



Christianity and The Future of Prisons

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Proverbs 30: 2-9 John 8: 1-11

I have always had a problem with punishment. I have never understood how inflicting pain on someone makes things better. It may be that the person has done wrong, perhaps even something very nasty, but how can it possibly be the case that involving the rest of us, by collusion or directly, in inflicting pain is ever going to make things better.

Having been a victim of crime, several times, I understand the emotional tendency to lash out and to want revenge, it is of course a primal and visceral reaction. But, what we know is that victims of crime are treated badly by a justice system based on revenge. We only have to look at the dismal figures of arrests, prosecution and conviction for rape. But even at the lower end of the crime spectrum, people who are victims of minor assault or theft are treated badly, often forgotten, and research shows that few victims feel good at the end of the process.

Yet, when reparative solutions are engaged, victims are more likely to have confidence in the system and feel fairly treated and that the frequency of offending is more likely to be reduced. These are practical arguments in favour of a radical change in our system of justice, but I believe there is more fundamental reason for change. The central place of punishment in our society is morally corrosive and contaminates us all. It generates a blood lust, evident in politicians who compete with one another to call for more vicious punishments. It generates division and hate, focussing on people who are often the most vulnerable or ostracised.

It does not have to be like this. Restorative justice has been around for a long time, and more recently reparative solutions are ideas that have gained ground.

We need to change the ethical framework of the justice system. Immediately, the challenge is to keep as many people as possible out of the toxic criminal justice system. I retired from leading the Howard League for Penal Reform a few months ago. My focus had been, over the last ten years or so, aimed at keeping children out of the system.

Edinburgh University conducted longitudinal research on thousands of children which showed that the more contact they had with the police, the worse the outcomes and the more likely they were to get involved in crime. In 2010 I launched a programme of work aimed at stopping the police from arresting children. I found that in four years to 2011, the police carried out over a million child arrests, including 2,000 primary school age children in one year. This was feeding the crime problem, leading to a life of disaffection,

and was the reason for the inflated use of prison for children who were being pushed through the system. In England and Wales there were over 3,000 children in prisons and other penal institutions.

This is the work that I am most proud of. We worked with police to get them to understand that doing nothing was the almost always the best option. For normal childhood challenges, parents and schools are best placed to respond. We all know that children, teenagers, are annoying, and do things we wish they wouldn't, but that challenge is a normal part of growing up and arrest is not the proper response.

We put out local press statements and each year I would do around 40 radio interviews. At the start, the main question would be: but they have done something wrong so why aren't we arresting them? After ten years of public education campaigning, the question would be, why is our local police force not doing as well as a neighbouring force at reducing arrests.

Just before I retired we published the latest figures, which showed just over 72,000 child arrests, a decrease of 75% in ten years. The number of primary school aged children arrested had been reduced to 383. By last year, the number of children in penal custody had, as a consequence, been reduced to around 560, almost all boys. And, no there were no children of primary school age in custody and hardly any 12, 13 or 14 year olds.

At the same time, crimes committed by children, even serious crimes have fallen.

We are starting to see the knock-on effects working their way through the system with fewer older teenagers in custody.

In case anyone needs reminding why keeping young people out of prison is so important, just have a look at the reports published by inspectors into places like Feltham which has incarcerated tens of thousands of boys and has never, never, been a decent or safe place, where violence by staff and by boys is an everyday occurrence, where the boys don't get decent or even enough food, where boys are lucky to get just a few hours education a week, where punishment is an everyday event, and at the end of it all, the children are often released to no proper support and even homelessness.

Prison is no place for children.

I spent a lot of time in prisons in my 30 year career, including over 100 of the prisons in the UK, some of them many times. I recall going to a private prison holding young boys. I was told how well the boys were treated. We were served lunch by boys out on the wing and I was told how they were all engaged in positive activity. I walked away from the guided tour led by the governor, along the wing and asked to see inside the cells, where I had been assured there were no boys. I found two lads who told me they had been locked up for days. One showed me his great wadge of 'nickings' – sheets of paper showing his punishments. The one on top was for ringing his cell bell. He told me the officer had brought him a metal tray of lunch to eat alone in his cell, but no knife and fork, so he rang the bell, for which he had been 'nicked'.

The pandemic has had a terrible impact on prisons, for children and adults. People have been locked in isolation, or perhaps even worse, two to a cell designed and designated for one person, all day and night for two years. Many prisons are still containing people in their cells for extended periods. Staff shortages mean there just are not enough people to run prisons decently.

Looking forward, now I can take a step back, I am hopeful that the number of children in the criminal justice and penal systems will remain low – I think police across the country at a senior level have understood that bringing children into police custody is counter-productive and expensive – and in some ways the massive publicity about egregious cases illustrates my point, that they are now exceptional whereas they used to be the norm.

But, government estimates indicate that the number of people in prison is set to reach over 100,000. To accommodate them, there is a massive prison building programme. You may recall that Michael Gove, when he was briefly Secretary of State for Justice, indicated that he wanted to build new prisons to replace the Victorian jails. This is no longer the policy, the new prisons are in addition to the old ones.

We will be a carceral society. No one is without sin. But we choose how to respond to wrong-doing and we can choose to make things worse, or we can choose to try and heal the damage that has been done by crime.

You, the young people here, are the future. You choose.