

AN OUTSIDER'S LOOK AT MOUNTJOY PRISON

A discussion paper ¹

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Introduction

My placement is at Mountjoy prison, North Circular Road, Dublin. Mountjoy prison was built in 1850 and has great historical interest as it was used by the British to imprison many political prisoners during the Irish struggle for independence. As such Mountjoy was part of the system to keep the largely impoverished Irish under colonial rule and control.

Mountjoy was designed to hold 547 prisoners. With A block closed it holds 441 prisoners at an average cost of €95.000 per year.² Since 1850 the living conditions of the prisoners have changed little. There are no dining facilities in the prison. So each prisoner eats by himself in his cell. He is locked up in his cell for 18 hours per day. There are no toilet facilities in each cell. So each prisoner is forced to use a pot or call an officer so he can use the toilet. A prisoner is allowed only one shower a week, unless he uses the gym. Some prisoners use a tap to have a shower more frequently. Until recently, Mountjoy was the only prison in Ireland which did not have televisions in cells. Just before Christmas (2003) the slow process of installing televisions in each cell

¹ This paper was originally presented as a discussion paper for the Loreto House programme in 1994. As such, I make no claim that it is comprehensive and fully researched. Its aim was to promote discussion among the group after using a method of social analysis. It has been modified slightly for *Oceania Vincentian*.

² McGee, Harry. *Irish Examiner*, 12/11/03 p. 15.

was completed. For those prisoners who are illiterate, there has been little to distract them during the 18 hours lockup.

My experience

The prisoner that I see regularly is a foreign national who was detained for couriering drugs in Ireland. Since I started visiting Mountjoy, I have heard that one of the ways of drugs entering prison was by being thrown over the wall. Even though I had heard about it, I was surprised one day as I was walking along the canal at the back of Mountjoy to see two men, one throwing something over the wall of the prison, the other using a mobile phone. I have also heard that there are two forms of currency used in the prison. One is cigarettes. The other is hashish. These are used to buy or sell services or goods from other prisoners.

Facts

Ireland has a very high prison rate with 174 per 100,000. This compares to 34 per 100,000 in France and 90 per 100,000 in the Netherlands.³ Also Ireland has a very young prison population with 25% being under 21 years old, whereas other Western European Countries have as few as 5% of prisoners under 21.⁴

Drug use among prisoners is very high. It is estimated that 70% of prisoners in Mountjoy at the time of the *Report of the Ministerial Task force on Measures to Reduce demand for Drugs* in 1996 had a history of drug use.⁵ A survey carried out in 1998 confirms this high usage

³ O'Mahony, Paul. *Prison Policy in Ireland: Criminal Justice versus Social Justice*. (Cork University Press 2000), 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18

⁵ Dept of Community Health and General Practice, Trinity College Dublin. *Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV in Irish Prisoners: Prevalence and Risk*, 3.

with 45% of 344 respondents of the survey with a history of injecting drug use who had been in prison for more than three months, stated that they had injected drugs in the previous month.⁶ Because of the sharing of equipment in prison, there is a greater risk and prevalence of HIV and hepatitis in prisons.⁷

The government in 1991 made a major shift in drug policy in that it introduced a harm reduction approach, including the provision of methadone maintenance and needle exchange for injecting drugs.⁸

Most of the prison population in Mountjoy comes from the most deprived areas of Dublin. This would indicate that there is likely to be a link between poverty, drug use and imprisonment.

Structures and Connection

Social. Many of the prisoners in Mountjoy come from the most deprived areas of Dublin. They grow up where deprivation is the norm and “it comes as no surprise that many offenders and especially prisoners have failed drastically in the educational system. Most have failed to establish themselves in rewarding employment and have turned to alcohol and drugs to sooth their feelings of insecurity, inferiority and meaninglessness. In addition, many of them, having suffered a materially and emotionally deprived, often tragic and abusive, childhood, lead chaotic lives, and experience profound mental and emotional problems. The deprived background and personal history of adversity and maladjustment that characterise the majority of Irish prisoners are not coincidental facts but strong indicators of the important causal contribution of the social environment to their criminality.”⁹

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ O'Mahony, P. *Prison Policy in Ireland*, 73.

A part of the social environment is the community attitude to drugs and imprisonment. Irish crime rates, although they have increased over the years, are still not as high as many other Western countries. Yet the Media and the community, by and large, are very concerned with the rate of crime and drug misuse. The community endorses being tough on crime and illegal drug use.

Cultural. In the past 10 years Ireland has undergone a huge rate of change. Instead of people migrating, Ireland now receives migrants. There has been an increased rate of prosperity and the Church now no longer plays the dominant and the controlling role in forming people's attitudes. The media has a large role in forming people's attitudes. Ireland is no longer a traditional society with great internal adhesion, but a pluralistic society with a diversity of attitudes and life styles. As part of this there has been a breakdown in traditional relationships with an increased breakdown in marriages and single parent families. As such this breakdown can lead to further poverty as there is a weakening of the support structures in society. Unfortunately, substance abuse contributes further to relationship breakdown.

Political. Generally, politicians have reacted to media driven moral panics which have led to introduction of mandatory sentences for drug trafficking and longer sentences.¹⁰ Especially at election time politicians like to play the law and order card which both whips up fear in society and prevents any deep analysis of the problems in society. As mentioned above, there was a move in 1991 to a harm reduction approach. This recognises the reality of illegal drug use in society and enables health authorities to prevent the spread of disease such as hepatitis and HIV. Generally a deep analysis of the causes of poverty and illegal drug use is put in the too hard basket. As a result there is little done to effectively reduce poverty. This can lead to a sense of hopelessness and a turning to substance abuse.

¹⁰ Ibid., 62.

Economic. At present, large amounts of money are spent in trying to prevent trafficking and use of illegal drugs. As well, large amounts of money are spent in maintaining and enlarging the prison system. Along with the drug traffickers, the people involved in the legal system, including the prison system, benefit economically. Unfortunately, society as a whole loses economically as there is an increased crime rate with its associated economic cost.

From what has been stated above, a conclusion can be drawn that one of the main ways to reduce illegal drug use is not a war on illegal drugs and the use of prison as a punishment and deterrent. A far more effective approach would be positive strategies to reduce the poverty of people who turn to illegal drugs.

A second approach could be treating the drug problem itself as a social and a medical problem. At present it is treated as a crime problem. This leads to massive resources being used to fight the trafficking of illegal drugs and the consequent use of resources in imprisoning convicted drug users and traffickers. A change in approach would require a massive transfer of resources from the legal and criminal system to the medical and welfare system. Very few politicians would be brave enough to suggest this approach, let alone act on it as we have a society that has been educated to fear illegal drugs and educated to believe that the law and order is the appropriate response to the question. One of the results of treating the drug problem as a medical and social problem could be a dramatically reduced crime problem in Ireland. People again could feel safer as drug users would not have to resort to robbery to gain money for their habit.

Catholic Social Teaching

At the core of Catholic Social Teaching is the dignity of the human person. Although many documents from the time of Leo XIII develop

the notion of the dignity of the human person, it is the Pastoral Constitution of the Church (*Gaudium et Spes*) of Vatican II, that brings the teaching to its fullness. Chapter 1 talks at length about the dignity of the human person acknowledging that “man (sic) was created ‘to the image of God.’”¹¹ Even though the prisoners in Mountjoy have committed crimes, their enslavement to illegal drugs tarnishes their human dignity. And their treatment tarnishes it further. Because Irish society has not eliminated poverty, which is a major contributing cause of illegal drug use, it could be said that Irish society as a whole contributes to the lack of respect to human dignity in its poorest members. As Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens* says that: “within a country which belongs to each one, all should be equal before the law, find equal admittance to economic, cultural, civic and social life, and benefit from a fair sharing of the nations riches.”¹² Unfortunately, this is not occurring in Ireland as well as in all other nations.

Action and Conclusion

While it is not possible to bring all the facts and all information to a short exploration of the issue of prison and drugs, it is clear that the present system of treating illegal drug use as a law and order problem has very limited success. It does not tackle the basic issue of poverty in Ireland, with its high unemployment and sense of hopelessness, as a basic cause of the drug problem in Ireland. Action to change the mindset of a society and politicians is a difficult task. A change to treat drug usage as a medical and society problem is a way which would ultimately reduce the criminal acts required to support a drug

¹¹ *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* In: O'Brien, D. J. & Shannon T.A. Eds., *Renewing the Earth: Catholic Documents on Peace, Justice and Liberation*. (New York: 1977), 188.

¹² Paul IV, *Octogesima Adveniens*. In: O'Brien, D. J. & Shannon T.A. Eds., *Renewing the Earth: Catholic Documents on Peace, Justice and Liberation*. (New York :1977), 361.

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habit, and also ultimately reduce the numbers in prison and reduce the incidence of HIV and Hepatitis in the prison system.

Any action could proceed along the line of supporting those organisations which actively critique and lobby government on behalf of the poor as well working with organisations that look to the reform of the prison system.

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