

Restorative Justice

Reoffending prisoners generates an annual economic and social cost of £18.1 billion for English and Welsh citizens.

After doing time in the harsh environment that is a prison cell, ex-convicts should be the people most unlikely to return to incarceration, right? However, quite counterintuitively, the Ministry of Justice's Economic and Social Costs of Reoffending Report states that the average annual prisoner reoffense rate in England and Wales is 48%, meaning that almost half the individuals who complete their sentences end up back in prison within a year. According to the report, the impact of the high reoffense rate goes beyond the individuals directly involved in it, affecting society as a whole with an annual economic and social cost of £18.1 billion.

British prisons were described as violent, unsafe, and overcrowded by the European Committee for Prevention of Torture, indicating that the key to keeping ex-convicts out of prison is not through brutality and traumatic experiences. Vicky Pryce, author of Prisonomics and patron of Working Chance (a charity that finds quality jobs for women ex-offenders) argues that in order to reduce further crime, governmental policies should focus on addressing "mental health issues, better education and employment".

Consider Norway, a country consistently occupying the number one spot in the Most Comfortable Prisons in the World list. Up to 1990, the country had a reoffense rate between 60 and 70%, which decreased to the current 20% after a reform in their prison system. Norwegian incarceration follows restorative justice, which has as its primary goal the reintegration of prisoners as stable contributors to the community. The system avoids the extra social and economic costs of reoffending ex-convicts faced by the British approach.

The high-security Halden prison is a great example of the Norwegian restorative philosophy: it has no bars on its windows, has fully equipped kitchens with sharp objects and does not have prisoners sentenced to life. Halden also provides its inmates with multiple programs and courses, which the prisoners themselves remark on as having a positive effect on mental health and their hopes for the future, as well as supplying them with marketable skills. Notably, between 60 and 70% of the Norwegian inmates find jobs as ex-convicts, a stark contrast to the 25% that achieve this after leaving British prisons.

The positive effects of the prison reforms on the reoffense rates in Norway reinforce what was found by the 2007 report on recidivism released by the US Department of Justice: strict incarceration leads to an increase in prisoner reoffense rates. The report also concluded that facilities that incorporate "cognitive-behavioral programs rooted in social learning theory" are the most effective at keeping ex-offenders out of prison. Perhaps the brutality and insufficient investment in prisoner wellbeing in Britain have a higher correlation to reoffense rates than previously imagined.

On a positive note, Mick Pimblett, assistant general secretary of the Prison Officers' Association, seems to believe the life of the average British convict is improving. He stated that since March 2020 there has been an increase in "staffing levels, investment and spans of control" in British prisons, which has led to a reduction in violence. Perhaps this step away from brutality is also a step towards a healthier, less damaging prison system, even though it is still very far from the Norwegian approach.

