

Fear and loathing in the prison ecology, or: How I learned to stop worrying and embrace complexity in understanding institutional violence

Prisons are complex spaces that involve an intersection of social, legal, moral, cultural, emotional and political factors and processes. Additionally, interpersonal violence is a widely recognised reality in prisons across the world, which means that it is a ready-made ‘problem’ that demands ‘solving’. However, violence in prisons has multiple drivers that relate to its causes and control, which means that simple solutions at one level (e.g., policy) or another (e.g., individual treatment) are likely to be ineffective in and of themselves. Indeed, the pervasiveness and seeming inevitability of violent incidents in prison spaces suggests that prison violence constitutes a ‘wicked problem’. In this address, I argue that one-size-fits-all, imported, simple solutions are unlikely to work in the long-term and that we need to develop approaches that recognise the ecological nature of violence in carceral spaces to inform viable and relevant violence prevention strategies. Drawing from over twenty years of clinical experience and applied research in Aotearoa prisons, this presentation also highlights the importance of a culturally-accountable philosophy of care and especially the priorities of mana whenua in promoting safety and wellbeing for those who reside and work in our prisons.



Armon Tamatea

Armon (Rongowhakāta; Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki) is a clinical psychologist who served as a clinician and senior research advisor for Ara Poutama Aotearoa/Dept of Corrections (New Zealand) before being appointed senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Waikato. He has worked extensively in the assessment and treatment of violent and sexual offenders, and contributed to the design and

implementation of an experimental prison-based violence prevention programme for high-risk offenders diagnosed with psychopathy. Armon is the lead researcher for Nga Tūmanakotanga a multi-year MBIE-funded research programme that aims to understand and reduce prison violence in New Zealand, and teaches in the post-graduate clinical psychology programme in the School of Psychology. His research interests include institutional violence, psychopathy, New Zealand gang communities, and exploring culturally-informed approaches to offender management. He was also president of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abuse (ANZATSA) from 2018-2021. Armon currently divides his professional time between research, teaching, supervision, and clinical practice in the criminal justice arena.