
The Challenges And Issues Prison Face As A Criminal Justice Agency

This essay will aim to critically discuss some of the challenges prisons face as a criminal justice agency in the present day and it will also discuss some strategies put in place to ease these challenges within prison. Prisons are the harshest form of punishment for an individual who has committed a criminal offence, The Ministry of Justice (2018) explains the purpose of imprisonment and some aims put in place. Firstly, protection of the public - prison protects the public from the most dangerous and violent individuals. Secondly punishment, prison deprives offenders of their liberty and certain freedoms enjoyed by the rest of society and acts as a deterrent. Lastly, rehabilitation prison provides offenders with the opportunity to reflect on, and take responsibility for, their crimes and prepare them for a law-abiding life when they are released. Furthermore, The Ministry of Justice (2018) state that for prisons to be effective the basics must be right, this includes creating prisons that are secure: with the physical integrity of the prison a priority to prevent prisoners from getting out – and drugs, mobile phones and other contraband from getting in. They also explain that prisons must be safe with orderly, purposeful and structured regimes, free from violence, intimidation and self-harm, and it means creating prisons that are decent: with clean wings and humane living conditions (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Many prisons in the UK have fallen below standard and fail to meet these basic needs as they face many challenges every day.

To begin with, one challenge that's majorly affecting prisons as a criminal justice agency is that with crime rates rapidly increasing prisons are becoming overcrowded. In the UK today, there are 83,525 prisoners in England and Wales, including young offender institutions (The Howard League, 2020). Under the Ministry of Justice's own definition of safety and decency, the prison estate should not hold more than 74,954 people. There are currently 8,571 men and women held above this level (The Howard League, 2020). In the 15 years since the first edition of the World Prison Population List the estimated prison population has increased by 25-30% but at the same time the population has risen by over 20%, and the world population prison has risen by 6% (Jewkes et al, 2016, pg 101). Jewkes et al (2016, pg 101) explains that the prison has, increasingly, become an automatic policy response to an ever growing range of social issues and problems. There appears to be a growing consensus that imprisonment is an acceptable measure not only as a response to street, interpersonal and property crime, but also to activities not straightforwardly defined as 'criminal', such as mental illness, homelessness, and public drunkenness. This suggests that people are becoming imprisoned for committing crimes that aren't seen to be worthy of a prison sentence and they could potentially be given an alternative form of punishment such as probation, this could be a contributing factor towards overcrowding in prisons if the punishment is not seen to be necessary. With a growing population crime rates are increasing and the amount of people receiving prison sentences is also increasing causing an overload of prisoners meaning prisons are having to cope beyond their capacity. There are many implications due to overcrowding prisons, for example it can lead to insanitary, violent conditions that are harmful to the physical and mental well-being of prisoners (MacDonald 2018). Overcrowding includes the doubling or tripling up of inmates in a cell that should only accommodate one person this meaning privacy is not always possible, many of these cells have unscreened toilets which fail to provide even the most basic human dignity (Silvestri, 2013). Living a life where a person is restricted from having that privacy can cause anger and

frustration adding pressure to existing mental health illnesses or creating them, it is more of a challenge to meet standards for humane conditions when prisons are working well over 100% of their capacity. It also becomes harder to manage prisons effectively as overcrowding puts pressure on resources and reduces the space for educational and rehabilitative programmes which is essential for prison life (MacDonald 2018). Where prisons lack in providing these programmes such as rehabilitation this increases the rates of reoffending when inmates are released, as well as these programmes supporting inmates who are mentally ill. Very little has changed for nearly 30 years, overcrowding has always been one of the biggest issues for prisons and for improvement it must be rooted out.

Moving on to another challenge that is faced by prisons is under staffing due to the difficulties prisons face when trying to maintain staff and recruit them too. For example since 2010 there have been significant reductions in the number of prison staff with frontline staff reduced by almost a quarter (23%). This has resulted in less staff looking after approximately 800 additional prisoners (MacDonald, 2018). A reason behind this could be that workers in security services are more vulnerable to occupational stressors and strains than other professional groups, particularly high levels of burnout and mental health problems have been found in prison officers, this due to their frequent exposure to violence means that post-traumatic stress disorder is common (Kinman, 2017). Working within a prison can be a difficult job to up-take and with overcrowding on the rise more staff are required to cope with capacity and this would also explain a higher turnover of staff who may have been affected negatively through work. A few statistics showing the working conditions for prison staff are, in the 12 months to December 2016 assaults on prison staff rose by 38% to 6844 incidents and of these assaults 789 were serious (Clarke, 2017). This allows us to see how severe the conditions can be within a prison and why there is likely to be such a shortage of staff due to unsafe working conditions and lack of violence control. Not only are prisons understaffed but working in overcrowded prisons can impact negatively on staff morale, this would then have a knock on effect on the mental health of staff and performance at work would be minimal affecting the overall atmosphere within the prison (MacDonald, 2018). Following on from before, overcrowding is a huge contributing factor to why staff struggle to cope with capacity, simply too many inmates will outnumber the staff and their control over prisoners will not be as strong as they need it to be, thus leading to violence and assault. This sense of aggravation and lack of morality means conditions within prison are unsafe and dangerous.

Continuing on, a further challenge that is faced every day is how unsafe the prison environment is as a whole. A report was made after the inspection of HMP Liverpool in 2018, it stated that many prisoners had to endure squalid living conditions with rats, cockroaches, damp, dirt and hundreds of broken windows with jagged glass in the frames and filthy or leaking toilets (Travis, 2018). This is evidence that shows prisons are an unsafe place to be, living conditions such as this can be a danger to the physical health of inmates due to the lack of hygiene and is fundamentally unsafe. Those having to live in these conditions are inevitably going to suffer both mentally and physically from being deprived of humane living conditions, this then resulting in frustration and distress likely to be encouraging violence within prisons. Putting poor living conditions aside, a further problem faced as an agency is substance abuse within prisons and how to stop inmates from accessing these illegal drugs. For example, a psychoactive substance also known as 'spice' is taken very frequently within prisons, commonly reported immediate effects include agitation, psychosis, hypertension and seizures, due to the accessibility and low cost of this drug it is very common within prisons (Gov UK, 2019). In the UK, the last decade has seen rapid growth in both availability and use and some argue that their increased use in

UK prisons may link to increases in violence, self-harm and death in custody (Gov UK, 2019). Where inmates do have free-will to take these drugs, there is a lack of control over contraband within prisons and strategies to minimise the accessibility of drugs should be put into action to prevent suicide, self-harm, mental illness and violence as these all encourage the prison as an environment to be a dangerously unsafe place. The rate of self-injury has more than doubled among male prisoners since 2010 with self-harm at record levels with 42,837 incidents - in an ideal world inmates should be restricted from drug use to limit these numbers of self-harm (MacDonald, 2018). During the same inspection in HMP Liverpool in 2018, violence of all kinds has increased and since the previous inspection in 2015 nearly two thirds of prisoners said it was easy to obtain drugs (Travis, 2018), this implies that it is becoming easier for prisoners to get drugs into prison as time goes on. However, there is evidence to show that schemes have been put in place to change behaviour within prison. The Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) system was introduced in 1995. It is a tool of prison management. As stated by the Prison Reform Trust, the scheme: promotes conforming behaviour through rational choice. Enabling people to earn benefits in exchange for responsible behaviour (Pratt and Grimwood, 2014, pg 1). But with this scheme being introduced 25 years ago statistics show that drug abuse has also significantly risen since then, drugs are used and accessed more so it could be that those in prison choose substance abuse over good behaviour. It could be argued that the EIP scheme isn't strong enough to impact behaviour and inmates would rather risk punishment over reward to satisfy their needs in prison by taking drugs. Ultimately meaning that the scheme is ineffective, drug abuse continues regardless and prison remains an unsafe environment.

Conclusively, as a criminal justice agency, prisons are challenged and face extreme measures with few resolutions to the problems. The main focus would be inmates themselves, the violence and danger influenced by drug use, poor mental health through things such as overcrowding and that lack of personal space they receive. Poor living conditions in various prisons within the UK also challenge behaviour and both physical and mental health. Collectively, if extra staff are recruited, better schemes are implemented with tougher discipline, it will be easier to tackle some of the challenges faced, as crime rates rise this is essential to meet the basic needs of a prison.