

## Addicted to banging people up.

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With whole life sentences now in the news, it seemed a good time to look at our addiction to banging people up. Even left wingers I know, the nicest people you could imagine, get a gleam in their eye about locking people up for a long time. It's understandable when you see a horrendous crime in the media, the desire to see the criminal punished and put where they can't hurt others. It's very similar to the attraction of the right wing for some, the need to feel protected.

It's a very expensive addiction though. I don't normally quote lots of figures, but there are a few eye watering ones about prisons. The UK (BBC Figures) currently locks up about 88,000 people, which compared to the almost 3 million the USA locks up seems almost modest. But they each cost us (BBC Figures) £47,000 a year to keep there. Plug those numbers into your desk top calculator and watch the result go off the edge of the screen! Occupancy rate is now 113%, so we're really shoe horning them in and you can guarantee lots of brand new privatised prisons are going to arrive soon.

Value for money? Prisons brutalise and just send people out as better criminals, plus the inmates aren't out in the world and adding to the economy. The only plus for prison is that it stops people committing more crimes.

Personally I've always thought that if we invested half that £47,000 a year in certain areas we'd achieve more and genuinely help people better their lives. Then there are the huge number of mentally ill people in prison and the drug addicts. Prison isn't going to help them, just make them worse, so they need moving onto properly financed care.

I'm not going to offer a magic solution to what we need in place of prison; I'm just saying that what we currently do with people is crazy. We need to start seriously thinking about moving all but the worst offenders out of prison and back into being productive members of society. Every criminal who doesn't re-offend means one less victim of crime!

I remember reading Giddens and finding it quite a shock that until relatively recent time's prison wasn't a place to put people long term. Prison was just a place a place to put people until you decided what to do with them, which was usually something painful and unpleasant. Then as we became more enlightened we stopped beating them around the town or hanging them and kept them locked up for years and years. Prison isn't a solution to anything; it's just an expensive way of kicking the problem into the long grass.

We need to break our addiction to 'banging em up' and spending a fraction of that £47,000 a year in deprived areas would be a good start.

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