The supremacy of imprisonment as a way of dealing with offenders has never been seriously challenged, even though there is plenty of evidence to show that it does not work, as either a form of punishment or a place of rehabilitation. But in the last few months, crime, punishment, and UK prisons have been in the news regularly. The Coalition government, has enormous and growing debts, and has been reviewing all public services to identify where they can make cuts, and as spending on prisons is high (£50,000 per year, per offender) they have been taking a closer look. Highlighting the glaringly high re-offending rate and the failure of prisons to rehabilitate and prevent re-offending.

Chris Grayling, the Justice Minister has announced a review and a number of new cost-cutting initiatives, describing the current arrangements as “a bad return on investment”. Ideas already mooted include compulsory work or education for offenders in order to earn their privileges, such as Sky TV – a tightening of the existing regime. He has also announced a mentoring scheme, which relies on ex-offenders or other providers (reporting to the state) to “support” (police) newly released offenders for a period of 12 months, to prevent them re-offending. The mentoring idea includes practical support in finding work and housing, and has received some
initial positive appraisal – but is untested and likely to take eons. Both schemes are attempts to educate, influence and control offenders, to make them change their offending behaviour by offering incentives, and will not please the “hang ‘em and flog ‘em” brigade who insist that punishment is the answer. Rehabilitation or punishment? Two established methods for dealing with offenders, neither of which has had a significant impact on reducing crime. So, just how should we treat those who break society’s laws?

The treatment of offenders has come a long way since the days of racks, ducking, guillotines, gallows, birching, flogging, hard labour, and transportation. Originally, prisons were simply places to hold people while awaiting a range of gruesome punishments, and then became a form of punishment themselves, depriving offenders of their liberty and protecting society from their menacing ways. Nelson Mandela, one of the world’s most famous political offenders, spent almost 20 of his 27 years in jail, confined to a small cell, the floor was his bed, and he had a bucket for a toilet. He was forced to do hard labour in a quarry, received one letter every six months, and was allowed one 30-minute visit a year. The prison officials were as brutal as the conditions and it is a testament to the man and his will that he survived such an ordeal. Many Northern Irish political offenders were regularly and viciously beaten, and locked in shit smeared cells for years with maggot-infested mattresses to sleep on in the infamous Maze prison. Look back through the history books even further and the brutality and inhumanity shown to those who broke the laws of society are difficult for mollycoddled modern day citizens to contemplate. Yet, despite such horrific punishment, people still committed crime.

Reformers were successful in abolishing the death penalty, hard labour, cruel and punitive regimes and for changing the purpose of prisons. They established the idea that for most inmates, prisons should be places of reform and rehabilitation, where they could learn the skills to support themselves when released, and they introduced programmes of work and education. Modern day prisons incorporate a vast range of services from different providers, allowing participants to work and earn money, learn and get qualifications and get psychological help for an increasing list of disorders. So, instead of bumps and bruises, offenders now leave institutions with work experience, a handful of qualifications, a boost to their self-esteem, and a wad of cash, but.... they still commit crime. The re-offending rate is high (around 30%), and the prisons are full of new and repeat offenders.
Crime is a broad and changeable concept, differing across time and place, but in essence, you commit a crime and get a criminal record if you break one of the laws of society, of which of course, there are many. People are imprisoned for playing music too loudly and disturbing their neighbours, claiming benefits fraudulently, stealing electricity by bypassing the meter and driving without due care and attention. Many have been drunk in a public place and some have driven a car without a licence or insurance, have not paid business VAT or income tax correctly, and shoplifted for themselves or others. Quite a few have been vandals, and some have stolen from their employer. Some have received stolen goods, left the scene of an accident, inflicted grievous bodily harm, burgled houses, and shops, and carried drugs into the country and then sold them to others. Some are illegal immigrants, caught working without the relevant documentation, and many are prostitutes of one description or another. A small number have murdered their own offspring, some have murdered their partners, and others have beaten or murdered strangers in random acts of extreme violence. Types and patterns of crime differ between men and women, and men commit the majority of crimes (approximately 80,000 of the total prison population of 85,000 is male). Offenders and their crimes are categorised and then offenders are housed in different institutions depending on that category.

Prison is not quite like the "holiday camp" one hears talk of, offenders are denied their freedom and contained within the walls of the institution. They have no choice about who they share a cell with, about what they eat and drink, and restricted choices relating to work and education. Yes, many of them have televisions and they can use the gym and get regular food and a warm if rather small hard bed. They also get to see their loved ones at pre-arranged visit times but may not be allowed to touch or kiss them. They can write and receive letters and make occasional phone calls under certain circumstances, but they still have to follow the prison regime. They get up when told, eat when told, wash and toilet when told, go to bed when told, do as they are told. The consequence of disobedience is the denial of some of their basic privileges, such as loss of TV, loss of association with other offenders, solitary confinement and being denied permission to attend work, education or exercise for a defined period of time. Offenders say the harshest punishment is the denial or restriction of visits from friends and family and the loss of their freedom.
Prison: What is it good for?

Luke Gittos

writing for punishment is a thing of the past. said “he wasn’t a man until he had been to prison”. As pointed out by successful, then offenders would be ex-offenders, getting on with life in the real world and not "care" home to prison) with negative results for everyone. ruling elite, who bereft of a philosophy and any forward looking ideas, continue to take us all

Marx said, "Question everything", and I do. I question the role of prisons as either places of punishment or places of rehabilitation; they are as messed up as many public institutions, as

It is hardly surprising that society is confused about how to treat offenders, when we look at the many aspects of our lives already. It is time to take that prison key and unlock the prison gates, and get paid for it (a lot less than the minimum wage); amongst other jobs, they cook, garden, weekend breaks.

Many ex-offenders have gone from one state institution to another and back again, (from release to work with real employers. They have in-house "bank" accounts into which their prison earnings are paid, supplemented by money sent in, and can purchase goods from a limited)

The fact that so many offenders go back to prison time and time again, is perhaps the best measure of the effectiveness of prisons, and one on which they fail. If rehabilitation were

Do prisons rehabilitate people? Again, yes and no. Some embrace the rehabilitation process, fill their self-esteem, and persuade them to change their offending behaviour by addressing their above to get their sentences reduced or early release with an electronic tag. A lot of offenders

vulnerable and in need of help and support from a range of professionals. Some do have their long days and nights with work and study and leave with their first ever experience of

or with those who consume too many drugs or too much alcohol, and even with celebrities

In addition to attending classes in a range of subjects, many offenders "work" within the prison rules, and be seen to make lifestyle changes in order to gain privileges. They are effectively

And, an article in a recent edition of The

extending the arm of the state has soared and lives and potential continues to be wasted. Despite our obsession with crime and offenders - the TV schedules are full of programmes

When almost everyone is seen as some sort of victim and in need of some sort of therapy, it is

Spiked (}

various "behavioural problems", "illnesses and addictions" (reflecting a cultural trend in society). Including dealing with it don't work.

Some actually embrace it as a true mark of their character. One offender told me his mother says "No, No, No", but offenders get little choice in the matter, they have to follow

to their old habits.

Despite our obsession with crime and offenders - the TV schedules are full of programmes

no serious paper on real life crime. So, a serious discussion about how society deals with crime

Spiked (}

intervention robs us of autonomy, affects our ability to take control of our own life, and makes us more state reliant not

and now minder, in an effort to stop or persuade offenders from leading a crime filled life. But

Spiked (}

famous said "No, No, No", but offenders get little choice in the matter, they have to follow

taxis to see specialists, albeit in handcuffs.

Some actually embrace it as a true mark of their character. One offender told me his mother

In addition to attending classes in a range of subjects, many offenders "work" within the prison

prison really serves.

Many of them also attend a range of therapeutic and behavioural control courses, including

Anger Management, alcohol and drugs awareness, and a range of counselling programmes.

Some, of course, "play the game" and attend some or all of the above to get their sentences reduced or early release with an electronic tag. A lot of offenders

 celebrations without the long wait and fees that those in the real world have to put up with and are taken in

bribes, and when those on the outside want to try and help or make contact, the prison really serves.

to their old habits.

The overall message being that they are victims of abuse and/or society, are emotionally fragile, and now minder, in an effort to stop or persuade offenders from leading a crime filled life. But

Spiked (}

...and a range of counselling programmes. They have in-house "bank" accounts into which their prison earnings are paid, supplemented by money sent in, and can purchase goods from a limited

Some, of course, "play the game" and attend some or all of the above to get their sentences reduced or early release with an electronic tag. A lot of offenders

...the prison gates, and get paid for it (a lot less than the minimum wage); amongst other jobs, they cook, garden, weekend breaks.

Many ex-offenders have gone from one state institution to another and back again, (from release to work with real employers. They have in-house "bank" accounts into which their prison earnings are paid, supplemented by money sent in, and can purchase goods from a limited

Some actually embrace it as a true mark of their character. One offender told me his mother

prison really serves.

Many of them also attend a range of therapeutic and behavioural control courses, including

prison really serves.

prison really serves.

...the prison gates, and get paid for it (a lot less than the minimum wage); amongst other jobs, they cook, garden, weekend breaks.

Many ex-offenders have gone from one state institution to another and back again, (from release to work with real employers. They have in-house "bank" accounts into which their prison earnings are paid, supplemented by money sent in, and can purchase goods from a limited

Some actually embrace it as a true mark of their character. One offender told me his mother

prison really serves.

Many of them also attend a range of therapeutic and behavioural control courses, including

prison really serves.

prison really serves.

...the prison gates, and get paid for it (a lot less than the minimum wage); amongst other jobs, they cook, garden, weekend breaks.

Many ex-offenders have gone from one state institution to another and back again, (from release to work with real employers. They have in-house "bank" accounts into which their prison earnings are paid, supplemented by money sent in, and can purchase goods from a limited

Some actually embrace it as a true mark of their character. One offender told me his mother

prison really serves.

Many of them also attend a range of therapeutic and behavioural control courses, including

prison really serves.