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Government-Imposed Reorganization and Public Service Turnaround: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from the Prison Sector in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

Theories of public service turnaround suggest that replacement of the management of public organizations is a potentially effective response to serious cases of performance failure. Using a quasi-experimental synthetic difference-in-difference approach, we investigate whether the UK government's reorganization of the management of a large "failing" prison in England resulted in a successful turnaround in its performance. Our findings suggest that the prison experienced dramatic improvements in confinement conditions, safety and order after reorganization, potentially due to increased resource allocation. Documentary evidence indicates that the new prison management also achieved service improvements through the restoration of prison officers' authority and better partnership-working with other public sector bodies.

KEYWORDS

organizational turnaround; prisons; public interest theory; quasi-experimental methods; reorganization

Introduction

Direct government intervention in the management of public organizations has become an increasingly common practice for addressing perceived performance failures (Berman, 1995; Hagen & Kaarbøe, 2006). Such interventions are typically aimed at achieving a turnaround in the financial or service performance of public services and can range from the provision of financial incentives and administrative support through to the introduction of new personnel (Hood et al., 1999). At the extreme, central governments can replace the management of failing public services, appointing new leaders with the authority to undertake organizational reforms. However, despite on-going concerns caused by cases of failure in the public sector (Caillier, 2023; Hodkinson, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2024), surprisingly little is known about the performance effects of interventions intended to address them, especially government-imposed reorganizations intended to turnaround failing services.

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Reorganizations of public service organizations through the replacement of senior managers assume that incumbent organizational leaders lack the capabilities required to achieve a successful turnaround (Turner et al., 2004). In contrast, central government has the authority to identify and deploy experts with the skills, know-how and experience to drive through the organizational changes needed to improve services (Jas & Skelcher, 2005). According to public interest theory, democratic governments are authorized to intervene in the public sector in this way because they act on behalf of the citizens whose interests they represent (Goodsell, 1990). As such, directly intervening in the management of an organization by replacing its management can facilitate the sweeping changes that the public interest suggests are needed to return failing services to desired performance levels (Boyne, 2004). From this perspective, government-imposed reorganizations of a service deemed to be 'failing' are intended to better harness the distinctive capabilities associated with the public sector, such as political authority, democratic legitimacy and a stable resource base (Billis & Glennerster, 1998; Rufin & Rivera-Santos, 2012). They can also unleash the broader commitment to promoting the public interest among public servants (Wittmer, 1991).

Prior studies of public service turnaround have revealed much about the relationship between management change and organizational turnaround (e.g. Favero & Rutherford, 2016), but only rarely address the effects of government-imposed reorganizations on public service organizations (e.g. Reingewertz & Beerli, 2018). This sparse research effort suggests reorganizations by central government can generate improvements in the financial and service performance of public organizations, but has not directly modeled the impact of a change in the management of those organizations imposed by central government. To delve deeper into whether government-imposed replacement of the management of a 'failing' public service is an effective approach for turning around its performance, we analyze prison conditions, safety and order in Birmingham adult male prison (HMP Birmingham) in England, an institution reorganized by UK central government on the grounds of poor performance in 2018.

To uphold performance standards in prisons in England and Wales, UK central government has operated a performance rating scheme alongside a schedule of regular prison inspections since the 1990s (Boin et al., 2006). Cases of poor performance and failure are subject to a variety of interventions, ranging from more intensive performance monitoring and a busier schedule of inspections to the removal and replacement of top managers (National Audit Office (NAO), 2003). The turnaround of prisons deemed to be failing remains high on the policy agenda in the UK (MOJ, 2021) and is widely debated by the media (Thompson, 2024) and civil society organizations with an interest in criminal justice (e.g. Prison Reform Trust,

2023). The replacement of the private contractor responsible for managing HMP Birmingham by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), was one of the most significant interventions in the running of a public service within the UK, which holds important lessons for interventions elsewhere.

To investigate whether government-imposed reorganization was an effective approach for turning around HMP Birmingham, we use a synthetic difference-in-differences (SDID) approach to analyze prison conditions, safety and order between 2011 and 2022. This quasi-experimental method enables researchers to investigate the impact of policy changes in critical cases by constructing a synthetic version of the case with which to compare outcomes before and after the policy change. SDID analysis combines a conventional DiD approach, comparing the trajectory of the outcomes between treated units receiving a policy “treatment” and control units, with the Synthetic Control Method (SCM), which compares outcomes for a single treated unit with a version of the unit constructed from the characteristics of multiple control units (Clarke et al. 2023). To do so, SDID approximates treatment effects by matching the pretreatment time trends of the treated units with those of a donor pool of untreated units and then comparing post-treatment outcomes (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021). For our analysis, we compare multiple dimensions of prison performance: rates of overcrowding, violent assaults and prisoner protesting behaviors; for HMP Birmingham and synthetic versions of the time trend for the prison constructed using weighted data from other similar English and Welsh prisons.

To deepen scholarly understanding of the capabilities required for successful reorganization, our SDID analysis of prison performance is supplemented with a wide array of documentary evidence, including: inspection reports, Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) reports; improvement plans; Ministry of Justice briefings; parliamentary committee minutes and reports; nonprofit briefings and practitioner articles. The results of our SDID analysis suggest government-imposed reorganization is an effective approach to turning around failing public services – results that are robust to several sensitivity tests. Further analysis indicates that this may be because of the allocation of additional resources to support the new management. The documentary evidence highlights the ways in which the replacement of the prison management facilitated application of the capabilities required to turn the prison around.

Theory

In the wake of NPM, performance management has become regarded as a vital means for making public services more efficient, effective and

responsive to citizens' needs (Lapsley & Miller, 2024). As a result, governments across the world now measure and manage the performance of public services in a host of different ways (Van Dooren et al., 2015). These 'performance regimes' generally comprise multiple channels through which public service performance is monitored, including suites of internal performance indicators, external oversight by regulatory agencies and a willingness to engage with the media to communicate service achievements to the wider public (Hood et al., 1999; Rainey et al., 2021). Monitoring processes are applied to the performance of services provided 'in-house' by governments and to services that are contracted out to private firms or other providers (Marvel & Marvel, 2007). Performance management of this kind is seen as a prerequisite for achieving public service excellence and averting failure (Moynihan, 2009). Nevertheless, governments committed to managing public service performance recognize the need for strategies to support services perceived to be under-performing (Walshe et al., 2004). Turnaround strategies are especially urgent in cases of poor performance that receive significant adverse media coverage, due to the importance governments attach to negative reputational effects (Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013) and their desire to avoid the blame for 'visible' failures (Howlett, 2012).

Meyer and Zucker (1989) emphasize that in the public sector, "social constraints impede the operation of economic or economic-like forces that would sustain high performing organizations and shut low performers" (115). In fact, the social and political impediments to closing or abolishing under-performing public organizations are often so serious, that such organizations run the risk of 'permanent failure' – chronic, persistent low-performance (Meyer & Zucker, 1989). While the definition of failure in the public sector is regarded as more complex than organizational failure in the private sector, where indicators of bankruptcy underline the stark reality of business closure, public sector stakeholders are often able to differentiate between good and performance when given appropriate cues (James et al., 2016; McCrea et al., 2025). Van de Walle (2016, p. 832) explains how public service failure refers to a "failure or perceived failure by public organizations to deliver services to the customer against established norms". The norms against which public service delivery are evaluated by customers (or citizens) are increasingly formalized and mediated through the performance regimes to which public services are subject (Moynihan et al., 2011). Nevertheless, such norms may only result in political action to address failures when information about such failures is widely disseminated and understood (Erlich et al., 2021). When the failure of a service is palpable and is widely publicized, as in the case of HMP Birmingham, the reputational effects of failure may mean that 'authoritative external intervention' by central governments is necessary to

turn around the service and reestablish public trust in the provider (Jas & Skelcher, 2005). Whatever the motivation for responding to perceived failures in this way, the justification for such interventions is typically made on the grounds of the public interest.

The public interest and public service turnaround

According to Goodin (1996), the public interest is: “(1) an interest that people necessarily share (2) by virtue of their role as a member of the public (3) which can best or only be promoted by concerted public action” (339). The concept of the public interest thus provides strong philosophical and political justifications for government intervention in cases of public service failure. In particular, public interest theorists posit that public servants should be able to exercise wide ranging powers to promote the public good (Kelman, 1987). Public interest theory is then “both a positive theory about what motivates policy-makers and a normative theory about what *should* motivate them” (Levine & Forrence, 1990, p. 168) – in this case the provision of better public services (Andrews & Boyne, 2010).

Within the context of public service delivery, public interest ideas can be employed to articulate the need for efficient, effective and responsive organizations. Bozeman (2007) suggests that the public interest “refers to the outcomes best-serving the long-run survival and well-being of a social collective construed ‘as a public’” (12). Numerous empirical studies highlight the contribution that good quality public services make to social welfare (e.g. Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008), which, in turn, provides a broader justification for the inspection of public service organizations to ensure that they meet the standards of performance the public (i.e. citizens, service users and taxpayers) has a right to expect. From this perspective, ‘performance regimes’ ward off the prospect of public service failure by motivating public service organizations to operate in the interests of service users (James, 2000). Nevertheless, there is widespread recognition that inspections themselves may not be sufficient to drive public service improvement in failing organizations (Turner et al., 2004). As a result, such organizations are often encouraged and supported to undertake turnaround strategies that can enable them to generate desired improvements.

Public service turnaround theories point toward three distinctive strategies that can be deployed to improve ‘failing’ organizations: retrenchment, repositioning and reorganization (Beeri, 2012; Boyne, 2004, 2006). A retrenchment strategy is aimed at cost-cutting, mainly by switching to a reduced and more focused service offering. For a failing public service, retrenchment can enable managers to devote more resources to those activities more likely to result in a positive performance pay-off. It may

even be necessary to undertake an initial period of retrenchment to get the process of recovery underway (Robbins & Pearce, 1992). A repositioning strategy is more innovative, concentrating on the development of new services and/or new markets. In the public sector, repositioning is likely to involve “a new definition of the mission and core activities of an organization” (Boyne, 2006, p. 379), which can generate service recovery through quality improvements and by positively influencing key stakeholders’ perceptions of organizational legitimacy (Boyne, 2004). A reorganization strategy involves changing the top management team and/or the implementation of new structures and systems (Boyne, 2004). In particular, replacement of the senior managers may be deemed unavoidable because “the existing management is rarely capable of taking the drastic action needed to effect a turnaround” (Slatter, 1984, p. 74). It also sends a clear signal to stakeholders about the seriousness of the organization’s commitment to achieving recovery (Boyne, 2006).

In the private sector, turnaround strategies are instigated by the senior management in a bid to recover former levels of organizational performance or to stimulate new growth (Trahms et al., 2013). In the public sector, turnaround strategies can be implemented by public service organizations themselves or by governments concerned about the social, economic and political implications of service failure (Reingewertz & Beeri, 2018). Within this setting, the public interest provides a strong rationale for government-imposed reorganizations to replace the managers of failing public services with government-approved managers, especially since government, ultimately, carries the financial, service and political risks associated with service failure (Van de Walle, 2016). It is also likely that reorganization-based turnaround is attractive to central governments because strategies of retrenchment or repositioning within the public sector are more difficult to implement due to the statutory nature of many public services and limited opportunities to move out of old markets and into new ones (Boyne, 2004).

Government-imposed reorganization and turnaround

By imposing reorganization on a public service organization perceived to be ‘failing’, governments can be seen to act decisively in the public interest through the deployment of sector-wide capabilities that may not be available to the failing organization. In particular, experienced managers and experts from outside of the failing organization are assumed to be able to bolster the performance management capabilities of those organizations and to provide a strong challenge to them as they target meaningful improvements in performance (Murphy & Jones, 2016). In general, the achievement of public service turnaround is a political

process, with some organizations needing “only a small improvement in performance to be judged a success, whereas others may face much higher hurdles” (Boyne, 2004, p. 377). However, when central government removes the incumbent management of a public organization and appoints new managers (as in our case) then the process implies a far-reaching reform of organizational practices and culture, which is intended to achieve a similarly transformational approach to public service delivery (Boyne, 2004).

Although reorganization is expected to result in public service turnaround, to date, few studies have evaluating whether government-imposed changes of management have the desired effects on performance, especially within the criminal justice field, where turnaround strategies of retrenchment and repositioning are even more difficult to implement. This is surprising given the high political salience of failures within this field and the public interest reasons typically advanced in justifying interventions to address them (Roberts & Hough, 2005). Nevertheless, there is a small, but growing literature that examines the connection between turnaround strategies and subsequent changes in public service performance in other policy fields, which can shed light on the likelihood that imposed reorganizations will be successful.

To date, the majority of public sector turnaround studies have found that concerted efforts to achieve service recovery through retrenchment, repositioning or reorganization are successful. In terms of reorganization specifically, Boyne and Meier (2009) show how the appointment of a new chief executive is related to better school district performance in Texas, albeit only when that executive is an insider. Similarly, Favero and Rutherford (2016) find that the appointment of a new school principal generates better student performance and parent satisfaction in New York. However, these studies addressed turnaround strategies introduced by organizations themselves, rather than government-imposed changes to the management of those organizations. The literature on state takeovers of the management of US school districts suggests there may be few noticeable benefits for student achievement (Schueler, 2025), though takeovers aimed at improving financial outcomes in local government have a better track record of success in the US (Singla et al., 2023), Germany (Zabler, 2020) and Israel (Reingewertz and Beeri, 2018). These studies point toward potential benefits of government-imposed reorganization, but are solely located within the local government field and do not directly address changes in the management of public service organizations, which underlines the need for analyses of the replacement of senior managers in other policy fields.

It has been suggested that the benefits of different turnaround strategies are likely to vary according to circumstances in which an organization is

operating (McKiernan, 2002) and that their application should be tailored to the needs of the failing organization (Rutherford & Favero, 2020). For example, Alonso and Andrews (2021) find that the creation of a nonprofit organization responsible for turning around education services in Hackney, London, enabled the local government to draw upon not-for-profit capabilities to better address local needs. For HMP Birmingham, we argue that the replacement of the management of the institution facilitated the application of public sector capabilities at the prison that were not present when the prison was under private management. In particular, public sector managers tend to have more managerial experience (Crewe et al., 2011; Le Vay, 2015; Nakamura, forthcoming) and therefore stronger capabilities in improving prison operations (Cabral et al., 2013) along with greater democratic legitimacy for carrying out reforms in the public interest (Robbins, 1987). The application of these distinctive sectoral capabilities was particularly urgent in Birmingham's case because the Chief Inspector of Prisons stated that 'the treatment of prisoners and the conditions in which they were held at Birmingham were among the worst we have seen in recent years' (HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP, 2018, p. 5). Indeed, the prison was issued an improvement notice on the basis that 'the Custodial Service has fallen below the Required Standard resulting in Reduced Performance across a number of areas', especially levels of violence, purposeful activity and cleanliness (MoJ, 2019). To better understand the nature of the intervention, the background behind the government-imposed reorganization of HMP Birmingham is discussed in more detail next.

Study background

To illustrate the rationale for the government-imposed reorganization of HMP Birmingham and the mechanisms through which policy-makers sought to turn its performance around, we utilize documentary evidence as "background information" (Yanow, 2006, p. 411). HMIP and IMB reports were scrutinized to gain insight into the conditions in the prison and the organizational changes undertaken when its management was replaced. In addition, to gain a wider perspective on "how people responded at that time to particular events or ideas" (Yanow, 2006, p. 411), we examine oral evidence presented to the UK House of Commons justice committee, press releases and other publications (see [Appendix A, Table A2](#)). This documentary evidence guides our description of the study context and, later, informs the interpretation of the results from our quasi-experimental analysis of outcomes.

Birmingham prison was established by Birmingham municipal borough council in 1849 to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding population (<https://institutionalhistory.com/homepage/prisons/major-prisons/>

hmp-birmingham-or-birmingham-county-gaol/#_ftn1). Along with other local prisons, Birmingham was nationalized in the 1870s, converting to a male only local prison in the early 1900s. A chequered history of controversies and reforms followed during the twentieth century, until the management of Birmingham was contracted out to a private company by the UK government in 2011, partly to address poor performance but also to deliver efficiency savings (MoJ, 2011). Thereafter, the prison experienced profound problems culminating in a serious prison riot in 2016. Further deteriorations in living conditions in 2018 led to an unannounced prison inspection in August 2018, which highlighted that: “against all four of our healthy prison tests – safety, respect, purposeful activity and rehabilitation and release planning – we assessed outcomes as poor, our lowest assessment” (HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP, 2018, p. 5). This assessment was based on: direct observation, prisoner surveys, discussions with prisoners, staff and relevant third parties, and documentary analysis. As a result, the chief inspector concluded that the prison was “fundamentally unsafe, where many prisoners and staff lived and worked in fear, where drug taking was barely concealed, delinquency was rife and where individuals could behave badly with near impunity” (HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP, 2018, p. 5). Importantly, he urged the government to undertake drastic action “to address the squalor, violence, prevalence of drugs and looming lack of control” (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2018). This request and the publicity that it garnered led to the government replacing the prison management.

The UK government appointed a new prison governor who initially took control of the prison for a ‘step-in period’ of six months in August 2018. Although HMPPS hoped to return the prison to private management, in April 2019, the government and contractor mutually agreed that “the public sector is better placed to drive the long-term improvements required and the contract will end” (MoJ, 2019). The contractor agreed to pay £9.9 million to cover the cost of the ‘step-in’, with their staff transferring to HMPPS contracts in July 2019 and the new governor being made permanent (MoJ, 2019). The whole process followed the protocols established for managing the contract in the event of performance failure (see National Audit Office, 2018). Evidence on the performance of Birmingham prison after the replacement of its management can thus provide vital insights into the effectiveness of government-imposed reorganizations for turning around ‘failing’ public services.

Data and methods

To estimate the performance effects of the reorganization of HMP Birmingham, we collected data from English and Welsh male local prisons

for the financial years 2010/2011 to 2022/2023. By focusing on this study period, we can capture the long deterioration of performance that occurred prior to the political recognition of organizational failure that spurred the eventual intervention. Hence, by using a SDID approach we model pretreatment patterns in performance that were not politically acknowledged at the time they were occurring. We restricted our sample to the 28 male local prisons (including Birmingham) for which we were able to gather enough data for the entire period, to avoid overfitting biases and ensure that potential donor units for the synthetic version of HMP Birmingham have similar underlying characteristics to the ‘treated unit’.¹

In England and Wales, male local prisons are facilities that house adult male offenders either awaiting trial, sentencing, or serving shorter sentences. During the study period, they were responsible for holding around one-third of the entire prison population in England and Wales, the overwhelming majority of whom are men (around 90%). Male local prisons are generally designed to serve specific regions, receiving prisoners directly from the courts. A key feature of local prisons is that they often operate over capacity due to the high inmate turnover and intake from courts, hence including other type of prisons with different characteristics in our sample might bias our results.

Outcome measures

The performance of public services is complex and multidimensional, with judgements about appropriate standards of achievement and failure contested by an array of different stakeholders, including citizens, politicians, higher levels of government and regulatory agencies (Andersen et al., 2016). By and large, prison performance is not scrutinized as closely as many other public services by ordinary citizens because the treatment of incarcerated individuals occurs ‘out of sight’ and those individuals may be regarded as less deserving of the same level of consideration (Maguire et al., 1985). At the same time, prisoners’ themselves may struggle to participate successfully in the determination of what constitutes ‘a good prison’ due to the coercive power relations to which they are subject (Behan & Kirkham, 2016). As a result, performance accountability in prisons tends to be upheld by a complex web of regulatory agencies, private security firms and civil society actors concerned with penal reform (Cabral & Santos, 2018), until such time as a crisis occurs which demands a political response (Barker, 1998). Within this context, Logan (1992) identifies eight dimensions of quality of prison confinement, with which to analyze the outcomes experienced by the incarcerated: security, safety, order, care, activity, justice, conditions, and management. Our analysis focuses on three

key dimensions of confinement: (i) inmates' conditions; (ii) prison safety; and, (iii) prison order, using statistics published by the MoJ.

Inmates' *conditions* are measured using the overcrowding rate, which is the proportion of prisoners housed in cells where the number of occupants exceeds the recommended capacity (e.g., two prisoners in a cell meant for one, or three in a cell meant for two). Since the 1980s, when the HMPPS began including performance data in its annual reports, this measure has been a key element of the prison performance management system (Boin et al., 2006).

To measure the next dimension of prison performance, i.e. *safety*, we use as a proxy the number of violent assaults per 100 inmates. This measure is also a crucial component of the performance management system for prisons in England and Wales (Solomon, 2004). It reflects the effectiveness of prison officers in managing the complex interpersonal dynamics that arise within the prison environment (Bottoms, 1999) and is widely used in prison performance studies (e.g. Lukemeyer & McCorkle, 2006).

Finally, we use two complementary proxy variables to measure *prison order*: the number of barricades per 100 inmates and the number of incidents at height per 100 inmates. These measures of 'protesting behavior' provide valuable insights into the conditions and overall management of prisons, since they often reflect underlying issues, such as inadequate living conditions, dissatisfaction with prison services, or grievances about treatment and fairness (Carrabine, 2005).

Due to data limitations, we are unable to capture all eight dimensions of confinement quality proposed by Logan (1992). Nevertheless, we do analyze aspects of prison performance that are especially significant for the level of intervention that UK central government deems necessary to address perceived failure and that have been addressed in prior research on the prison system in England and Wales (Nakamura, 2016). Bennett (2012) emphasizes how the level of violence and disorder in prisons are critical indicators of how well they are doing, because as a HM Prison Service (2004) report highlights, "without ordered control and safe prisons almost none of our other work can be done successfully".

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for each outcome. It should be noted that although there might be other proxy variables that would be helpful to evaluate the merits/demerits of government-imposed

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (2011–22).

Variable	Obs	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Overcrowding rate (%)	364	51.47	22.62	0.00	93.70
Violent assaults (per 100 inmates)	364	34.49	20.81	2.03	114.48
Barricades (per 100 inmates)	364	1.63	1.77	0.00	14.91
Incidents at height (per 100 inmates)	308	6.51	6.74	0.00	56.68

Notes: Data retrieved from the HMPPS Annual Digests.

reorganizations in the prison system, we employ only those variables that are publicly available for a sufficient number of time periods to permit the effective application of a Synthetic DiD approach.

Empirical specification

To estimate the effect of the reorganization of HMP Birmingham, we conduct a SDID analysis comparing the outcome trends for Birmingham before and after its management was replaced by the government with the trends for those prisons in the control group. The SDID method, developed by Arkhangelsky et al. (2021), is an extension of the traditional Difference-in-Differences approach (DID), combining it with the Synthetic Control Method (SCM) proposed by Abadie and Gardeazabal (2003). The SDID estimator is conceptually similar to the SCM. However, there are notable differences in how the synthetic control group is constructed. SCM approaches focus on matching the pretreatment outcomes of the treatment group with that of the donor pool as closely as possible, whereas the SDID estimator aims to match only the pretreatment time trends of both groups. This allows pretreatment differences in levels to be accounted for by unit fixed effects (prison fixed effects in our case) in the DiD analysis. While traditional DiD remains a widely used method for estimating causal effects in quasi-experimental public management research, it relies heavily on the assumption that treated and control units would have followed parallel outcome trends in the absence of treatment. This assumption is sometimes difficult to justify, particularly when only one or a few units receive treatment—a common scenario in public sector interventions such as our case study.

The basic idea behind the SDID approach consists of first constructing a synthetic control unit using a weighted combination of potential control units. These weights are chosen such that the synthetic control matches the pretreatment trends of the treated unit. Then a DiD approach is applied to estimate the difference in outcomes between the treated unit and its synthetic control before and after a treatment. Estimation of the potential effect proceeds as follows:

$$\left(\tau^{\widehat{sdid}}, \widehat{\mu}, \widehat{\alpha}, \widehat{\beta} \right) = \underset{\tau, \mu, \alpha, \beta}{\operatorname{argmin}} \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^N \sum_{t=1}^T \left(Y_{it} - \mu - \alpha_i - \beta_t - W_{it} \tau \right)^2 \omega_i^{\widehat{sdid}} \lambda_t^{\widehat{sdid}} \right\}$$

where the estimate of interest is the Average Treatment Effect (ATT), generated from a two-way fixed effect regression, including optimally chosen weights $\omega_i^{\widehat{sdid}}$ and $\lambda_t^{\widehat{sdid}}$ (see Arkhangelsky et al., 2021, for a more detailed description of the method). Following Clarke et al. 2023, it is important to note that this method flexibly accommodates shared

time-specific aggregate components through the estimation of time fixed effects (β_t) and captures unit-specific, time-invariant characteristics through the estimation of unit fixed effects (α_i). For illustrative purposes, it may be worth considering how the SDID method compares to the baseline DID. The standard DID consists of precisely the same two-way fixed effect regression, simply assigning equal weights to all time periods and groups:

$$\left(\widehat{\tau}^{sdid}, \widehat{\mu}, \widehat{\alpha}, \widehat{\beta}\right) = \underset{\tau, \mu, \alpha, \beta}{\operatorname{argmin}} \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^N \sum_{t=1}^T (Y_{it} - \mu - \alpha_i - \beta_t - W_{it}\tau)^2 \right\}$$

By including the mentioned optimally chosen weights, the SDID estimator can overcome the absence of pretreatment parallel trends, a challenge often faced by DID. Furthermore, the SDID does not require that the treated unit be within a ‘convex hull’ of control units, which is an important constraint on SCM approaches (Clarke et al., 2023). Furthermore, the SDID approach generally needs fewer pretreatment periods compared to a SCM (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021). As a result, SDID can improve model fit and reduce potential biases from overfitting.

In summary, because the SDID addresses weaknesses of both the DiD and SCM analyses, it is a quasi-experimental method that achieves a high degree of robustness for policy evaluation purposes (HM Treasury, 2020). Nevertheless, to check our SDID results’ robustness to alternative identification strategies, we complement our analysis with Abadie and Gardeazabal (2003) SCM, which constructs a counterfactual to estimate the value of the outcome variable that would have been observed for the treated unit in the absence of the treatment. As discussed above, a synthetic control is constructed using a weighted combination of potential donor units to approximate the characteristics of the unit affected by the treatment. A key aim in doing so is to minimize the distance between the pretreatment characteristics of the unit experiencing the treatment and those of the donor units. Hence, we employ two complementary quasi-experimental methods to evaluate whether the reorganization of HMP Birmingham resulted in better outcomes for inmates.

Results

Synthetic difference in differences

Figure 1 depicts the main results of our SDID approach for each outcome of interest. First, a visual examination of the four SDID plots indicates that the parallel trends assumption is generally plausible across most outcomes. For *overcrowding rates*, *violent assaults* and *incidents at height*, the

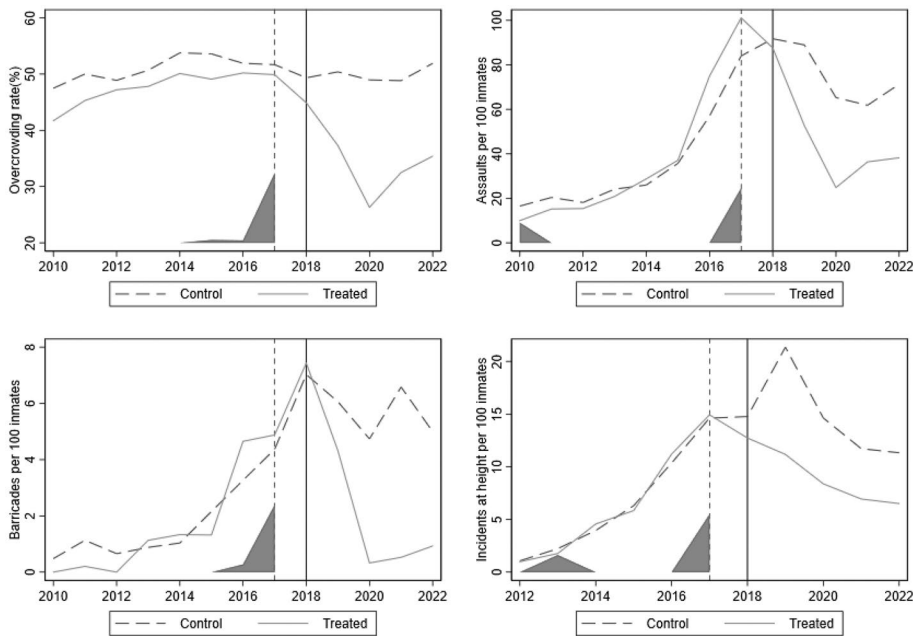


Figure 1. SDID estimates of HMP Birmingham versus the synthetic control (2011–22).

The horizontal solid lines show Birmingham overcrowding rates (upper left), assaults per 100 inmates (upper right), barricades per 100 inmates (bottom left), and incidents at height (bottom right). The dotted lines show the corresponding series for the synthetic controls based on the SDID method. The time weights are represented by the grey area in the figures.

pretreatment trajectories of the treated units and their respective synthetic controls seem aligned, suggesting that the assumption of parallel pretreatment trends is satisfied. For *barricades*, the overall pretreatment trend appears broadly similar between the treated and synthetic series, though there are minor discrepancies on a year-to-year basis. Taken together, these patterns suggest that the SDID design yields appropriate counterfactuals across outcomes, though the results for *barricades* should be interpreted with caution.

Overall, our results suggest that all analyzed outcomes improved in HMP Birmingham right after the UK Government reorganized the prison in 2018. As depicted in [Figure 1](#), when comparing Birmingham's outcomes with those of the control group, the overcrowding rate was reduced by about 15 percentage points four years after reorganization, while the number of violent assaults was reduced by about 30 violent assaults per 100 inmates. Similarly, there seems to be a substantial reduction of protesting behavior, as the number of incidents with barricades decreased by about 4 incidents per 100 inmates in 2022, while the number of incidents at height was also reduced by about 6 incidents per 100 inmates. It should be noted that due to data availability we were only able to gather data for the latter indicator from the financial year 2012/2013 onwards instead of 2010/2011. Prison specific weights included in each SDID specification are reported in [Appendix A, Table A1](#).

Table 2. SDID Coefficient Estimates for HMP Birmingham (2011–22).

	A. Inmates conditions and violence	
	Overcrowding	Violent assaults
SDID coefficient	–12.728	–38.647
Standard Error	6.748	11.034
	B. Protesting behavior	
	Barricades	Incidents at height
SDID coefficient	–3.772	–5.746
Standard Error	1.328	5.443

Notes: Standard errors computed using 100 permutation-based iterations.

To facilitate the interpretation of our results, in [Table 2](#) we report coefficient estimates using the SDID method for the four-year treatment horizon, which again suggest a positive effect of reorganization on HMP Birmingham for overcrowding rates (–11.69 percentage points), violent assaults (–38.4 per 100 inmates), riots using barricades (–3.79 per 100 inmates), and incidents at height (–5.74 per 100 inmates). We also report standard errors computed using 100 iterations of the placebo, or permutation-based, inference procedure proposed by Arkhangelsky et al. (2021). The magnitude of the standard errors suggests that all estimated coefficients are statistically significant at the 10% level or better, with the exception of the coefficient associated with the number of incidents at height which, according to the standard error, is not statistically different from zero. It should be noted, however, that inference in SDID approaches with only one treated unit can be problematic, since the permutation-based procedure requires homoskedasticity across units and, generally, leads to large confidence intervals. For that reason, we supplement our SDID analyses with an SCM approach.

Synthetic control method

[Figure 2](#) depicts the main results of the SCM approach for each outcome of interest. The results of the SCM approach confirm our SDID findings, with the post-treatment difference between HMP Birmingham and its synthetic counterpart virtually identical both in direction and magnitude to the SDID estimates. In addition, we conduct a series of placebo tests, which help to avoid mistaking random differences for real impacts and can facilitate statistical inference. These placebo tests involve applying the SCM iteratively to every control unit, reassigning in each iteration the ‘treatment status’ to one of the units in the donor pool, and then computing the effect associated with each placebo.

[Figure 3](#) shows the placebo test results for each outcome. The light gray lines represent the gap in each outcome associated with each of the runs of the test, and the black line represents the gap estimated for HMP Birmingham. The figure suggests that no other prison outperforms

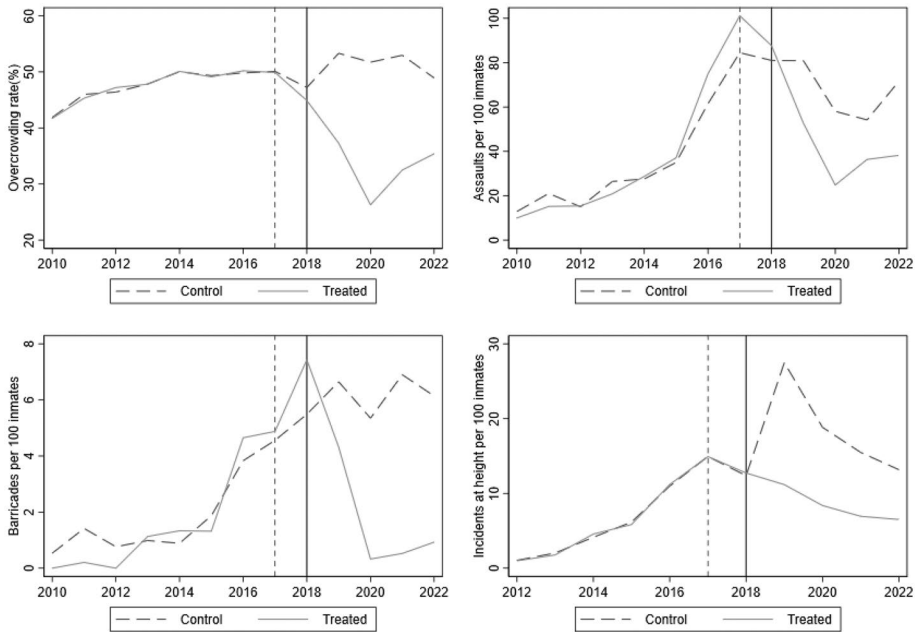


Figure 2. SCM estimates of HMP Birmingham versus the synthetic control (2011–22). The horizontal solid lines show Birmingham overcrowding rates (upper left), assaults rate (upper right), barricades per 100 inmates (bottom left), and incidents at height (bottom right). The dotted lines show the corresponding series for the synthetic controls based on the SCM.

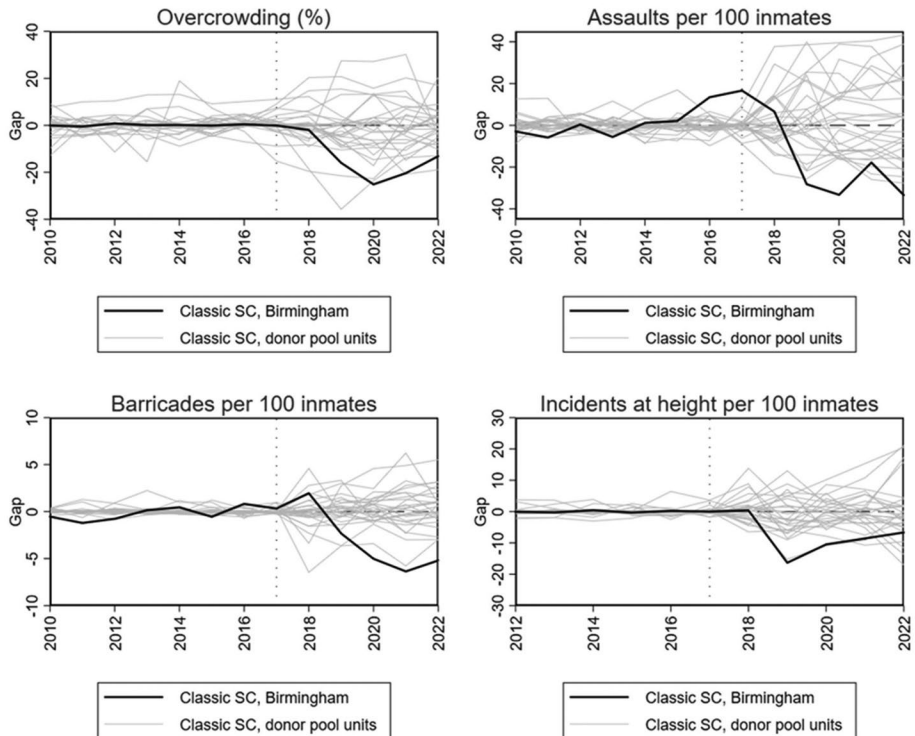


Figure 3. Synthetic control method in-space placebo tests. The light grey lines represent the gap between the outcome for each placebo unit and its synthetic counterpart, and the black line represents the gap estimated for HMP Birmingham.

Birmingham in terms of reducing overcrowding rates, violent assaults, incidents with barricades and incidents at height after the reorganization. Since the placebo tests do not generate gaps similar in magnitude to those estimated for Birmingham, the analysis indicates that reorganization reduced overcrowding, violence and protesting behavior.

Discussion

Our quasi-experimental analysis suggests that government-imposed reorganization was an effective vehicle for turning around HMP Birmingham. This is corroborated by evidence from inspection reports (HMIP, 2021; HMIP, 2023a) and commentary from a range of important stakeholders (see IMB, 2022, 2023), which indicates that in the wake of reorganization the new prison management was able to focus on improving conditions, safety and order within the prison. To better understand the extent to which the turnaround in the performance of HMP Birmingham was attributable to the application of public sector capabilities, we explored the documentary evidence in more depth.

The turnaround literature suggests that radical change is only likely to occur when senior managers from outside a failing organization are brought in to impose new perspectives on the organization (Mueller & Barker, 1997; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). In the period immediately following the reorganization, one of the key changes made by the prison governor was to reduce the prison population. Because the government intervened in the management of the institution, the governor was authorized to redistribute prisoners to other institutions in the public prison estate. Due to this reduction in capacity, the governor thereafter became able to allocate more staff to address issues with prison stability and invest time and money in upgrading wings of the prison that were previously considered barely habitable (IMB, 2020). As a result, “the prison improved in many aspects: better living conditions, reduced violence, improved staff/prisoner ratio” (IMB, 2020, p. 5). Importantly, it should be noted that a reduction in the prison population could potentially have led to higher overall and direct costs per prisoner. This occurs because many correctional expenses—such as staffing, facility maintenance, and administration—are largely fixed and do not decrease proportionally with inmate numbers.

To formally test whether there were statistically significant reductions in the prison population, and/or an increase in costs, we extend our SDID analysis to estimate whether the government intervention affected the number of inmates, overall costs and direct costs. In the English prison system, direct costs refer to the day-to-day operational expenditures incurred at individual establishments, including staff salaries, utilities, food, healthcare, and other costs directly associated with running prisons. By

contrast, overall costs encompass both these direct expenditures and broader central or system-wide costs, such as administrative overheads, estate management, national contracts, and capital depreciation.

The SDID results depicted in [Figure 4](#) indicate that the intervention was indeed associated with a decline in the prison population relative to the synthetic control, suggesting a contraction in incarceration levels. At the same time, the overall cost per prisoner rose noticeably after the intervention, reflecting higher per-capita expenditures for the government during the take-over of HMP Birmingham. In contrast, direct costs per prisoner—covering day-to-day operational spending such as food, health-care, and supervision—showed only modest or delayed increases, implying that the rise in total costs stemmed primarily from indirect expenses associated with the deployment of system-wide resources to support improvement of the prison. Taken together, these findings suggest that the policy led to fewer inmates but higher spending per prisoner, indicative of structural adjustments and a possible shift toward a more resource-intensive correctional model with more oversight from central government. Indeed, the results suggest that the turnaround of HMP Birmingham required more than just a change in senior leadership and buy-in from staff, with [Figure 4](#) pointing toward about a 30% reduction in the prison population and an increase in spending per prisoner of more than 15% relative to the control.

In addition to focusing on living conditions, the new prison governor adopted a ‘back-to-basics’ approach focused on “being procedurally just—making sure that we are being just not only for the men, but for our staff as well” - something that was felt to be absent under the previous management (Q581, Q582, House of Commons: Justice Committee, [2018](#)). Central to this new approach was “the support from the Police and Crime Commissioners and the local West Midlands police” in resolving legal issues posed by assaults within the prison. Indeed, the reinvigoration of partnerships with other agencies was key to the new approach to managing the prison, so much so that “resettlement preparation in the prison and multi-agency collaborative working is a strength” (IMB, [2022](#), p. 7). In addition to improving partnership-working with the local community, the prison governor gave “a strong lead to equality and diversity” (IMB, [2023](#), p. 10), by appointing a permanent senior director of equalities, diversity and inclusion and by promoting equality-related events, consulting with prisoners and providing information and support. To drive this agenda forward, networking with Birmingham City Council and other prisons has also taken place” (IMB, [2020](#), p. 21).

Overall, the appointment of a highly experienced prison governor and senior leadership team in 2018 was at the heart of the turnaround process, especially as three successive governors had been responsible for the prison

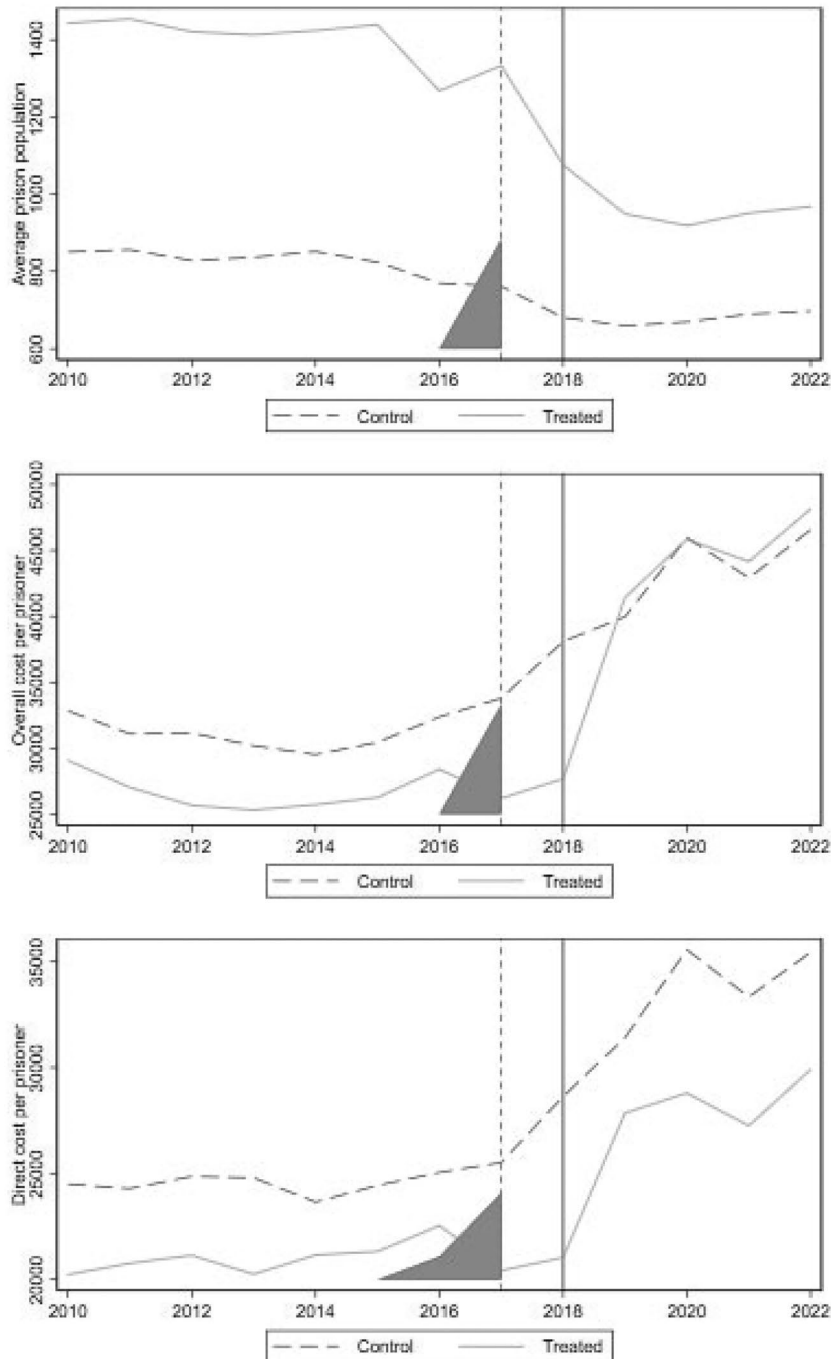


Figure 4. SDID estimates of HMP Birmingham versus the synthetic control (2011-22).

The horizontal solid lines show Birmingham prison population (top), overall cost per prisoner (middle) and direct cost per prisoner (bottom). The dotted lines show the corresponding series for the synthetic controls based on the SDID method. The time weights are represented by the grey area in the figures.

since the 2016 riot. Indeed, the chief inspector later suggested that “it was the relentless and uncompromising focus on standards by the governor that was at the heart of this success story” (HMIP, 2023b). The imposition of

new management enabled new better qualified, trained and motivated prison officers to be brought into the prison. During the HMP Birmingham inquiry, the CEO of the HMPPS pointed out that after the riot the prison contractor had “recruited staff and brought staff in from other establishments, but they were not experienced and were not able to have the impact that we would have wanted” (Q575, House of Commons: Justice Committee, 2018). To turnaround the prison, the new governor appointed a higher proportion of experienced prison staff and managers (Q580, House of Commons: Justice Committee, 2018).

The documentary evidence presented above highlights that by imposing a reorganization the government was able to deploy the capabilities needed to maximize the prospects of successful recovery. However, there were still some areas of HMP Birmingham’s performance that remained poor. For example, relatively low levels of purposeful activity were highlighted in both prison inspectorate and IMB reports. Birmingham’s IMB reports also emphasize nationwide issues hampering efforts to improve prison conditions in Birmingham (and elsewhere), such as: prisoners serving indeterminate sentences; non-release of some foreign nationals; lengthy remand stays; the influence of criminal gangs in the community; and, poor staff retention (IMB, 2020; IMB, 2021; IMB, 2022; IMB, 2023). Hence, while government-imposed reorganization may be an effective approach for addressing certain critical factors influencing performance, it may not be a panacea for all the ‘wicked problems’ that confront providers of public services. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications

Theoretical implications

Drawing on indicators of prison conditions, safety and order, our quasi-experimental analysis suggests that reorganization was a successful policy for harnessing public capabilities to the turnaround of a large, important, but failing public service organization. Empirical studies rarely investigate whether government-imposed reorganizations achieve performance turnarounds, especially those that involve the imposition of new management. By applying quasi-experimental techniques, we approximate the presence of a causal relationship between reorganization and a meaningful turnaround in performance and highlight some of the mechanisms through which this was achieved. The use of an SDID approach was especially apt in this case, because we analyze the treatment effects for an intervention that was experienced by a single unit – something that conventional DID approaches are unable to accommodate effectively. In addition to applying a method that could be usefully extended to policy interventions in restricted cases in other public management contexts internationally, we supplemented our SDID analysis with the kinds of documentary evidence that can also be

utilized by researchers seeking to understand the dynamics of policy interventions in one or a small number of cases. Nevertheless, subsequent research could draw upon primary data through questionnaire surveys and interviews with key stakeholders involved in reorganization to fully explore the ways in which government-appointed managers achieve better outcomes.

Our analysis casts new light on public interest theories by examining the role that a change of management can play in addressing poor prison performance. Studies comparing the outcomes from reorganizations in countries of varying degrees of ‘punitiveness’ (Pfeffer, 2024) would yield valuable insights into the generalizeability of our findings. Likewise, research comparing the performance of public service organizations experiencing government-imposed reorganization in other policy fields, such as social housing, social care and waste management, within and across different countries would also cast much-needed light on public interest arguments for government-imposed reorganizations in poorly performing public services. More generally, our study contributes to public service turnaround research by illustrating how a reorganization strategy can enable struggling organizations to achieve service improvements. Our findings indicate that significant organizational change may be required to achieve a transformation in the performance of ‘failing’ public services, and that central governments may be well-placed to direct such a transformation. Nevertheless, future studies should investigate whether public service organizations themselves might have the capabilities needed to implement far-reaching turnaround strategies when confronting performance failure and how these could be developed and applied with greatest effect.

Practical implications

Our research highlights that reorganization is a potentially valuable tool for policy-makers dissatisfied with the quality of public services. It also offers reassurance to practitioners that the distinctive capabilities of the public sector can be productively harnessed to serious cases of organizational failure. Governments concerned with the performance and management of public services should therefore ensure that the public sector retains the capacity and capabilities needed to direct the management of vital services effectively. At a macro-level, this implies the maintenance of public institutions vested with the power to undertake significant interventions within public services. At a meso-level, this entails organizations being equipped with sufficient experience and expertise in dealing effectively with service failure. At a micro-level, it requires that public managers be given the training and authority required to make decisions that protect the public interest (Berman, forthcoming).

The findings also offer insights for public leaders involved in public service turnaround. Although the achievement of performance improvement in 'failing' organizations places heavy demands on the management capabilities within public service organizations, it is only when there is a buy-in from all key stakeholders that the development and exercise of the capability for authoritative action can be harnessed to the task of recovery (Jas & Skelcher, 2005). As a result, the success of reorganization as a policy is dependent upon the collaborative capabilities present within an organization and the political, as well as the managerial, acumen of organizational leaders. The development of professional networks dedicated to sharing the lessons from cases of public service failure and turnaround and from best (and worst) practices is therefore vital to building and sustaining a cadre of public managers capable of resolving problems in public service delivery (Rashman et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Our study contributes to the literature on public service turnaround by providing quasi-experimental evidence on the government-imposed reorganization of a prison in the wake of serious performance failure. Our findings highlight that by taking control of a failing public organization central government can draw on the public sector capabilities needed to implement a comprehensive organizational turnaround process. Nevertheless, although we furnish evidence of the beneficial effects of reorganization for three critical dimensions of prison performance, the available quantitative data did not permit us to investigate all dimensions of confinement quality. Future studies of the outcomes from reorganization should therefore endeavor to address a broader range of the multiple dimensions of public service performance than we do on this occasion. A research agenda focused on exploring the full spectrum of successes and failures associated with government-imposed reorganization would therefore reveal much about the dynamics of the public interest in public service turnarounds.

Note

1. The male local prisons included in our analysis are Altcourse, Bedford, Birmingham, Bristol, Bullingdon, Cardiff, Chelmsford, Doncaster, Durham, Elmley, Exeter, Forest Bank, Hewell, High Down, Hull, Leeds, Leicester, Lewes, Lincoln, Liverpool, Norwich, Nottingham, Pentonville, Preston, Swansea, Wandsworth, Winchester, Wormwood Scrubs.

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Appendix A

Table A1. SDID Unit Specific Weights.

	Overcrowding	Assaults rate	Barricades	Incidents at height
Altcourse	0.019	0.000	0.000	0.031
Bedford	0.032	0.354	0.431	0.149
Bristol	0.036	0.425	0.000	0.004
Bullingdon	0.039	0.000	0.121	0.011
Cardiff	0.041	0.000	0.000	0.066
Chelmsford	0.050	0.029	0.220	0.026
Doncaster	0.048	0.000	0.000	0.031
Durham	0.047	0.000	0.000	0.062
Elmley	0.024	0.000	0.000	0.000
Exeter	0.044	0.000	0.015	0.037
Forest Bank	0.043	0.000	0.000	0.077
Hewell	0.018	0.000	0.000	0.030
High Down	0.048	0.000	0.000	0.014
Hull	0.033	0.000	0.000	0.013
Leeds	0.049	0.000	0.061	0.000
Leicester	0.016	0.111	0.009	0.110
Lewes	0.059	0.000	0.000	0.021
Lincoln	0.061	0.000	0.000	0.003
Liverpool	0.036	0.000	0.000	0.055
Norwich	0.043	0.000	0.000	0.000
Nottingham	0.030	0.000	0.000	0.151
Pentonville	0.033	0.000	0.000	0.000
Preston	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Swansea	0.026	0.000	0.051	0.049
Wandsworth	0.057	0.000	0.000	0.000
Winchester	0.030	0.080	0.091	0.061
Wormwood Scrubs	0.041	0.000	0.000	0.000

Table A2. Documentary data sources.

Key stakeholders	Type of written material analyzed	Number of documents	Approximate page count
G4S	Letter to HoC Justice Committee	1	1
HM Prisons	Debriefing paper	1	13
Inspectorate	Inspection reports	3	367
	Scrutiny report	1	27
	Blog by Chief Inspector	1	7
	Letter from Chief Inspector	1	6
Howard League	Press release	1	1
Independent	Annual reports on HMP Birmingham	4	134
Monitoring Boards	Letter to HoC Justice Committee	1	2
Ministry of Justice	Improvement Notices to contractor	2	4
	Ministerial letters to HoC Justice Committee	4	12
	Ministerial response to letter from chief inspector of prisons	1	5
	Ministerial responses to IMB reports	4	17
	Outstanding Issue Notices	2	3
	Press releases	2	4
National media reports	Metro	1	9
	The Guardian	2	5
	The Independent	1	7
National Audit Office	Letter from Auditor General	1	16
Prison Reform Trust	Briefings	1	2
	Response to Justice Committee Inquiry	1	11
UK Parliament	Letter to Minister of State	2	4
	Oral evidence to House of Commons Justice Committee	1	45
	Written evidence to HoC Justice Committee	2	8