



Reimagine prisoner classification

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We expect our prisons not only to hold prisoners securely, but also to prepare them for life on the outside. But as Nicholas Fox argues, the current system is built around risk rather than rehabilitation: by reshaping our prisons to meet both objectives, we could drive down reoffending and cut the costs of crime to society.

From Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to the contemporary wave of highly-profitable tech companies, specialisation is often the lynchpin of success. In the Galapagos, Darwin observed how more than a dozen finch species – with common roots in a single ancestor – had evolved to occupy each available environmental niche. And in today's digital economy, each of the apps installed on our smartphones has a unique function – from Uber's ability to connect passengers with drivers, to Shazam's prowess in identifying individual music tracks. Entities that focus on doing one thing often do it very well indeed.

On the flipside, companies that diversify too far have got into trouble. Taking just one example, the chief executive of Sadeh Lok housing group wrote some years ago about how over-diversification nearly led to the collapse of his organisation¹. Businesses that try to be too many things to too many people risk failing to deliver for everyone.

This is a problem that afflicts our prison system. At present, we expect all prisons to provide a vast range of services and to manage all offenders' needs and goals, despite their limited ability to specialise or take advantage of local expertise or circumstances. Prisoners are classified according to risk – principally their risk of absconding – rather than their needs in terms of rehabilitation.

In theory, prisoners have their needs assessed at the outset of their sentence, and are provided with a rehabilitative programme that both delivers the sentence laid down by the court and maximises their rehabilitation in terms of education, work experience and treatment.

In practice, however, it is not always possible to assess prisoners in a timely way; and prisons – asked to provide services from vocational skills to drug treatment, from basic literacy training to mental health counselling – struggle to provide a really high-quality offer across this wide range of requirements.

Where prisons do specialise is in managing the risk of escape, violence and organised gang activity – operating a system of security categories which simplifies security, processes and staffing requirements. Within each category of offenders, however, there are prisoners with a huge variety of needs; and with the focus on risk, few are able to deliver rehabilitation programmes as effectively and efficiently as is desirable. This is an area sorely in need of reimagining.

Classification by needs as well as risk

Instead of segmenting the prison population simply according to risk, what if we divided people according to both risk and need? Then we could create prisons that – whilst retaining the risk and efficiency benefits of security categorisation – had the assets, staff and resources required to specialise in the needs of a particular offender group, delivering better services and improving outcomes. New prisoners' initial assessment would include a decision on which kind of prison would best support their rehabilitation and, in time, their ability to build a new life back in wider society – perhaps one specialising in drug treatment, basic skills, vocational training or mental health conditions. Each facility would be set up to address a specific cohort's needs.

At set-up, capital investments would be required to reshape the prison estate; but as we embark on building a series of new prisons, now is the right time. And the ideas contained in this article do not necessitate completely new facilities: they could be implemented with the relatively inexpensive subdivision of existing prisons. Prisoners could then move between facilities as their needs change, in much the same way that patients move between units in a hospital.

As an example, prisoners who are addicted to drugs would begin their sentence in a facility with a specialist drugs rehabilitation capability. Such facilities would have extraordinary levels of scrutiny of mail, visitors and other potential forms of drug delivery – including additional checks on staff – to minimise the risk of drugs entering the premises. Prisoners would undergo intensive treatment and regular testing, and would be subject to enhanced searches if they fail a test. They would only be permitted to move to other types of facility once they have been demonstrably drug-free for a required period.

Elsewhere, bespoke facilities would be designed to provide prisoners with the life skills that will reduce the risk of their reoffending once freed. For example, prisoners with learning needs could attend prisons with facilities and regimes entirely focused on helping them with basic literacy and numeracy skills, and equipped to identify and cater to problems such as learning difficulties or dyslexia.

There are, of course, risks around housing prisoners with addiction issues under one roof – as revealed by the attempts to ban smoking from parts of the prison estate, which have made some prisons more difficult to manage. The same concerns apply to facilities exclusively occupied by prisoners with mental health issues. However, such concerns only really make sense if you imagine a prison as currently constituted.

The benefits of specialisation

The idea here is to provide facilities that are specifically designed to cater for prisoners' needs. So in the case of drug addiction, facilities would be designed to provide the most supportive environment possible – with the expert staff, medical facilities, intelligence channels and physical spaces to both minimise drug dealing, and maximise offenders' chances of kicking their habits.

The situation is similar when it comes to mental health. Creating bespoke facilities for people with mental health issues risks being labelled as building a new generation of asylums; but the fact is that such people are already incarcerated – and in facilities that are quite unsuited to their needs. A properly planned mental health prison would both improve the safety, security and treatment of offenders, and reduce the risks to staff of housing prisoners with mental health conditions in mainstream prisons.

And there's another point here. In a drug treatment prison, addicts would receive much better specialist services – but there would also be benefits for other prisons, which should see a much lower incidence of drug-taking and the associated dangers such as gang violence, staff corruption and medical problems. Similarly, whilst prisoners with mental health issues would gain from being housed in a suitable specialist environment, this approach would also have advantages for other prisons – which would have to expend less time and resources on the health and security issues around this cohort of offenders, freeing them up to build services focused on the needs and goals of the wider group.

Meanwhile, prisoners whose rehabilitation would be best served by improving their job opportunities could enter institutions focused on training, education and work experience. This might particularly suit the cohorts given longer sentences, and thus have the time to develop new skills. The scale and scope of operations could be increased significantly compared to current facilities – for instance, by offering CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) cards to help former prisoners get work in areas such as scaffolding, painting and decorating.

Preparing prisoners for life on the outside

With prisoners based in training units specialising in their medium-term needs – and with a reduced requirement to focus on managing problems such as those around drug addiction and mental health – it should be possible to provide more advanced skills and experience than is currently the case. Inmates might, for example, learn management skills – perhaps turning their experience in running gangs or drug rings to good use – or concentrate on gaining technical or production qualifications. With a more stable population, workshops could operate in a more commercial way than is possible at the moment. Prisons set up along these lines would prioritise work and make provision for increased release on temporary licence (ROTL), easing offenders' transition into the working world at the end of their sentence.

It is worth stressing that prisons do need to be segmented according to security risk. What we are proposing does not eliminate the need for such categorisation, and would certainly not eliminate the need for high-risk prisoners to be held in Category A facilities. However, given the size of the existing Category A estate, many offenders could be safely transferred to specialist facilities without compromising security. Many prisoners are currently held in far more secure prisons than required by their own risk categorisation; ensuring that offenders are only held at the minimum security category required would save more money that could be ploughed back into specialist services.

Combined with other ideas such as 'Reimagine sentencing'², rethinking the way our prison estate is configured could decrease drug use and its associated violence, improve outcomes in terms of basic skills and employment prospects, and reduce reoffending. Prison staff would enjoy more highly-skilled jobs, with greater potential to help people stop offending and build better lives. And the greatest beneficiaries would be the public – whose vast investment in prisons could produce not more waves of recidivist criminals, but cohorts of ex-offenders equipped to build a new life in wider society.



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Contact

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2. <https://home.kpmg.com/uk/en/home/insights/2018/08/reimagine-sentencing.html>

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