

Cost of re-offending is around £11bn - prison is a colossal failure

Erwin James

Reconviction rates show everyone should be concerned about what happens to released inmates

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One of the most significant remarks a prison governor ever made to me during the 20 years I served in jail was that, as a society, "we believe in rehabilitation for prisoners - but we are not quite sure just how rehabilitated we want them to be".

It seemed an odd thing for someone who was charged with protecting the public to say. Just as absurd was the complacent manner in which he said it.

I wondered how he could tolerate such failure. I said if we persisted with a prison system from which almost every prisoner is released, surely it is in society's best interests that prisoners leave more able and motivated to live crime-free lives than they were when they went in? There has to be more to prison than punishment. "You try telling that to the man in the street," he said.

Like most people who work in our prisons, the governor was a decent man trying to do a good job in hard circumstances. His prison, like most the late 1990s, was overcrowded and under-resourced. His main concerns were security and "good order and discipline". As long as there were no escapes or disturbances, the "key performance indicators", he could say his prison was functioning. What happened after inmates were released was not his concern.

Yet the reconviction rates revealed by the Ministry of Justice show that everyone should be concerned about what happens to released inmates. The average annual cost of keeping someone in prison is around £45,000. For some years it has been estimated that the financial cost to society of re-offending is around £11bn (the human cost, of course, is incalculable). By any measure the evidence is clear - prison as we have been using it is a colossal failure.

In any prison there are pockets of good practice where skills are taught and broken lives fixed. But since my conversation with that governor, prison numbers have risen by about 20,000. Local prisons keep most inmates locked in their cells for 20 hours or more a day.

Ever-diminishing resources and the year-on-year growth in numbers over the past two decades has led to more and more prisons being reduced to little more than human warehouses. It may be that while offenders are inside they cannot commit more crimes, but holding dangerous, damaged people in conditions that do little to encourage or enable them to change for the better stores up bigger problems.

This coalition government talks about a "rehabilitation revolution". It needs to be made clear that this is not a means of making prison life more meaningful just for the sake of the prisoners. An emphasis on rehabilitation is the only way to reduce re-offending and reduce the number of potential victims of released prisoners.

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