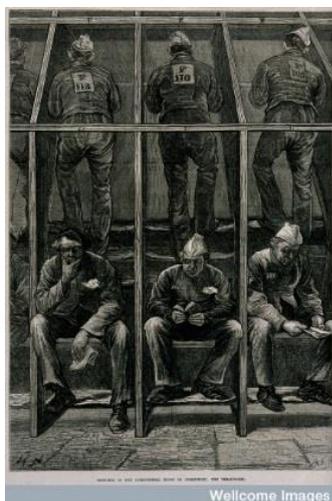


Prisons - still searching for a solution

By Professor Hilary Marland and Dr Ana Chamberlen
from the University of Warwick's Knowledge Centre Feb 2017



Men standing in a frame treading on the boards of a treadmill: in the foreground others sit looking glum. Wood engraving by W.B.S. after M.F. Wellcome Library,

Victorian prisons were dreadful and frightening places. Writers and commentators of the time criticised the prison system, and called for change. Fast forward 130 years and the media is full of opinion and exposé on the current set-up. England now has the largest prison population in Western Europe. Will there ever be a system which works?

Prison. It's meant to be awful right? Isn't that what teaches criminals not to reoffend? *"That certainly ended up being the tactic in the Victorian era,"* explains Professor Hilary Marland from the University of Warwick's Department of History.

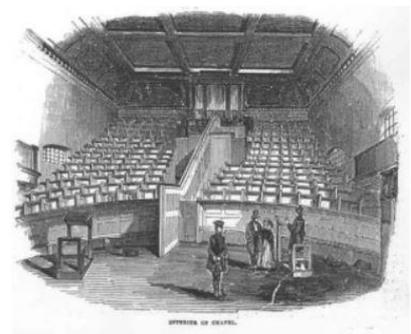
"Discipline was always rigidly imposed, including the rule of silence – communication between prisoners was severely punished and prisoners were locked in their cells for 23 hours out of 24 during the first 18 months of their sentences. Every minute of the prisoners' day was closely observed and regulated."

Professor Marland is Principal Investigator on the Wellcome Trust funded project, *Prisoners, Medical Care and Entitlement to Health in England and Ireland 1850-2000*. Her research focuses particularly on the impact of prisons on mental wellbeing. *"The discipline of separate confinement was introduced in the 1840s, associated with the arrival of the modern penitentiary in Britain. But, in this system there was at least the spirit of transformation. In the quiet of the cell, prisoners were urged to reflect on their crimes, to repent and to reform. Prisoners were to be educated and taught a trade, to equip them to lead better lives when they left prison to be transported to the colonies,"* continues Professor Marland.

"Yet, despite initial optimism and the iron discipline that accompanied it, within a decade the system was seen to be breaking down," she explains. *"The regime was difficult to impose in many prisons, transportation had been abandoned and*

replaced with hard, and oftentimes pointless, labour, and reoffending remained a major problem.

“The shift in emphasis from reform to punishment and deterrence was embedded in the Prison Act of 1877, which introduced greater uniformity and harsher conditions. Edmund Du Cane, Chair of the Prison Commission from 1877 to 1895, intended the prison estate to operate with the precision of a machine; if prison could not actually stop habitual prisoners reoffending then at least it would deter others,” concludes Professor Marland.



Interior of the Chapel, Pentonville Prison. *Illustrated London News* (7 January 1843). Public Domain.

So is that still the view of prisons now and, with some prisons appearing to reach crisis, are they doing the job are they supposed to do? Dr Anastasia Chamberlen, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Warwick. *“Since the mid-1990s the two biggest parties in England have maintained a popular ‘tough on crime’ stance,”* explains Dr Chamberlen. *“So we’ve seen vast increases in prisoner numbers in this period. Continuing to appear punitive and tough on offenders not only gains popular support but suggests a sober stance towards the problem of crime, an issue which has traditionally made public anxious and fearful.*

“Reform is still a major buzzword,” she continues. *“In the past few years, a series of Lord Chancellors have promised reform in prisons, but their focus has always been to prioritize a reduction in reoffending rather than a reduction in the use of custody.*

“Research shows that prisons certainly aren’t responsible for cutting crime. So unless dedicated effort, faith and capital is invested in alternatives to incarceration, reoffending rates are unlikely to decrease,” says Dr Chamberlen. *“Failing to address the problems of crime and punishment means the public continues to be anxious and distrustful and expects criminals to be sent to prison and this creates a vicious cycle. Tackling the current crisis through a focus on reoffending neglects entirely the conditions under which rehabilitation can work,”* she says.

But prisons aren't as bad as they were... Professor Marland continues: *"There is little doubt that Victorian prisons, even though discipline was by and large maintained, were terrible and frightening places. They attracted fierce criticism from contemporary observers. Charles Dickens had protested the introduction of the separate system in the 1840s as 'cruel and wrong' and authors such as Charles Reade and John Galsworthy were to condemn its continued usage as a system of punishment into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prison inmates, The Speaker magazine argued in 1895, were 'the victims of tyranny as merciless as it was stupid and revolting'.*

"Criticism also came from within. In an article published in The Fortnightly Review in 1894 under the title 'Are our Prisons a Failure?', Reverend William Morrison, chaplain at Wandsworth Prison between 1887 and 1898, argued that the severe and highly deterrent regime operating in prisons was not only failing, but actually destroying prisoners' minds. He asserted that rates of insanity in prisons had doubled since the 1877 Prison Act, associating recidivism with the debilitating process of imprisonment, which made many men unfit to earn an honest living."

Surely, society has moved on from these dark times though? *"Prisons continue to be dangerous and harmful places,"* concludes Dr Chamberlen. *"With the current system there's little that can effectively address issues that lead someone to crime in the first place, let alone deter people from offending. The punitive approach to imprisonment and the brutal environments of prisons still can't address the problems of crime and the inequalities that are associated with offending. And tragically, they continue to cost the lives of people whose care was in the hands of the state."*

Dr Chamberlen is working on a research project entitled *Why Punishment Pleases*, examining the urge to punish in neoliberal societies and examining the underlying reasons for pursuing punishment even when it is ineffective. *"Meanwhile, the government once again announced its intention to implement reforms by hiring more prison staff,"* adds Dr Chamberlen. *"While these are welcome proposals which may address some of the immediate and short-term emergencies faced by the prison service at the moment, we need to address the underlying issues that created the situation in prisons in the first place."*

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