

RICHARD SPARKS

But Mr Howard has professed a readiness to see the system expand further.

MICHAEL HOWARD

We shall no longer judge the success of our system of justice by a fall in our prison population.

ROD MORGAN

At the time that the Woolf Report came out in 1991 the prison population had fallen fairly significantly and was fairly stable and most people reading the Woolf Enquiry Report agreed that there was an agenda for change there to which they could commit themselves.

Following the Woolf Report the government issued a white paper in which they said that they had accepted nearly all of Lord Woolf's recommendations. However, since then times have changed, I'm afraid, quite dramatically. The fact that the Home Secretary has himself said that prison works appears to have encouraged sentences to make more liberal use of imprisonment, both the numbers going to prison and the length of sentences, and so the prison population has risen dramatically from the low 40s to between 51 and 52 thousand now.

There isn't room for manoeuvre and, furthermore, the Home Secretary has said that he wants prisons to be made more austere and various things are being done to realise that objective.

If the population continues to rise, if we continue to have, towards the end of this century, the sort of overcrowding that we've had in the past, then I fear that the Woolf agenda will go out of the window and we'll have further troubles in our prisons.

RICHARD SPARKS

The concern is that a rising prison population makes it 'harder to address prisoners' problems or have decent human relationships and without these the potential for personal damage is profound. Alison Liebling has studied suicide and self harm in prisons.

ALISON LIEBLING

We had quite an increase in 1987 from about 20/25 suicides a year to about 40 or 50 suicides a year and the numbers have stayed pretty high since then, In fact, last year it was about 61 and there's every sign that's it's going to be about that sort of figure this year.

Other countries are showing the same kind of increase so the numbers are-high quite high. You need to look at rates to work out whether or not they're more or less than in the community and what the research shows is that even if you take the same population out in the community the rate is higher in custody than it is outside.

There are lots of possible reasons but the simplest is that, first of all, we imprison a very vulnerable population. If you were to describe the most at risk population in the

community you would describe, at the moment, the young male population, those who are socially disadvantaged, people who are alcohol and drug addicted, people who don't have work and stable ties, and that's the prison population.

So, they're vulnerable before they come into custody but then you have to look at what the stage is that they're at in custody. Often it's a period where family ties are finally cut. If relationships have been a bit dodgy then once they get into custody they're often ended and also they have survived the experience of prison. And so the two things together can make life in prison very difficult.

ROLAND

The mental process of coming into this institution can be horrendous sometimes. You know, stripping you of your identity as you come through the gate, you know, in through the reception. We, we don't get it here but I've seen it and I've felt it in other establishments. You're just totally stripped of your identity and if you're coming in for a fairly minor offence that can be so horrendous sometimes that you don't get over, even after you've time your init-, small period of time, your three months and been discharged and you're still trying to get over that stripping of, your identity because there's no process within prison that puts your identity back into you again.

ALISON LIEBLING

If I think of cases of prisoners I've interviewed after suicide attempts, the reasons probably fall into categories. I think, first of all, a major problem is family and outside responding to an intolerable situation, either a visit not turning up or the ending of a relationship - in the case of some women, children being taken into care - an intolerable relationship problem, but then there can be reasons to do with what's going in prison. Bullying can be a factor, particularly for young male prisoners. I mean, all sorts of problems that people can through whilst they're in custody.

Sometimes prisoners use this word boredom. They'll say, I did it because it because I was bored, but when they're given time to talk about that in a bit more detail they often end up with the word depressed or fed up or a different set of words. So, I think there's often a kind of superficial explanation and then there's a much deeper explanation that only comes out if people are allowed the time to express themselves properly.

RICHARD SPARKS

Perhaps we're not really clear on what we do want from our penal system. There's a tension under the prison is meant both to satisfy the rising demand for retribution and yet to deliver safe custody and positive regimes.

ALISON LIEBLING

The unfair expectations on the prison service are almost never talked about and I think it's something I know staff feel quite strongly about, although they don't often think about it in these terms, that what they're being asked to do is, first of all, look after groups of people who nobody else has ever looked after or wants to look after and then they're expected to solve all the damage that's been done over sometimes a very long history in whatever time they have - 12 months - and then they're held

accountable when things go wrong. And I think they're in an impossible situation, the impossibility of their task is not really acknowledged.

DAVID WILSON

One finds increasingly as a prison governor that people don't just happen to come into prison on day one with no previous record or criminal career, they come in with a great deal of past history and past involvement with social services. They have very distinct problems in their lives, be it unemployment, lack of job skills, be it addictions – either to alcohol or to drugs - have no formal educational qualifications and the, of course, and sadly, they're stigmatised by having the label 'offender' or 'ex-offender' applied to them.

So that question is a much broader one and it's not simply the responsibility of the prison service to do something about that.