

Prospect

Issue 78 / September 2002

Prison is a bargain

100,000 regular offenders cause half of all crime. Lock 'em up

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The government is worried about the cost of prison, but its own studies show that incarceration is a cheap option. According to the 2001 white paper, "Criminal Justice: the Way Ahead," about 100,000 regular offenders are responsible for roughly half of all crime. The Home Office has estimated the total cost of crime to be about ? 60 billion and, if true, this would mean that persistent offenders cost ? 30 billion, or ? 300,000 per year each. Locking them up at the official average cost of only ? 37,500 per year is a bargain.

Recent prison statistics highlight the government's dilemma. It is worried about rising crime and recognises that prison deters some potential criminals. It should therefore be building more prison places. But its policy is to send fewer criminals to jail. Two beliefs explain why there is no large-scale building programme. First, the government is influenced by criminologists who claim that prison does not work. Second, it thinks that prison is too costly. Both arguments are suspect.

First, does prison work? It depends what you want it to do. It is true that it is not good at reforming bad people. But, as a method of protecting the public, prison does work: while criminals are inside, they can't steal your car. Moreover, as a method of rehabilitating offenders, it is no worse than probation and community sentences. The usual measure of effectiveness is the number of re-convictions within two years of the end of a criminal's sentence. As the Home Office acknowledges, on average, about 58 per cent of offenders are re-convicted within two years, whether they were sent to jail or given a community punishment. For 18 to 20-year-old males the proportion is 72 per cent.

Governments often deal with difficult political problems by pursuing contradictory policies, usually in the hope of upsetting as few people as possible. Policy towards crime has been a prime example. Being "tough on crime" was intended to satisfy Labour voters, who did not like having their homes broken into, and "tough on the causes" was meant to appease intellectuals, who tend to believe that crime is not really rising, or that it is caused by poverty.

The recent white paper, "Justice for All," accepts that persistent, serious offenders-the 100,000 mentioned earlier-are hard to rehabilitate and should be detained to protect the public. However, it also estimates that only about 20,000 of this group are in prison at any one time. If true, the government should be providing at least another 80,000 prison places. Instead it regards 71,500 prisoners as too many.

Is prison too costly? The Home Office estimates the average cost of keeping a prisoner inside for one year to be ? 37,500 and regards community sentences as a cheaper alternative. Some non-custodial programmes cost only ? 6,000. However, to compare the cost of prison with the cost of non-custodial sentences misses out the cost of increased crime-because community sentences do not prevent re-offending to the same extent as prison. A recent report estimates that a released prisoner who re-offends costs the criminal justice system an average of ? 65,000, not counting the ? 37,500 per year for a prison place. In addition, there were other costs falling on the public sector, such as hospital treatment of victims and the repair of property, estimated to be ? 31,000. There are also the costs borne by private citizens, including insurance premiums and security measures. In 2000, the Home Office published an estimate of the total cost of crime. The study put the total at ? 60 billion per year, a figure close to the cost of the NHS in England.

All the figures cited here are based on official estimates. To the government's credit, it has published them, but what the public wants is policies based on these facts, not on half-measures based on pleasing various different interest groups.