

Working in Prisons

Baroness Vivien Stern spoke to the *Making it Happen* Conference on 25 June 2002 organised by HM Prison Service and CLINKS. This is an edited version of her speech.

Working in prisons is fascinating and full of dilemmas.

Let me start with some dilemmas. I was invited to go to Iran last month for a penal reform mission. Should I go? If I did I could be regarded as giving support to a regime where last year at least 139 people, one aged under 18, were executed. In the end I went. I was very glad I did. We were able to support the prison administration. They were the initiators of the invitation and the reform programme, as often happens. It is often the people who run the prisons day to day who understand what is wrong and suffer from doing jobs that are not do-able.

They were good people, trying to do the right thing, and by going there we were able to be the occasion for public debate on the ineffective government policies they were required to implement which filled the prisons with small-time malefactors to no good purpose.

Volunteers going into prisons to see prisoners just because they want to provide sympathetic human contact are valuable resources. They confirm that the prisoner in prison is not forgotten, not just a recipient of some service, not just a person with 'needs', but a person with a personality who is worth talking to.

But there are also dangers in such work, the work that is of outsiders going into prisons to deliver a service. The outsiders might be coming in and deskilling prison staff, giving the impression that the staff are just there to lock and unlock and the outsiders do the meaningful work.

The other grave danger is outsiders becoming so much part of the system that they lose their sense of outrage. So they keep going in to do their project, and, should it be Dartmoor, for instance, they close their eyes to what is going on. I quote the report of Chief Inspector Anne Owers about what is going on

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It is a bit like that here in two ways. First of all we suffer from ineffective policies that fill the prisons with small-time criminals. Secondly we have many talented reform-minded prison staff who are speaking out in favour of change.

What in this context is the proper role for outside organisations, for civil society?

I shall suggest three proper roles. The first is promoting acceptance, respect and inclusion in civil society for prisons, prison staff, prisoners and the prison as a local institution that belongs to the community, being a bridge between prisons and society, helping prisoners to be seen as citizens, and prison staff as valued contributors to a local community.

Secondly there is indeed a role for outsiders, NGO's and civil society organisations, to actually go into prisons and provide the prisoners with some service. At their best outsiders going into prisons can give prisoners a choice and access to services they are able to get outside and lose access to when incarcerated, e.g. Citizens Advice Bureaux, confidential counselling services, liberation through art or drama.

in that prison – prisoners being variously described to the Inspectors as "the shit" or "rubbish" of the system or "these people" or "coloureds".

But the outsiders carry on working because they think their work is so important or the contract is so important to their organisation that they are silenced. Thus they do a disservice to the prisoners and to the prison staff.

So the third and maybe the most important role for outsiders is to be the conscience of the community, to make it clear to the public what is wrong, to give a voice to the moral concerns of the prison service and staff.

Children in prison is one such area. I looked for the figure of children we have locked up – not for their own protection but because they have done wrong and are being punished. Apparently the figure is 3450.

The Howard League for Penal Reform says that in the last 10 years 18 children killed themselves in prison. In a recent 18-month period there were 554 recorded incidents of children harming themselves. Also force was used 3620 times and 296 children were injured. Isolation was used as a punishment

4437 times by the end of April 2000.

I am surprised no one has stepped in to try and get an order to remove these children to a place of safety. But maybe if the Howard League succeeds in its claim against the Home Office for failing to apply the Children Act in prisons these children might be better treated.

So there is plenty to speak out about regarding children in prison. But that is not all. The situation of women in prison is an outrage too. There are 4328 women in prison, an increase of 21% on last year alone. What sort of women? In fact women suffering from multiple deprivation – women who come from poverty and from the worst our society has to offer. According to the Prison Reform Trust, 25% have been in care, 20% in a psychiatric hospital, nearly half have no education to speak of, and half are dependent on drugs.

So we put them in a place like Eastwood Park, which according to our measured and thoughtful Chief Inspector Anne Owers is neither safe, decent nor constructive. She said that the prison could not deal with the high level of psychiatric illness among the prisoners. So why were they there?

Many were suicidal or damaged themselves. In one month there were 47 incidents of self-harm and 56 suicide risks. There have been three suicides since April 2000. It sounds like a hospital not a prison.

Then the visitors were very badly treated. They had no access to lavatories. Some of the prisoners had to receive their visitors and talk to them through glass – so called closed visits. There must have been a grave security risk but it is hard to believe it is right. Finally the prisoners at Eastwood Park often did not even get their one hour a day in the fresh air although this is a basic human right – accepted by all the prison systems of the world as a right.

I cannot imagine going to another country and saying we are locking up hundreds of mentally ill women, treating their visitors with disrespect and not allowing them their one hour's exercise in the open air per day.

I would possibly keep quiet about it abroad, but it is not acceptable to keep quiet about it at home. It is too shaming. Here in this room are 500 people who all care about prisons, and are all decent, respectable people with moral codes. What is going on in this country in our own prisons is not good enough. If we were only to be concerned about the women and children without noting the situation of men in overcrowded prisons there would be enough for all of us to do.

Outsiders working in prisons have a responsibility to awaken the conscience of the community. They must ensure people know what is being done in their name, help the politicians understand that their penal policies will not do and that they are asking the prison service to do what it is not right to ask them to do. They must show that there is here a broad constituency of concern that wants to see less which makes us ashamed and more which is acceptable, ethical and constructive in prisons and in the community when prisoners leave.

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What lies behind attitudes?

A review of the mainly North American literature on attitudes suggests that attitudes to offenders are more sympathetic in times of prosperity and optimism. While demographic factors are important, variables such as prejudice and fear of crime play an important role. A just world belief – that good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people – and Christian fundamentalism are all linked with punitiveness. Those who fear crime are more likely to think courts lenient and advocate heavier sentences. Perhaps surprisingly, victimisation does not seem to effect punitive attitudes.

The media plays an important role in shaping attitudes, having taken over the role of elders as primary storytellers in modern culture. The media misrepresents the level of occurrence and nature of criminal acts. Those who watch a lot of TV tend to be more fearful, and those who watch crime programmes are more punitive.

Measuring attitudes is more complicated than it seems. Some people hold attitudes for instrumental reasons – more prison keeps me safe – others for expressive reasons – more prison gives offenders what they deserve. Attitudes to prison may also include attitudes to the various components – retribution, deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation. Increasing knowledge and understanding may reduce punitive attitudes as may developing empathy, but a number of studies have shown that repeat offenders elicit little sympathy (Wood and Viki, 2001).

Measuring public attitudes is by no means easy. Some of the evidence is contradictory and difficult to read. The important lessons for policy are that: the public are not as pro-prison as is generally supposed; there is a much scope for marketing alternatives to prison; and that there is much support for prevention.

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