

An extract from the diary of Barry Farrell, a journalist who spent two weeks living in a men's prison and investigating the conditions there in the 1980s. Prisons have historically been used as a deterrent for committing crimes and as a form of punishment for crimes committed.

The prison population is big and it is getting bigger. The number of men on life imprisonment was 850 in 1972; by 1982 it has rocketed to 1750. The average life sentence served by a 'lifer' is 10.5 years, although there are individual cases of inmates staying for 30 years or longer. I've been staying in 'D wing' at a notorious incarceration centre in the UK which belongs to some of the country's most violent and dangerous inmates. It really has been an eye opener for me.

Some aspects of time inside are exactly how outsiders perceive them. For instance, food served three times daily is basic and focuses on nutritional value rather than taste. It is state funded, mass-produced flavourless slop designed to keep a prisoner alive, not serve them up with gourmet delights.

However, there are other areas that may be less familiar to the ordinary member of the public. Training boards are used to monitor an inmate's behaviour, their attitude towards their crime, their rehabilitation and more. Every aspect of a prisoner's life is checked. I was invited to attend a number of these meetings: one such prisoner spoken to was asked about his alcoholism, how it contributed to his crime and what he is doing now to combat his addiction. He is currently receiving treatment from an allocated doctor and psychotherapist and is positive about his own progress. The board praise his behaviour inside and comment that it is helping to contribute towards his eventual leaving date.

Additionally, many prisons use their populations for positive work. Hundreds of braille books are produced by inmates across the country every year. They read a text and type it out in braille format to be bound together and published in order to open up the world of literature to the blind.

During my time in D Wing, I was also able to speak to a number of inmates who told me their own thoughts and feelings about the prison system. Some prisoners claim that the system simply 'institutionalises' individuals where inmates serve a five- or six-year sentence, are freed and then end up back in prison a short while later. A life of being repeatedly incarcerated and freed.

Sadly, riots are still commonplace and during my visit, security measures are tightened in response. Prisoners complain that with less opportunity to socialize and greater 'lockdown' time, their mental health is severely affected with many claiming severe anxiety, depression and paranoia when locked in small and austere cells.

Although prisoners are able to decorate their rooms with posters, cards and very limited furniture, windows are usually around 8 inches by 5 and the temperature in the summer rockets, with prisoners describing it as 'worse than a boiler room'. Some talk about preferring the death penalty to life in prison, knowing there is an end to their punishment, whilst a lifer must wait indefinitely to know when it has been decided by the state that they have suffered enough for their crimes.

Overall, the system is working to a degree in terms of rehabilitation. Every prisoner is given opportunities to learn new skills or to contribute to the outside world whilst remaining behind bars. However, there is less evidence to support prisons as a form of deterrent. The number of inmates is growing, including a sudden rise in life terms, and it is predicted that this number will increase to rise before 1985. Question marks still remain over how we are punishing and reforming criminals in this country.