

# Mission impossible

Bus-like, three reports have arrived in convoy to tackle the thorny issue of drugs in prison. Andrew Neilson frisks them for valuable currency.

In one London prison, the problem was pigeons. Dead ones. Prisoners' friends were lobbing the carcasses of pigeons over the wall after stuffing them full of drugs. Picked up by those on gardening duty, the pigeons would be relieved of their unlikely cargo for distribution throughout the jail. It is uncertain, however, whether even a fast breeding race of vermin such as the pigeon could supply enough corpses to supply the demand inside Britain's prisons.

The government admit that about half of the prison population at any one time are 'problematic drug users' - arguably an underestimate - with an average of 55 per cent of new prisoners testing positive for Class A drugs. The black market in opiate substitute Subutex is thriving. Nearly £80m was allocated for drug treatment in English and Welsh prisons in 2007-8.

The first report to be published, by the Centre for Policy Studies, is notable as its author is Hussain Djemil, a former head of drug treatment policy at the National Offender Management Service. Djemil argues that the government is more interested in managing the problem of drugs than eradicating it. He advocates a "pre-emptive intelligence-led approach" and says the biggest problem in interrupting the supply of drugs into prison is staff corruption. Djemil urges any strategy should start from the premise that all illicit drugs should be eliminated from prisons.

This contrasts with the second report, an internal review produced

for the government by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC). The review bluntly states that the creation of drug-free prisons is "not considered to be practical in the current resource climate". Nonetheless, the review concurs with Djemil that there is no joined-up strategy between the various Whitehall departments (Health, Justice and the Home Office) to tackle drug misuse in prison. Both reviews also criticise the government's reliance on mandatory drug tests (MDTs) and question their effectiveness, not least because MDTs encourage the usage of harder drugs that do not have the lasting trace levels of cannabis.

## the only workable solution lies in sentencing reform

The government commissioned a further report on how to disrupt the supply of drugs by David Blakey, formerly Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary. It is a pragmatic piece of work, with a number of recommendations that focus on rolling out drug dealer-busting technology currently found only in the high security estate, such as mobile phone blockers and scanners. Overly-intrusive and legally dubious options, such as forcible intimate body searches are dismissed.

Djemil's report questions the use of opiate substitutes such as methadone in prison. Certainly, some who accuse the government of managing the prison

drug problem have methadone in their sights. But any discussion of the use of opiate substitutes must recognise the high proportion of prisoners with dual mental health and drug problems. Stopping methadone would be disastrous. Prison suicides are on the rise and need no help to push the trend further upwards.

Methadone should be the prelude to broader-based treatment. But the PWC review suggests that this is not a realistic option given the scale of the problem and the numbers in prison, while Blakey wants resources concentrated on security.

As of Friday 4 July, we had 83,330 prisoners in England and Wales - an increase of 3,787 over the previous twelve months. What all three reports fail to address is that the only workable solution lies in sentencing reform. We simply send too many people with too many problems to prison, often for short periods of time, where they would be better helped in the community. With reduced numbers in custody, resources could then be properly applied to increase security and give those in prison the treatment they require. At the moment, the government's own evidence suggests that prisons actually create drug habits, with one in five men reporting that they first used drugs in custody. Given the relationship between drug addiction and crime, our overcrowded prisons are singularly failing to keep anyone safe.

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