

Criminal Justice System Should Stop Sending So Many People to Prison

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Some crimes are so serious and some criminals so dangerous that prison is the only possible disposal; nobody disputes that. Even so, why have prison numbers burgeoned by nearly 40 per cent since 1997 to a level where we now imprison more per 100,000 of population than any other country in Europe? Where we have more lifers than Russia? How has it come to this?

An answer can be found in *Cutting Crime: The Case for Reinvestment*, a report by the House of Commons Justice Select Committee. It concluded that the incessant growth in the prison population was caused by a toxic cocktail of sensationalised or inaccurate reporting of difficult cases by the media; relatively punitive overall public opinion; a self-defeating over-politicisation of criminal justice policies since the late 1980s; and the sentencing framework and sentences.

This means not just that we are sending too many people to prison for too long; we are also sending too many of the wrong people to prison — too many mentally ill people, drug addicts, minor offenders, young people and women. But we cannot go on like this.

The committee said that the criminal justice system was facing a crisis of sustainability. The Ministry of Justice has to find £1.3 billion in savings over three years; yet new and existing resources are being pre-empted by spending plans to accommodate a potential prison population of 96,000 by 2014.

Each prisoner costs the state about £41,000 a year and building each prison place costs £100,000. Twenty thousand too many people in prison cost more than £800 million a year; 10,000 new places will cost £1 billion — and who is to say the limit will be reached at 96,000?

Public expenditure is under the greatest pressure. Now is the perfect time for the Government to be bold and curb a policy that is hogging resources to the detriment of not only the criminal justice system but also society as a whole. If, as is said, only one in 20 crimes results in the perpetrator being caught, it seems that a repressive penal policy may have no appreciable effect on the rates of offending. We could spend less and achieve more by diverting resources to prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

Locking up more people for longer plays well with the populist press. But the costs of this policy are huge and increasing and there is little to suggest that the policy works. Douglas Hurd, the former Home Secretary, once remarked that prison is an expensive way of making bad people worse. On that basis, our prison policy is an expensive way of doing more harm than good.