2001). Yet, throughout this journey, SPUs have mostly hindered de-radicalisation and disengagement efforts. When in use, SPUs have generally served to strengthen rather than weaken the identity, social and group processes contributing to violent extremism (McEvoy 2001; McKeown 2001; Smith 2014). They promoted the development of a 'them' versus 'us' culture, which hardened group identities, increased investment and commitment to extremism and hindered the development of effective staff-prisoner relationships which could challenge extremist beliefs and behaviour (Prison Review Team 2011b; McEvoy 2001). There is, however, one important exception to this which suggests that under certain conditions, the social and group processes in SPUs may be able to encourage de-radicalisation and disengagement. During the 1990's, with the support of their leaders, paramilitary prisoners began to consider the use of non-violent means to achieve their goals, with the majority deciding to support the NI peace process (McEvoy 2001). These events suggest that the social and group processes in SPUs may encourage disengagement and de-radicalisation but only in the context of wider political and social developments and with the approval of key extremist leaders (Smith 2014; McKeown 2001). The conditions in these SPUs, therefore, tended to reinforce extremist views and commitment to extremism as prisoners' personal views were reinforced through their interactions with likeminded others and there was limited opportunities to express alternative identities and actions which may challenge extremism or promote de-radicalisation/disengagement.

The commitment of paramilitary prisoners to their cause was also influenced by events both in prison and wider society. The development of an oppressive prison regime which violated human rights and the continued discrimination of Catholics in NI society reinforced extremist narratives of oppression and mistreatment, legitimating extremist arguments and providing a rationale to justify the use of violence. Accordingly, when dealing with extremist prisoners, there needs to be a greater recognition of the symbiosis between events in prison and events within the communities from which prisoners originate and/or identify with. Not only do events within communities influence a prisoner's endorsement of and susceptibility toward extremism when they enter prison but these events

continue to influence their endorsement and susceptibility towards extremism during their imprisonment, as they hear about ongoing events in their communities and witness the effects of these events on peers and loved ones. Efforts to tackle extremism in prison which focus solely on the thoughts, actions or behaviours of individual prisoners will therefore miss the role that events in the wider community and prison can play in influencing susceptibility to extremism, as well as how the behaviour and attitudes of valued peers and State officials may make extremist arguments more convincing.

For example, State officials can increase vulnerability to extremism and if all members of the ethnic group from which extremists tend to originate are treated suspiciously. Such treatment can contribute to feelings of stigmatisation, discrimination and procedural injustice, as well as result in this group experiencing worse outcomes compared to other groups. In NI, most (though not all) of the paramilitary prisoners were Catholic, while the majority of prison staff were Protestant (McEvoy 2001; Prison Review Team 2011b). This added to the development of a divisive, stereotypical culture which clouded the ability of both prisoners and staff to see beyond the Catholic/Protestant label (Butler and Maruna 2012). The consequences of this continue to be seen in the present day as Catholics prisoners experience worse outcomes compared to their Protestant counterparts and as Catholics are less likely to seek employment within NI prisons (Prison Review Team 2011a; Prison Review Team 2011b; Butler and Maruna 2012; NIPS 2016). This can strengthen the appeal of violent extremist propaganda as rightly or wrongly, such events can be used as evidence to back up claims of continuing State marginalisation, discrimination and injustice. Consequently, when dealing with extremism, State agencies need to be careful to ensure that their actions do not legitimate the extremist arguments which they are seeking to combat.

In addition, how State officials treat paramilitary prisoners in SPUs in NI has been used to radicalise individuals within the community. Emotive stories of State discrimination, marginalisation and injustice have been used to radicalise those who identify with the paramilitary prisoners in the

SPUs. Security surrounding the SPUs has limited the amount of public, independently verified information about the SPUs' regime which can be used to challenge extremist propaganda. Nowadays, social media is often used to circulate unverified stories about the SPUs in Maghaberry prison, with these stories eliciting strong emotive responses from the public, with few independently verified facts available to confirm or deny these stories. These unverified stories have been used to justify the killing of prison staff, public protests and disorder (McAleese 2015; Williamson 2016). Of course, events in NI also suggest that the treatment of these prisoners can radicalise others regardless of whether or not they are held in SPUs, as when NI discontinued the use of SPUs, the treatment of these prisoners continued to be used to mobilise support for violent extremism and justify violence (McEvoy 2001). Nevertheless, when held in the general prison population, more information is publically available about their conditions which can undermine extremist arguments that these prisoners are being treated poorly in comparison to others.

The events in NI also demonstrate how political considerations can play an important role in shaping the narrative surrounding extremism and can result in the recommendations of experts being overruled in the pursuit of political objectives. Rather than the management of paramilitary prisoners being underpinned by a clear strategy promoting disengagement and de-radicalisation, their treatment varied depending on the different political objectives being pursued and the image politicians were seeking to project to a local and international audience. Experts' concerns about the ramifications of policies for de-radicalisation, disengagement, safety, order and control were superseded by policymakers' desires to achieve the political objectives they were focused on. This created a costly, ineffective prison service which did little to promote rehabilitation, disengagement or de-radicalisation (Prison Review Team 2011a; Prison Review Team 2011b). Nowadays, the differing political narratives surrounding the SPUs in NI continues to be problematic as political parties disagree on how these prisoners should be managed (Northern Ireland Assembly 24th October 2016). Such disagreements hinder de-radicalisation and disengagement efforts as politicians are not united in their understanding of the issue or how best to address it, leaving prison authorities reluctant to implement

novel approaches to de-radicalisation and disengagement due to the lack of political support they may receive for such endeavours.

## Conclusion

The experience of NI therefore highlights how psychological, situational, social and political factors can affect the extent to which SPUs are effective in preventing radicalisation and the spread of violent extremism. Each of these factors played an important role in shaping the regime in the SPUs and hence its ability to promote disengagement and de-radicalisation, with each factor affecting and being affected by the other (see Figure1).

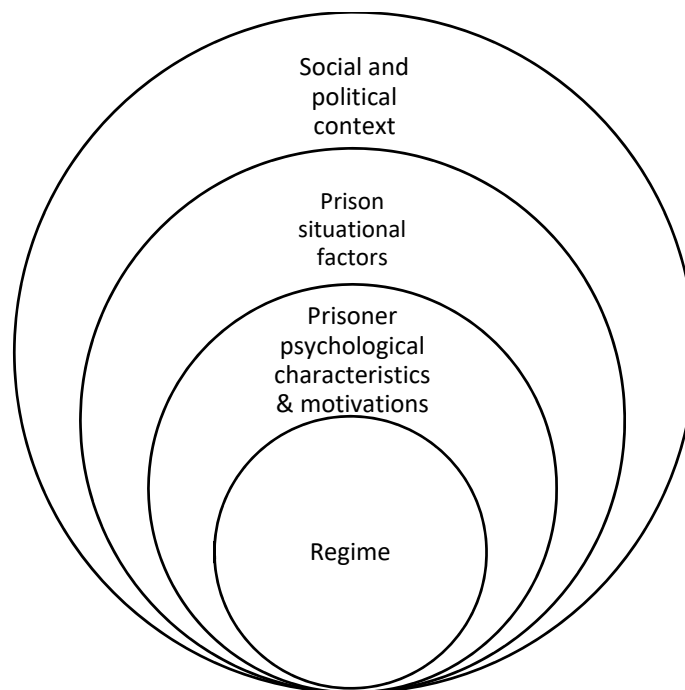


Figure 1: Factors influencing the regime in the SPUs

The psychological characteristics and motivations of the prisoners in the SPUs in NI meant that these prisoners knew each other, were highly committed to their cause and had the support of their

families, friends and valued peers. As a result, their detention together in the SPUs made disengagement more difficult as they knew how they behaved affected their status and reputation both in prison and in the community, encouraging continued investment in extremism to avoid being marginalised and/or excluded by family and friends. The detention of highly committed individuals in the SPUs also resulted in these individuals monitoring less committed individuals so as to use social and group processes to discourage disengagement. Situational factors within the prison facilitated this process as overcrowding, staff shortages, poor prison design, inadequate facilities, limited staff training and restricted surveillance gave these prisoners an opportunity to form groups and establish a powerbase within the prison, which they used to intimidate others and destabilise the prison system. This situation was exacerbated by the creation of SPUs which further diminished staff surveillance, governance and staff-prisoner relationships, hindering the ability of prison staff to provide order and control, challenge these groups and their extremist arguments or promote disengagement and de-radicalisation. In addition, social and political events served to increase commitment to extremism as the continuing social and economic discrimination of Catholics legitimised extremist arguments that a political situation was not viable and that violence was necessary. Moreover, these factors influenced one another as social and political events affected the extent to which prisoners' families and friends were supportive of extremism, influencing prisoners' continuing commitment to and investment in extremist behaviour. Similarly, social and political events affected prison situational factors by influencing overcrowding, resourcing, vulnerability to extremism and the beliefs and behaviours prisoners and staff imported into prison. Likewise, prison situational factors, the regime in the SPUs and the prisoners' commitment to their cause affected the social and political context, contributing to the radicalisation of those in the community, public protests, social unrest and the election of political candidates endorsing extremist ideology. In this way, these psychological, situational, social and political factors resulted in a regime in the SPUs which was ineffective and ultimately entrenched extremism rather than limited it or encouraged de-radicalisation and/or disengagement.

Hence, to attribute the difficulties NI experienced managing extremist prisoners solely to the use of SPUs which housed extremist prisoners together, with minimal restrictions on their movements and interactions, is to only have a partial understanding of events in NI. While detaining prisoners endorsing similar extremist beliefs together and allowing them to freely interact with each other undoubtedly hardened their commitment to extremism and facilitated their continued involvement in extremist behaviour, such a theoretical understanding fails to acknowledge the role other factors played in shaping the use of SPUs in NI and their regime. This paper seeks to highlight the role psychological, situational, social and political factors played in shaping the effectiveness of SPUs in NI to encourage other jurisdictions to reflect on how these factors may be affecting their own SPUs success in countering violent extremism. It also offers a word of caution on how the advice of experts may be overruled by social and political events, which can result in political objectives and the need to present a particular image to local and international audiences undermining the development of an effective regime in SPUs, which may limit extremism and promote disengagement and de-radicalisation.

Of course, there are differences between those involved in violent extremism in NI and present day extremists. For example, extremist recruitment in NI was selective, limited by geography and involved more physical interaction compared to the use of online and virtual recruitment strategies nowadays (English 2009; Klausen 2015, 1-22). Attacks were sanctioned by a hierarchical command structure and, with some notable exceptions, generally tried to reduce the loss of civilian life through the use of advance warnings (English 2003). Yet, extremist attacks nowadays deliberately target civilians and tend not to follow a hierarchical command structure (English 2009). These differences, combined with the belief that present day extremists are less selective about who they recruit, has led some jurisdictions to adopt SPUs despite the experience of NI.

For instance, England and Wales adopted SPUs to restrict the ability of charismatic Islamic extremists to recruit impressionable, angry and marginalised prisoners (with no prior involvement in



extremism), as there was a concern that prisoners may be attracted to their status and/or the perks membership could bring (Ministry of Justice 2016; Liebling, Arnold, and Straub 2011). These concerns are valid. Yet, these proposals will have limited success as there are insufficient places available within these SPUs to hold all extremist prisoners and the reasons why individuals may be attracted to extremism remain unaddressed. Similar to NI, research in England has found that extremist prisoners exploit gaps in staff surveillance and governance to build a powerbase which they can then use to offer perks (such as status, protection, extra entitlements) to prospective recruits, as well as intimidate other prisoners and staff (Ministry of Justice 2016; Liebling, Arnold, and Straub 2011). Like NI, a lack of clear guidance, confidence and training for prison staff has contributed to limited engagement with prisoners and distant staff-prisoner relationships, which hinder disengagement and de-radicalisation efforts, the ability of staff to challenge extremist behaviour and the use of dynamic security to obtain accurate intelligence on prisoner activities (Ministry of Justice 2016; Liebling, Arnold, and Straub 2011). Again as in NI, a heightened awareness of societal discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion has also increased vulnerability to extremism, along with the imprisonment of younger, more oppositional prisoners who are frustrated with these social and political conditions (Ministry of Justice 2016; Liebling, Arnold, and Straub 2011). However, as in NI, SPUs will not address the psychological characteristics of those entering the prison or their experiences of marginalisation, discrimination or exclusion. SPUs will also not address the situational factors contributing to the gaps in staff surveillance or governance throughout the rest of the prison system, which will be necessary to prevent those not detained in SPUs from continuing to spread extremism and offering status and associated benefits to prospective recruits.

To reduce the potential for prison radicalisation in England and Wales, therefore, requires initiatives which not only focus on containing and rehabilitating individual extremist prisoners but also addressing the situational factors in prison which: allowed these prisoners to amass power and influence in the first place; undermined staff confidence in tackling this behaviour; and leaves prisoners' needs unfulfilled, resulting in impressionable, marginalised and angry young men turning

to extremism to find a sense of meaning and belonging in their lives. Initiatives must also address wider social and political factors which can contribute to: individuals being vulnerable to extremism due to feelings of being marginalised and/or treated unfairly; the potential to acquire feelings of social support and status via participation in extremist activities; and to ensure that progress made to promote disengagement and de-radicalisation in prison is not undone when prisoners are released and exposed to continuing marginalisation and discrimination, which could trigger a return to extremist behaviour. In particular, it may suit the political objectives of the current government to convey an image of SPUs as the most effective response to counter extremism rather than acknowledge how government cost saving measures have weakened the ability of the prison system to provide order, control and rehabilitative regimes, as well as the disproportionate negative impact these measures have had on marginalised groups of young people from religious and ethnic minorities (House of Commons Justice Committee 2015; House of Commons Justice Committee 2016; United Nations Economic and Social Council 2016).

While different to present day extremism, the experience of NI may therefore remain relevant and offer useful insights into how psychological, situational, social and political factors affect the use of SPUs, their regime and, consequently, their potential effectiveness in countering violent extremism.

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