Twitter Thread by SamVimes



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Reflecting on the discussion over School Exclusions, it's struck me that many see the concept of Abolition as like "Reform, only better". My experience of running a prison segregation unit has informed my view of how wrong this is. And so... A THREAD 1/

Firstly, updating laptop prevents a blog post, but I may get to that later, if so, I'll link below. To begin: A few years ago, I took over the senior management position in a prison that had departmental responsibility for the prison's Segregation Unit 2/

A Segregation unit is essentially a small living unit within a prison, where people can be taken for the purposes of punishment, or separation from the general population for safety reasons. 3/

When I took over the function, there were normally 12-16 residents, and almost never fewer. There are rules around how/why you can segregate people, which are too much for twitter, but for our purposes, we'll use the two main "themes"- Punishment and Safety 4/

People can be segregated as a punishment after an Adjudication, or held for the good order and discipline of the prison. (See the parallels with the school exclusions debate?) Segregation is not the only punishment available from Adjudication, but is often seen as the top one 5/

Problem is, as a punishment, Segregation is potentially problematic, in that it is quite psychologically difficult to deal with, with a Catch 22 that if you make it LESS difficult, it often ceases to be a punishment in effect. Certainly, in general...6/

It isn't effective in changing people's behaviour, in and of itself. So it MAY "balance the books" in some way, but there are other ways which ALSO may be more effective in changing behaviour, and more psychologically safe 7/

The first, most difficult, thing I had to do, was to separate in the minds of staff (and I include senior management here), the difference between the Safety and Punishment aspects of segregation, and remove the "semi-automatic" assumption for Seg as punishment 8/

I should add that the (majority) of well-behaved prisoners also had reservations about my approach. I put in an "assumption" AGAINST Segregation as a punishment, and required high levels of justification from Adjudicators, and personally oversaw

decisions 9/

The critical aspect was to ensure that people fully employed the other methods of punishment available that DIDN'T seperate people from the community, whilst generally having a "problem-solving" approach to offences (mostly those without an aggrieved victim) that did not...10/

Necessarily involve "punishment" at all. Where there was a human (as opposed to organisational) victim, I never supported a "no punishment" approach, but required heavy justification for the "Segregation" punishment 11/

In practice, "Segregation" as a punishment, mostly disappeared. To be clear, this was often technical- people committing offences hitting my new high bar quite often were too dangerous NOT to be segregated, for a time, under "Safety" rules 12/

BUT, the more we focused on solving problems, and using "community based punishment" as a default, the more our Segregation pop dropped. The more time my staff had to bring individual attention to people's problems. Icluding employing Restorative Justice where appropriate 13/

Our ASSUMPTION against segregation started to bed in, without any reduction in "justice" from the pov of any aggrieved victim. As with school exclusion, forcing someone not to engage with their community, may be an "easy option", tho it LOOKS 14/

To us, like punishment. Prison staff will recognise the prisoners who prefer segregation to having to engage with the community. I made their lives harder, and forced them to (with help) solve their problems, rather than run from them 15/

My absolute aim was to have no-one Segregated. My Seg staff started going on to the wings to provide moral support to prisoners who were "at risk" of being Segregated. Often in their lunchbreaks. We all DROVE against unnecessary segregation 16/

BUT, (and this is key), we never got to zero. The New Normal reduced from 12-14 to 4-6. Because, sometimes, you JUST HAVE TO DO IT 17/

Sometimes, you have to physically separate people. You could drive an oil tanker between "assumption against segregation" and "you're not allowed to segregate people". Imagine if you couldn't remove someone from a situation in which they were relentlessly predating on others 18/

Imagine if THEY KNEW YOU COULDN'T EVER SEGREGATE THEM. How would the behaviour of perpetrators change? Of predators? Removal of Segregation is fantasy stuff, built on a flawed model of human behaviour, and exaggerated view on our ability to change it 19/

This is the difference between Reform and Abolition. One is incremental, evidence based, and open to challenge. The other is dangerous and ineffective. They are not the same thing. I did what I did because it was morally right and operationally effective 20/

Not because I had some vague ideal about how the system would shake out if I burnt it down. The fact that I spent most of my time preventing unnecessary segregation did not mean that I had the slightest hesitation in locking someone up when it came to it 21/

I wasn't fighting some kind of political or emotional battle. I looked at the evidence, and (crucially) the human systems in the prison, then effected operational change 22/

Reform and Abolition are NOT the same thing. One thing is not like the other. Ask a prisoner if he wants his local Segregation Unit closed down. I know what the answer will be, I've done the research. Far-Left activists haven't, and wouldn't have to live with the consequences 23/