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## Prison reform

### Crime and punishment

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#### Britain needs fewer prisons, not more



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BRITAIN locks up more of its people than any other country in western Europe: 145 out of every 100,000 compared with France's 88 (though a fraction of America's 738). Sentences have got tougher, with longer stints in prison for pettier offences. Crime is, broadly, falling. Yet the British have less confidence in their government's ability to crack down on violence and crime than the French, Germans, Italians, Spanish or Americans, an Ipsos-MORI poll revealed last week.

For that, thank a run of bad news which has Britons reeling from headline to headline. If one were to believe the tabloids, paedophiles are rampaging through the schools and undeported foreign felons through the countryside. A string of crimes by convicts on early release culminated in a particularly sad and nasty sexual assault on a three-year-old girl, which came before the courts this month.

Carefully stoked by the press, popular passions are running high against everyone involved with the administration of justice. One home secretary (the minister in charge of prisons, the police and immigration) got the boot in May. His successor, John Reid, is busily putting the boot into everyone else, lambasting judges for being soft on crime and scaring the daylight out of his department. The Tories are demanding more prisons. Meanwhile, Tony Blair was due on June 23rd to urge a new balance between the rights of offenders and those of victims in favour of the latter.

#### Right question, wrong answer

Mr Blair is right to ask whether society's interests are best served by the status quo. The criminal justice system

requires a degree of public trust that at the moment is lacking. This is a chance not for lock-'em-up posturing, but for a dispassionate look at how to make the administration of justice more effective. Start with one simple fact behind most of the headlines: Britain's prisons are bursting at the seams.

At current rates of sentencing, the inspector of prisons warns, jails will be full by September. This matters: the shunting of prisoners from pillar to post by harried staff is undermining efforts to return offenders to society in a state fit to stay there (see [article](#)). They lose touch with their families; they leave courses and drug-detox programmes; wardens they knew lose track of them. Two out of three re-offend within two years of release. If politicians and judges, egged on by the press, insist on locking people up for longer, it will get worse.

How to fix things? Building more prisons is the obvious answer. Labour has already added thousands of new places, and both main parties talk of adding more. But Britain's jails always fill up, no matter how many there are. And new cells cost about £100,000 (\$184,000) apiece. A better answer than banging more people up inside is to strengthen facilities to deal with them outside.

## What prisons are for

Jailing offenders is supposed to do four things. It satisfies society's legitimate desire to smite evildoers (though advocates of restorative justice may favour community work or fines). It deters potential offenders (though many crimes are committed on impulse, or when drunk or drugged). It protects the public by taking dangerous offenders out of circulation. And it provides an opportunity to change the way offenders will think and act on their release.

These last two—incarceration and rehabilitation—are often cast as competitors in the tussle for scarce resources. In fact they should be seen as complementary. Society is protected in the short run when offenders are locked up, and in the long run when they are reformed. Violent and dangerous criminals belong behind bars. But many others end up in prison for want of anywhere else to go. What about them?

Many mentally ill criminals would be more easily reclaimed in facilities other than catch-all prisons, though prison drug programmes are in fact quite successful. So would many women prisoners, who tend to show violence only to themselves and elsewhere thrive in smaller detention centres close to home. Halfway houses are a plausible place for non-violent offenders of both sexes on short sentences or nearing the end of their time. Those in touch with their families are less likely to re-offend, and so are those who have jobs to go to when they leave. Non-custodial community sentences have yet to prove their worth; the rate of recidivism seems disappointingly close to that of people who serve prison terms. But those figures may change as the approach becomes more common and new cohorts of offenders affect the statistics.

These suggestions are not new. The Home Office itself has espoused many of them, only to drag feet in their implementation or be swamped by sheer numbers. Of course there are risks in diverting offenders to less secure facilities; some will run off and make headlines. But the risk of keeping increasing numbers under lock and key, to emerge later skilled only in tougher sorts of crime, is greater. It was a Tory home secretary who said, a decade and a half ago, that "prison is an expensive way to make bad people worse". Not much has changed.