

Socially progressive prisons cost less

*Addressing the chronic state of Irish prisons has financial benefits as well as humanitarian and social advantages, writes **Kevin Warner***

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In the face of the severe hardship that pervades our society at present, the conditions for people held in prison are unlikely to generate widespread concern. Yet, such arrangements do deserve close attention, since matters have degenerated greatly in recent years – but also because some of the most sensible responses can save rather than cost money.

A number of authoritative reports released in the past year have been scathing of the dreadful (and worsening) conditions in which the majority of prisoners are now held.

These include examinations by the Inspector of Prisons, Judge Michael Reilly; by the Irish prison chaplains, in their 2010 annual report; and by the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), the Council of Europe body that recently scrutinised some of our larger prisons.

Further, a series of searching Dail questions by Ciaran Lynch TD have helped reveal just how low standards have fallen. Terms such as ‘inhumane’, ‘degrading’, ‘unsafe’ and ‘dysfunctional’ are frequently used in the reports on our prisons. The CPT expresses “real concern as to the safe and humane treatment of prisoners”. The chaplains say “conditions in many of our prisons are today an insult to the dignity of any human being”, and regard the prison environment as “increasingly oppressive and destructive”.

The Inspector of Prisons repeatedly stresses that sanitary arrangements in prisons like Mountjoy, Cork and Limerick amount to “inhumane and degrading treatment”.

Overcrowding, high lock-up times, unhealthy and undignified sanitary arrangements, drug-taking, the lack of purposeful activities, and excessive restrictions universally applied (as in limiting contact with families) all combine to produce indefensible prison regimes.

Over a quarter of a century ago, a government report produced under the chairmanship of T. K. Whitaker set out clearly the very basic standards that should be applied in our prisons. Each

prisoner, they stipulated, should sleep in a single cell, have access to toilet facilities at all times, and be out of the cell for at least 12 hours each day.

Prisoners should be able to spend full days engaged in education, work and other purposeful activities, and should have the maximum opportunities for contact with family members. The Whitaker Report saw these as very basic conditions, yet things have deteriorated greatly since then.

Ciaran Lynch's questioning is particularly useful in showing the precise scale of some of the current problems, and how far we have slipped from the basic Whitaker standards. Over 62% of all prisoners must now share cells, nearly all of which were designed for one, and this problem worsened in 2010. Over a thousand prisoners must 'slop out', but most prisoners have to use toilets in the presence of others, whether there is in-cell sanitation or not. Lock-up times are becoming greater, with few out of cells for more than seven hours. Nearly 500 prisoners are locked up for over 20 hours a day, over half of these for 23 hours – usually on no other basis than that these prisoners feel vulnerable and have asked for 'protection'.

There is much evidence also that the scope for engaging in meaningful activity like education, training or therapy is becoming more and more limited for prisoners. Prison officers are increasingly assigned to security roles while workshop instructor posts are left vacant. Greater numbers in prison, and increasing segregation, lock-up and other restrictions within prisons, mean access to education is declining for many prisoners.

The reports give many disturbing insights into what these arrangements mean in reality. For example, the CPT report is critical of the regime for 66 prisoners 'on protection' in the C wing in Cork Prison, noting that

“as many of these prisoners could not associate with one another, a considerable number of them spent up to 23 hours locked in their cells. Further, none of the 9m2 cells possessed integral sanitation and several of them accommodated three persons, with one inmate sleeping on a mattress on the floor”.

Speaking of women held in Limerick Prison, the Inspector of Prisons says in his report of July 2010:

“I have stated that the in-cell sanitation is not screened. The toilet is not covered. I have observed food trays and towels being used as toilet covers. When there is more than one prisoner in a cell a prisoner attending to her sanitary or washing requirements does so within feet and in full view of her fellow prisoner.”

The chaplains condemned “the inappropriate imprisonment of people with mental illness, the inhumane imprisonment of the chronically ill, the unacceptable regime for juvenile offenders...” They describe the reality of the youngsters in St. Patricks Institution:

“[It] accommodates some of the most difficult (and therefore some of the most damaged) children in our society. Most of them suffered abuse, violence or serious neglect in their earlier childhood, sometimes in other institutions, abuse that was never adequately addressed. Rather than helping them to identify and address these issues (which have often contributed to their offending and subsequent detention), St. Patrick’s Institution is a ‘warehouse’ for young people, many of whom were broken by those childhood experiences.”

Ireland’s prison population has more than doubled in the past 15 years. We lock up 4,600 men, women and children nowadays. We could reduce that number, perhaps by as many as 2,000, if we adhered to the principle of using prison ‘as a last resort’ – the principle advocated by Whitaker and the Council of Europe, among others. Given that a prison place now costs on average about €90, 000 per annum, reducing prison numbers offers the country great financial savings. Alternatives to imprisonment such as community service and addiction treatment are far less costly. For once, the socially progressive thing to do is also the economically wise one.

With far fewer in prison, regimes could become more humane and less destructive, enabling life inside to become more tolerable and purposeful for prisoners and staff. We need a far greater proportion of our prisoners in open prisons like Shelton Abbey and Loughan House. As well as costing half to run as closed prisons, open prisons do far less damage to prisoners, enabling them to prepare for reintegration into society in a much better way, as the Inspector of Prisons notes.

Kevin Warner worked from 1979 to 2009 as Co-ordinator of Prison Education in the Irish prison system and has wide experience at a European level in relation to prison education and prison policy.