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Evaluation of digital technology in prisons

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Background

- Prisoner self-service technology first introduced into a small number of private and public sector prisons in England & Wales in early 2010s
- A number of potential benefits:
 - Improve digital literacy skills
 - Allows prisoners to take some responsibility for some aspects of their lives in prison
 - Improve prisoners' relationships with people outside of prison
 - Improve prisoners and staff wellbeing
 - Reduce staff time on administrative activities and increase time for meaningful activities with prisoners



Digital technology in prisons

- White Paper on Prison Safety & Reform in 2016 led to investment by HMPPS in installing technology more widely in prisons
- Introduction of digital technology for prisoners
 - In-cell PIN telephones
 - Self-service kiosks on wing landings
 - Laptops in cells
 - P-NOMIS on the Move for prison staff



Aims and objectives

- Evaluate the impact of digital technology in prisons
- Does prison technology:
 - Increase access to & improve communication of knowledge within prisons?
 - Improve prisoner confidence in using IT?
 - Improve prisoner relationships with staff, other prisoners & those outside of the prison?
 - Increase staff job-satisfaction & prisoner well-being?
 - Reduce prison officer time spent completing key activities/tasks?



Methods

- Four approaches taken:
 1. Interview/focus groups with prisoners and staff in prisons with digital technologies
 2. Prisoner survey in prisons with & without technologies
 3. Analysis of prison management data on violence, prisoner self-harm and staff job satisfaction; analysis of BT call data to the Samaritans
 4. Task-time analysis



Methods

Methodology	Objective	Which prison?
Interviews/focus groups with prisoners and staff	To explore prisoner and staff perceptions and experience of the technology	Digital prisons only
Prisoner survey	To measure use of PIN phones, checking account balances, ordering meals & canteen, use of self-service kiosks, confidence in using IT and wing 'climate'.	Digital prisons and comparator prisons
Quantitative analysis: 1. Prison management data 2. Data on volume of telephone calls	<ul style="list-style-type: none">To assess the impact of the technology on key outcomes of proved adjudications, rates of prisoner self-harm, staff sickness ratesTo assess the impact of the in-cell telephones on volume of calls	Digital prisons only
Task-time analysis	To explore whether the technology reduced the time taken by staff to perform key tasks or has the potential to reduce task time in comparator prisons	Digital prisons and comparator prisons



Prisons

Technology	Prison
In-cell phones	HMP A HMP B
In-cell phones & self-service kiosks	HMP C HMP D
In-cell phones, self-service kiosks & laptops	HMP E
In-cell phones & P-NOMIS on the Move	HMP F HMP G
Comparators	HMP H HMP I HMP J HMP K



Prisoner survey

- 250 questionnaires were distributed in each prison, giving a total of 2,750 questionnaires. The number of questionnaires completed was 916, giving an overall response rate of 33%.
- Statistical comparisons were conducted between prisons with digital technology and their comparator prison(s)



Interviews and focus groups

- 32 interviews and 21 focus groups with staff and prisoners in digital prisons
- Analysis resulted in the identification of five overarching themes:
 1. Functionality and Access
 2. Uptake and use of technology
 3. Interaction and relationships
 4. Staff and prisoner wellbeing
 5. Staff workload



Prison management data/phone data

- Management information on proven adjudications, prisoner self-harm rates and staff sickness rates
- Data on telephone call volumes and minutes (all calls and calls to the Samaritans)



Task time

Addressed 2 key questions:

- In those prisons where technology has already been implemented, has that technology contributed to a reduction in time spent completing key activities/tasks?
- Does technology have the potential to deliver time-savings in those prisons where it has yet to be implemented?



Interactions and relationships

- Positive impact of all technologies on
 - Staff/prisoner relationships
 - Prisoner/prisoner relationships
- Technology, particularly the in-cell telephones had reduced potential for conflict between prisoners, and between prisoners and staff

“Because you’re not arguing to do “Oh, I need to make a phone call”....you’re getting treated with decency with the phones and not being told, “Right, get out, you have to use the phones this time of the day” (Prisoner)

“There’s a positive side where you’re not having that confrontation there and then, you’ve got a phone in your cell, there’s no reason that you need to be out on the landing.” (Prison Officer)



Interactions and relationships

- But... staff commented that bullying/conflict associated with wing telephones could be moved to behind cell doors

“Has it put some of the bullying underground now where they’re in a cell with somebody forcing them to make a phone call to their family to get payment for something?” (Prison Officer)



Interactions and relationships

- Low levels of prisoner/staff conflict when using self-service kiosks on wings
- The opportunity to speak more regularly, privately, and freely with family and friends contributed to the maintenance of external familial and other important relationships.

“Now I’m able to sort of be a dad to my son and speak to him on that level....even if it’s only a little two-way phone call before bed just saying goodnight, I love you.” (Prisoner)

“I can be more open to family members now I’m just in a room by myself on the phone” (Prisoner)



Interactions and relationships

- Digital technology was seen as an incentive for good behaviour by both staff & prisoners, particularly in-cell phones

“People aren’t going to be kicking off as much and having a phone is a privilege..”
(Prisoner)

- Mixed findings about whether technology led to staff and prisons having more constructive interactions.

“It’s better for us like building relationships and working with them...” (Prison Officer)

“I understand it gives us more time to do stuff, but will all staff do all the extra stuff?”
(Prison Officer)



Interactions and relationships

- Increase in number and volume of calls.
- No discernible differences on wing atmosphere using EssenCES
- No effect of implementation of technology on proven adjudications



Wellbeing

- Improvements in the psychological wellbeing of prisoners, particularly the in-cell phones

“ I think it’s potentially gone as far as saving some prisoners’ lives.... in a cell you’re able to have a lot more privacy.” (Prisoner)

- Increased perception of autonomy for prisoners & increased personal responsibility

“And there’s a sense of pride about being able to manage your own life to some extent.” (Prisoner)

“I think having their own laptop gives them responsibility, and it gives them a link to the outside world...” (Prison Officer)



Wellbeing

- No effect of implementation of technology on rates of prisoner self-harm
 - Increase in number of calls and call minutes to the Samaritans after implementation
- “I have heard that they use the Samaritans number a lot more now...”* (Prison staff)



Wellbeing

- Perceived reduction in conflict and feelings of tension in prison by both prisoners and staff
- No impact of technology on staff sickness rates



Wellbeing

- Staff didn't think the technology had impacted on job satisfaction or wellbeing
- Staff commented that using P-NOMIS devices increased staff vulnerability on the wing

"I just feel uncomfortable getting that out because it's a...when I first got it out, it was 'Miss you've got a phone'... they get round you and I'm like, there's no need to be." (Prison Officer)



Functionality and access

- Significant improvements on the previous arrangements
- In-cell phones
 - Improved access to phones
 - Increased privacy and suitability of times for making phone calls

“A lot better. No queuing at landing, no waiting for association, no people shouting behind you while you’re on the phone.” (Prisoner)

- More frequent use of phones, for all calls and to Samaritans
- Cost of calls most frequently cited reason determining frequency of phone calls in all prisons

Functionality and access

- Self-service kiosks and laptops
 - Improved ability to submit and monitor applications on the kiosks & laptops, although not always more prompt

“ Yeah, you got a record. You can see the response. It’s much easier to keep digitally than it is to keep paper versions of everything.” (Prisoner)
 - HMP E with laptops – more straightforward to organise visits
 - Prisoners thought that kiosks and laptops had even more potential to provide information about events
 - Laptops potential for delivery of activities
 - Lower use of kiosks in prison where prisoners had laptops in cells



Functionality and access

- Reservations from some staff concerning P-NOMIS on the Move
 - Connectivity issues
 - Perceived limited functionality

“It doesn’t get very good signal no matter where you are in a prison” (Prison Officer)

- Where used, P-NOMIS on the Move seen as allowing prison officer to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently with information at their fingertips



Functionality and access

- The impact of outages had potential to be detrimental to order and control.
 - Contingency plans were not sufficiently robust and require review.

“As soon as the cell phones down, bam, chaos on the wing.” (Prison Officer)



Uptake & use of the technology

- Generally uptake of digital technology was good.
- No impact on prisoners' self-reported confidence or skills using IT.
- Misuse of technology was rare



Uptake and use of technology

But....

- Prisoner unfamiliarity/reluctance to engage with technology in general

“There’s people who have been ‘I’m never going to be able to use that, I’m too old or I’ve not used a computer’, but the guys are quite helpful with each other.” (Prison Officer)

- Prisoner concern about taking responsibility for hardware given the financial penalties

“So when it came to giving out laptops...there were quite a few people that said ‘No, I don’t want one.’ (Prison Officer)”



Impact on staff workload

- Self-service kiosks and laptops: reduced workloads and reductions in the time taken to complete certain key activities/tasks for wing-based staff
- In those prisons that do not currently have kiosks/in-cell laptops, the future implementation of these technologies may have the potential to reduce the time it takes to complete certain activities/tasks



Impact on staff workload

- In-cell phones: did not reduce workload
- P-NOMIS on the Move: potential to streamline responses to prisoner queries but issues with functionality and some staff were reluctant to use the devices



Conclusions

- In-cell phones
 - Increased use of phones
 - Enhanced prisoners' contact with family and others outside of prison
 - Reduced conflict with staff and other prisoners
 - Increased privacy and improved the suitability of times for making calls
 - Increased use of free support service (The Samaritans)
 - Positive impact on prisoner wellbeing
 - Cost of calls an issue
 - No impact on staff workload



Conclusions

- Self-service kiosks and laptops
 - Increased feelings of prisoner autonomy and agency
 - Reduction in conflict with staff and other prisoners
 - Increased frequency and satisfaction with the process of checking account balances, ordering canteen and meals, submitting applications
 - A range of time savings identified, although not necessarily applying to all prisons
 - Some hesitancy among prisoners less confident with technology
 - No impact on IT skills or knowledge



Conclusions

- Laptops
 - Some concern about costs incurred by prisoners if they are damaged
- P-NOMIS on the Move – not widely used



Limitations

- Prisoner survey response rate varied across prisons
- Representativeness of prisoners completing the survey and prisoner/staff in interviews and focus groups
- Number of other key national initiatives: Key Worker scheme (OMiC) and drive to recruit additional prison officers
- Prison management data measures are quite 'crude' measures for the type of impact that might be expected
- Task-time figures are indicative, rather than definitive
- It was not possible to capture pre-post change from prisoners and staff



- Thanks for listening!
- Any questions?
- Or you can contact me at ejp8@le.ac.uk