

## The old debate: punish prisoners, or rehabilitate them?

A prisoner's complaint that he has been denied radio in prison reminds us that incarceration is about more than just deterrence



A prisoner behind bars Photo: GETTY IMAGES

By Eleanor Muffitt

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Debates over how to treat prisoners have gone on since imprisonment began: should the prison system leave inmates to fester in cold cells, with punishment and deterrence as the goal of incarceration? Or should it let them wander from classroom to games room, preaching rehabilitation into society as its main aim? Alan Weston, currently serving his second rape sentence at HMP Frankland, complained to prison newspaper *Inside Time* this month saying he couldn't access National Prison Radio (NPR) on his new digital system. Mr Weston's complaint raises the age-old question – should we give criminals the same basic luxuries we take for granted, or would that be spoiling them?

Although the UK spends a higher amount of GDP on public order than the US or any EU countries, our jails are highly ineffective. With over 83,000 prisoners currently locked away, England and Wales have a staggering imprisonment rate of 150 per 100,000 of the population. Our prisons have been officially overcrowded since 1994; nearly 14,000 current inmates are serving indeterminate sentences.

If lowering the number of criminals is the reason behind imprisonment, recent figures point to a failing

system: almost three quarters of under-18s are reconvicted within a year of release. As James Bell, an American lawyer and prison reform activist, said: “As it stands now, justice systems are extremely expensive, do not rehabilitate, but in fact make the people that experience them worse.”

In response to worldwide alarm over the ineffectiveness of how we manage criminals, a growing number of prisons are embracing a new style of incarceration. By giving inmates more responsibility, comfort, and freedom within the prison walls, governors say they are offering prisoners the chance to change. In Austria’s Justizzentrum Leoben minimum security prison, convicts live in one-bed cells which each come with a television set and en suite. Halden prison in Norway has a two-bedroom house where inmates can enjoy overnight visits from family members. Critics argue such systems can only lead to unruly and dangerous behaviour, but surprisingly one of them boasts the lowest reoffending rate in Europe.

Bastøy Prison, situated on an island off the coast of Norway, is a minimum-security prison home to over 110 inmates, but only 69 staff members. Every type of offender may be accepted, and those who are free to cycle the island’s tracks and fish in the surrounding waters. When interviewed, many of its prisoners expressed eagerness to start families and enter employment upon release.

Greater freedom for inmates is slowly becoming more accepted in the UK. The radio service Alan Weston wanted to listen to is part of a scheme by the Prison Radio Association, a charity established in 2006 following inmate appeals for prison radio. One of several prison programmes aimed at lowering reoffending rates, content for the Sony Award-winning NPR station is presented and produced by prisoners.

As the Prison Radio Association spokesperson said: “Reducing reoffending is of benefit to everybody. Equipping prisoners with skills and confidence is crucial in bringing down reoffending rates. Prison radio offers a unique, innovative and effective way to communicate with prisoners and engage them in education, debate and community.”

In addition to equipping inmates for life after imprisonment, the station also gives convicts something essential to successful rehabilitation: hope. As Michael, an inmate at HMP Lindholme said: “I’ve just been introduced to NPR and the inspiration your radio station gives has been a very welcome breath of fresh air. I have now found a new lease of life and I’m now going after a dream I once had as a student at college”.

With fewer than 15 open prisons in the UK, our system is focused on punishment rather than rehabilitation. However, the results of loosening our hold on prisoners and granting them more responsibility are clear.

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