

Could economics solve the prison crisis?

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Prison numbers in England and Wales have risen sharply in the last decade, and are set to rise further. A study out today in the *Probation Journal* published by SAGE suggests that economists have a unique opportunity to help solve the prison crisis by bringing sophisticated economic modelling techniques to bear on the problem.

Chris Fox and Kevin Albertson from Manchester Metropolitan University contend that during the last decade, penal policy allowed many opportunities to harness the latest analytical research to optimise public spending slip away. In their paper "Could economics solve the prison crisis?" they argue that a new approach is possible, driven not only by moral or social concerns about actual and perceived [crime rates](#) and a high [prison population](#), but also informed by economic analysis and argument. The current [economic climate](#) makes their position hard to ignore.

According to Fox and Albertson, there is scant evidence society will benefit from locking up ever more criminals. Crime rates have fallen, but the link between rising numbers in prison and lower crime rates is debatable; hikes in prison numbers are likely only responsible for a small drop in crime.

Since 1997, economic analyses of the options for England and Wales when developing criminal justice policy and penal policy grown in reach and volume, partly led by government actions or policy. "But for every step forward in developing penal policy based on socio/economic analysis, at times it seems government takes at least one and sometimes

more steps back," says Fox.

The authors argue that the last decade's important developments cover a broad range of factors including aspects of the policy debate on sentencing; the government's commitment to evidence-based policy; investment in the economics profession across government; and the rise of the Justice Reinvestment movement, particularly in the USA.

However, these promising developments, underpinned by clearly articulated economic principles, were superseded by more recent government policy. Prison numbers have remained extremely high. As of January 2010 the prison population was 83,378, according to HM Prison Service.

One stumbling block to the greater use of [economic analysis](#) of criminal justice challenges is that, to date, the government has made only limited investment in commissioning robust impact studies of criminal justice policies and programmes. UK studies examining the effect of prison are in short supply. "The government has not, to the knowledge of the authors, commissioned and certainly hasn't published any robust impact studies of the relative impact of privately and publicly managed prisons," says Fox.

The authors urge the government to invest in more impact studies of key criminal justice interventions, particularly prison. They also want to see more cost-benefit analyses to inform policy, and continued capacity building, both within government and the wider research community, to undertake robust economic analyses of criminal justice policies and programmes.

Following the lead of the USA, they also suggest that Justice Reinvestment is an approach likely to lead to more effective criminal justice policies compared to incarceration for reducing re-offending, and

at a lower cost. However, more work is required to transfer successfully the Justice Reinvestment model to a UK setting. In the USA, Justice Reinvestment has been implemented at State and County levels by a single body or elected official with responsibility for all the key services required to effect sustained reductions in offending and re-offending over a criminal career: from early preventative measures that target at risk individuals, families and communities through to interventions for persistent and prolific offenders. In the UK, relevant budgets for crime reduction and criminal justice are held by a number of different organisations and at different levels of government. Fox and Albertson contend that a radical suggestion worthy of investigation is to devolve budgets for custodial sentences to groups of local authorities. "A set of financial incentives would be hard for regional policy-makers to ignore," Fox says, adding that, "a policy pursuing 'more of the same' is not reasonable."

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