

# Peer Support in Prison Communities: The Listener Scheme in England and Wales September 2006-May 2010



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## Background

The Listener scheme has been in operation since 1991 it is currently the best established peer support scheme operating across the Prison Service in England and Wales. The scheme is supported by Samaritans volunteers who visit prisons to select and train prisoners to become Listeners. Prisoners can turn to 'Listeners' in prison to talk about problems in confidence. To date, there has not been a large-scale, in-depth study of the Listener scheme in prisons. This research therefore has arisen out of a need to understand how the scheme operates, and how it is used and perceived by prisoners, Listeners and prison staff in different prison communities. The project is funded by a studentship provided by Samaritans. The research is also partly sponsored by the Research Institute for Law, Politics and Justice at Keele University.

## Research Aims

This research will investigate the following research questions:

- 1) How does the Listener scheme operate within prisons, and how is it perceived by various groups of the prison community (prison officers, professionals, prisoners and Listeners)?
- 2) How do prisoners use the Listener scheme within their patterns of coping and help seeking?
- 3) How do Listeners compare with other sources of help and support?
- 4) In which ways are prisoners' usage of the scheme embedded in the general features of, and acceptance within, the wider prison community?
- 5) What do Listeners identify as the effects and outcomes of being a Listener in prison?

## Stage 1: Sample design and recruitment [2008-2009]

The research will be conducted in up to five strategically selected prisons covering a range of security. Within each establishment a random sample of prisoners will complete the questionnaire and prisoners who have used the Listener scheme will volunteer to be interviewed through the questionnaire. Listeners and prison staff will be recruited on an opportunistic basis.

## Stage 2: Data collection and analysis [2009]

The research will be conducted in five different prison establishments across England and Wales:

- 1) A random sample of a minimum of 300 prisoners will complete a questionnaire;
- 2) Semi-structured interviews with prisoners who have used the Listener scheme (3-5 in each prison);
- 3) Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with Listeners (2-3 in each prison);
- 4) Finally, expert interviews will be conducted with a range of different prison staff (2-3 in each prison).

## Stage 3: Report writing [2009-2010]

Quarterly reports will be submitted to Samaritans for their internal use. A final report will be submitted to Samaritans, the prison service and participating prison establishments, and written up as a PhD thesis by May 2010.

## Stage 4: Dissemination of research findings [ongoing]

The research will be disseminated throughout the project at Samaritans internal and external events, voluntary sector, academic and prison sector events and conferences, and research activities at the University of Keele such as postgraduate symposiums.

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