

Trends in imprisonment

Rob Allen looks at what has happened to prison numbers recently.



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The astonishingly steep rise in imprisonment is certainly not a result of increasing crime. The number of notifiable offences recorded by police fell by more than half a million between 1992 and 1996. Moreover there were fewer people found guilty of offences in 1996 than four years earlier. What then accounts for the record rise in incarceration?

Sentencing

Although the numbers on remand have gone up a little over the last five years, by far the largest component in the increased population is people serving prison sentences. While just over 1 in 6 of those sentenced for indictable offences in

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1992 went to prison, the proportion had risen to 1 in 4 by 1996. In addition the average length of prison sentences has gone up strikingly.

Neither the trend towards a greater use of imprisonment or towards longer sentences can be wholly attributed to changes in legislation. The Criminal Justice Act 1991 did introduce restrictions on the court's ability to impose custodial sentences and these probably accounted for the sharp fall in imprisonment in the few months after the implementation of the Act in October 1992. The amendments to that legislation introduced in 1993 - particularly restoring courts' abilities to take account of previous convictions when deciding the seriousness of an offence - probably play some part in explaining the increasing number of custodial sentences since then. It is also true that an increase in the proportion of prison sentences actually served by offenders has made an impact on the numbers inside.

A punitive climate

Rather more important in bringing about the enormous rise in imprisonment has been the development of a much more punitive climate amongst sentencers, politicians, and the press. Home Office statisticians have noted that the murder of James Bulger in February 1993 coincided with the start of the upward trend in custodial sentencing. Michael Howard's 'prison works' speech to his party conference eight months later seems to have added fuel to fire which has raged continuously since then.

Taking a longer term view, the role which imprisonment plays has undergone some more fundamental changes over the last 20 years. As well as holding proportionately more people on remand, and women offenders, prisons now contain a much higher proportion of lifers and long term prisoners among the sentenced population than in the seventies. About 40% of people under sentence are serving sentences of four years or more compared to 12% in 1974. While generalisations are difficult, on the whole prisoners tend to be older, more disturbed, more prone to using drugs and as much as it can be measured, more greatly in need than they used to be.

Counting the cost

What are the implications, both of the short term and underlying trends in imprisonment? The main problem caused by the rapid increase in population is of course overcrowding and the corrosive effect this has on regimes within prisons. At a macro level, there are obviously enormous costs involved in building and running new prisons - up to £90 million to build a new prison and £24,000 per prisoner per year to run one. Some of these costs have been somewhat masked by the joint financing arrangements with the private sector under which most new establishments are being created. What is certain is that the resources needed to expand the prison estate could be used to fund the kind of community based prevention and rehabilitation programmes which have a better track record in reducing crime.

As for the prison estate itself, the longer term changes suggest a need for more flexibility to meet the changing balance of remand, female, long term and short term populations. Small multi-function units, provided they had the necessary safeguards, might provide more suitable accommodation to hold a range of prisoners closer to home and enable them to retain links with the community. More radically, a distinct estate for women, the removal of under 18s from the Prison Service and a provision to transfer any drug dependent prisoners to residential treatment programmes would almost certainly better meet the needs of these most vulnerable prisoners, and reduce the likelihood of their re-offending.

More generally, better sentence and career planning, more treatment programmes and more resettlement regimes will be necessary if the needs of the prison population are properly to be met in a way which realistically equips offenders to lead law abiding lives on release. Sadly, unless the numbers in prison can be brought down, the opportunities to finance such initiatives on the necessary scale look remote.

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