

PATTI LANGTON

This is Side 2 of D3 15 audio cassette 2. This side looks at how various researchers have addressed the question 'Does Prison Work'? It relates directly to Book 3 Chapter 2 & Book 2 Chapter 5 of the course. It's presented by Richard Sparks of Reeley University.

MICHAEL HOWARD

Let's be clear, prison works. It ensures that we are protected from murderers, muggers and rapists and it makes many who are tempted to commit crime think twice.

RICHARD SPARKS

Michael Howard, Home Secretary speaking at the 1993 Tory Party Conference, reasserting prisons role in his law & order agenda to the delight of his audience. But how do those who work in the prison system or have first hand knowledge of it react to his views? Roland is a lifer at Grenden Prison.

ROLAND

I don't think he really realises what prison is. I don't, you know, I think this is a political statement on his part. It doesn't do anything for me at all and it doesn't do anything for a lot of other men I've talked to who hear that kind of thing because, you know, we've come from other establishments, we see what they're like, we experience what they're like, you know. It doesn't mean anything. It's their containment institutions.

RICHARD SPARKS

Rod Morgan, Professor of Criminal Justice at Bristol University.

ROD MORGAN

It depends how you interpret what the Home Secretary said. I mean, prison clearly works in the sense that whilst a person is in prison they're not committing crime and his remarks can be interpreted to mean little more than that.

If we take the broader functions of imprisonment, however, you can take a variety of perspectives. Prison can be said to work in the sense that the public require that there be some sort of retributive response to crimes about which they are seriously concerned and that they will only be satisfied in that respect if the person receives the most serious punishment that can be imposed - the person is locked up.

But if you want to make someone better, whatever being better might mean, you want to make them literate, you want to give them job skills, you want them to face up to the seriousness of their offending behaviour, whatever it comprises, the worst conceivable place in which to do it is a prison.

RICHARD SPARKS

Larry Viner, a London magistrate.

LARRY VINER

The Home Secretary is talking through his hat. The statistics that are available for the amount of people that re-offend within leaving prison of two year period are astronomically high. And that doesn't take in to account the clever ones who are offending and not getting caught-.

RICHARD SPARKS

Alison Liebling, of the Institute of Criminology in Cambridge.

ALISON LEIBLING

My feeling at the moment is that prison is being over used, that expectations of what it can do are very high and that if we're realistic we have to start from where we are, I do believe you could make the experience of prison more constructive but only if it's applied to a smaller proportion of the offending population.

RICHARD SPARKS

Tim Newell, Governor of Grenden Prison.

NEWELL

It concerned me that we were being faced with a change in emphasis in the way the prisons were being used through that approach and, although one can see that it appealed to a certain trend present in society at that time with one or two reactions to events of that period, nevertheless anybody working in the criminal justice system realises that prisons are very damaging places for individuals and that we should use them as sparingly, as necessary.

They work for certain needs of society but they don't work as a main approach and a main sort of guideline of the criminal justice system.

RICHARD SPARKS

Eric Cullen, Head of Psychology at Grenden Prison.

ERIC CULLEN

Although there are a number of disparate, very positive programmes to address offending behaviour, it's only quite recently that the prison service has got its act together in terms of co-ordinating those and looking to other models of, of treating behaviour like Grenden for direction and so it's been hit and miss for a very long time and most prisons are primarily about clothing, sheltering, feeding and containing large numbers of inmates.

RICHARD SPARKS

David Wilson, Head of Operational Training for the prison service.

DAVID WILSON

I think though before we make too many broader statements about does prison work we've really got to satisfy ourselves that we've answered the question, what is prison for.

I mean, is prison about keeping people in custody or is prison about rehabilitating people once they are in custody? Is there some synthesis between those two answers? Well,

I don't think there's really any consensus at all about whether prison is for one or for the other and it seems to me, as a prison governor, that I, I can be criticised, or the prison service can be criticised for being too austere and having too, keeping people in unnecessary secure conditions and at the same time can be criticised, often by the same newspapers, groups of people, for not doing enough about stopping people trying to escape. And so I think the debate really hasn't yet been fully resolved enough to answer the question, does prison work.

RICHARD SPARKS

Deciding whether or not prison works seems on closer examination to be a complex and uncertain matter. David Wilson points out that we first have to be clear what we want prisons to do. Maybe prison works if it securely contains. But Morgan suggests that for prison to work it should deliver a just penalty.

Then there is the hope that prisons might also act constructively to change offenders attitudes and behaviour. But we've also heard that prison can be an actively damaging experience. It seems that for prison to work it must have some bearing on the community's safety. But what does this tell us about who should go to prison. What should happen to them there?

The prison service has summarised its objectives in the form of a mission statement.

MAN

Her Majesty's prison service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and to help them lead law abiding and useful lives in custody and after release.

ROD MORGAN

The first thing that any prison system must do and it's first legal obligation is to ensure that people who are sentenced to prison by the court stay there. No prison system is worth its salt in terms of its, its prime functions if it doesn't put security at a fairly high - it shouldn't be security at my price because any worthwhile prison system has to be taking risks because we expect people who have been to prison to lead law abiding lives on their release.

And if they come out of prison as the Woolf enquiry report put it "alienated and embittered" and thus less likely to subscribe to the values of justice represented by the criminal justice system, less likely to have respect for the law, less likely to have respect for the rights of other citizens, then the prison system has failed and, furthermore, it's undermined the very purpose of the criminal justice system.

So, any prison system that's worthwhile has got to remember that the vast majority of its charges are in prison for days, weeks, months, rather than years. We estimate, and I'm talking now just about the sentence population, that approaching 80 percent of all sentence prisoners are in prison for less than a year. So it's a transitory experience.

It's true the minority of them will go back time and time again but for most prisoners prison is a transitory experience. So it makes no sense to run any prison system such that after this relatively transitory period people come out less capable of leading a law abiding life.

RICHARD SPARKS

So how well to prisons deter or rehabilitate? Presumably, if a prison can, in principle, work it can also fail and maybe a prison designed mainly to deter or simply contain might be worse at rehabilitating. Sooner or later, and mostly sooner, they all come out. But will they or we have benefited? The evidence is not encouraging.

DAVID WILSON

Prison doesn't deter them. In fact, sometimes I would say, if anything, because of the, the name of prisons as they are at the moment, it tends to ingrain certain attitudes and people that really should be taken away. So you, you're sending people back on the streets in a lot of ways from other institutions, who are more bitter, who, who have a pr-, a tendency maybe to become more violent. So the, nature of their offending behaviour tends to get worse rather than better.

LARRY VINER

People appear again and again who have served custodial sentences for whom it has obviously not made any difference. People regularly commit offences on bail because they know they're going to go to prison and they want to get as much as they can before they go in. It's arguable that where somebody knows that they're going to go into custody that they represent a greater risk to society than somebody who isn't going to go in.

TIM NEWELL

The evidence is that the more people there are in prisons the more damaging the experience is for those who are going through it, particularly in overcrowded situations where there are, there's a great emphasis on numbers and where programmes and activities can't be fully developed with paying due care to the individual.

That's not to say that the programmes within prisons don't in fact help individuals, and our experience here is that many men derive considerable benefit from what we're able to provide at Grenden, but for the vast majority of people coming into prisons there isn't that opportunity and there isn't that experience for them and therefore the separation from home, the disruption to their family life, their economic life has considerable long term consequences.