

Should we build more prisons?

Pat Strickland

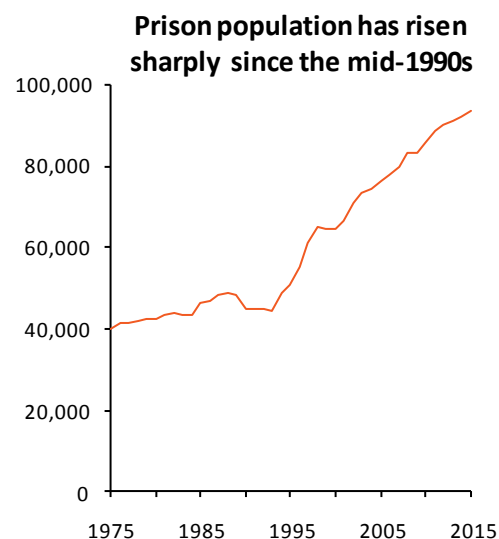
Does prison work and can we afford it?

The prison population has been rising, with an especially sharp increase since the mid 1990s. The Ministry of Justice attributes this to:

- courts sentencing more offenders to prison each year between 1995 and 2002;
- offenders staying in prison for longer, because of longer sentences and a decline in parole rates; and
- tougher enforcement following release, leading to more recalls for longer periods.

Some argue that increased crime levels in the 1980s and high profile cases, such as James Bulger's murder in 1993, fuelled political competition over sentencing. In 1993 Tony Blair promised the Labour party conference that he would be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime", while Michael Howard told the Conservative party conference that "prison works". Certainly, there has been a historically large amount of criminal justice legislation since 1994. Some also suggest that the criminal justice system – in the parole process, for example – has become more risk-averse.

The Labour Government aimed to achieve an overall net capacity of just over 96,000 by 2014, mainly through two major prison building programmes. Its Core Capacity Programme was to provide 12,500 places by 2012, with capital construction costs of around £2 billion and additional annual running costs of around £480 million. A further 7,500 places were planned through the New Prisons Programme (alongside the



closure of 5,500 inefficient places). Originally three "Titan prisons" were to provide those 7,500 places. Following consultation, five large prisons each holding 1,500 were proposed, with total capital costs of around £1.2 billion. A maintenance backlog for the existing estate may cost a further £1.2 billion.

All three main political parties have proposals to reduce reoffending and divert those for whom prison is inappropriate. Of these, only the Liberal Democrats argue that they would be able to cancel the prison building programme as a consequence.

For some, the key issue is how to keep pace effectively with the rising population; overcrowding can make rehabilitation more difficult as prisoners have reduced access to purposeful activity and are moved around more frequently. Others see the fundamental

KEY STATISTICS

- Prison population in England and Wales reached a record level of almost 85,000 in April 2010, an increase of 90% since 1993
- The prison estate has been overcrowded since 1994
- In 2008/09 it cost an average of £39,600 to keep a prisoner in prison for a year
- The UK has the second highest incarceration rate in Western Europe
- Approximately one-half of adult prisoners reoffend within one year of release
- Approximately three-quarters of juvenile prisoners reoffend within one year of release

problem as over-reliance on imprisonment, drawing resources away from preventive and rehabilitative work.

So is prison good value for money? The purposes of imprisonment are often given as incapacitation, punishment, retribution, deterrence and rehabilitation. The "prison works" argument usually cites incapacitation: prisoners cannot normally commit offences whilst incarcerated. Others, citing high rates of re-offending, argue that prison is expensive and ineffective.

Several substantial reports have recently examined these issues: see, for example, work by the Justice Committee, the

Commission on English Prisons Today (whose president was Cherie Booth), the Prison Reform Working Group (chaired by Jonathan Aitken), the Conservative Party and the National Audit Office. Questions raised include:

- Could we get better value for money by "reinvesting" some of the money spent on prisons, either in other parts of the criminal justice system (such as community sentences) or on activities that prevent crime in the first place?
- Should we have smaller local prisons, which may work better by rehabilitating offenders closer to home, or larger prisons providing economies of scale?
- How can we make justice more responsive locally?
- Could restorative justice reduce the need for imprisonment?
- Should more be done to rehabilitate prisoners serving less than twelve months, 60% of whom are reconvicted within a year but who often have no access to work or courses?

So, might the fiscal crisis prompt the kind of reassessment which prison reform advocates would welcome? Possibly. However, some commentators fear that the need to constrain costs will damage efforts to address the causes of reoffending, thus creating further pressure on prison places.