

Prison Expansion in Britain: A Long Legacy of Failed Policy

The British government is currently undertaking a massive prison expansion project, with plans to build 5 new “mini-Titan” prisons, 4 other new prisons, plus increases in the number of spaces within existing prisons. This means more than 20,000 new prison spaces by 2014. Although the government has admitted that the increased “demand” for prison spaces has largely arisen from changes in sentencing policy (i.e. increases in the number and length of prison sentences given out), it has made little effort to address those, or other root causes. Instead the government is trying “to build its way out of the prison crisis.” These plans extend a longer legacy of failed policy through expansion.

Prison Expansion Timeline:

- 1979** Prison population in England & Wales is 41,152
- 1980s** Thatcher government embarks on biggest prison building project since Victorian times. Prison population begins to expand.
- 1990s** Harsher sentencing and increased punishment expands imprisonment. Private prisons are introduced. By 1995, the prison population reaches 51,000.
- 2000s** New Labour’s “tough on crime” approach extends the Thatcher prison expansion legacy. By 2005, the prison population reaches 76,190.
- June 2007** Due to ongoing problems of prison overcrowding, Lord Carter is asked by the government to review and recommend options for “aligning the supply and demand” of prison places. Carter is specifically asked to look at “at the potential economies and benefits from large prisons.”
- Dec 2007** Lord Carter’s “Securing the Future” Report is published following limited consultation. Carter offers no suggestions to address underlying causes of prison population growth. Carter instead recommends a significant acceleration and expansion of Labour’s existing prison-building program. Carter recommends building three Titan prisons, which would hold up to 2,500 prisoners each. [www.justice.gov.uk/publications/securing-the-future.htm]

Dec 2007 Government immediately announces it will support Carter’s proposals, and plans to build 10,500 new prison places, on top of an existing 9,500 place expansion program. Government claims large prisons will provide “efficiency” and “better value for money.”

Jan 2008 Prison population reaches 84,920. Government issues update on the Titan Plan and confirms that the first Titan prison will be built by Dec 2012 and that two further Titans will be built by 2014.[www.justice.gov.uk/publications/prison-policy-update.htm]

June 2008 Due to widespread opposition to the Carter Report, the government announces a public consultation on the Titans. More than 74 groups respond to the consultation including several private prison companies such as GEO, Serco, G4S, Kaylx, and Interserve Consortium.

April 2009 The Ministry of Justice releases its response to the Titan consultation and announces that instead of building 3 Titan prisons, it will build 5 “mini” Titans holding 1,500 prisoners each. Also announces “market testing” for poorly performing prisons, opening expired contracts to bids from private and ‘third sectors’ and privatized probation boards. [www.justice.gov.uk/consultations/docs/new-prisons-response.pdf]

Facts about the New Prisons

- Overall prison capacity will expand to at least 96,000 by 2014. But this figure is based on 5,000 old “worn out” places being closed, which may not happen. So in reality capacity may reach +100,000.
- Proposed locations for the first two (mini-)Titans include Beam Park West (East London) and Runwell, Chelmsford (Essex).
- The mini-Titans will be privately financed, built and run (for profit).
- In addition to mini-Titans, the government plans to build two new public prisons (at Isis, near Belmarsh, and Coltishall on a former RAF base), plus two new private prisons (Belmarsh West and Maghull). HMP Littlehey will be expanded by 480 by early 2010.
- The prison expansion project is expected to cost £3.2 - 4.6 billion.

Why Imprisonment Rates are Rising

- In 1984, the prison population in England and Wales was 41,443. As of April 2009 it was 85,461. The most significant increases have occurred not because of increased crime, but because of changes in social, economic and justice policies.
- The Ministry of Justice admitted that 70% of the increase in “demand” for prison spaces from 1995-2005 was due to changes in sentencing.
- The number of people sentenced to life each year in the UK has almost doubled in the past ten years, even though the number of people found guilty has remained roughly the same.
- As of September 2008, there were 11,659 people serving indefinite sentences in Britain, compared to 3,000 in 1992.
- Since it came to power in 1997, the Labour government has created more than 3,600 new criminal offences.

Why More Prisons Are Not the Answer

- Prisons are not effective crime control measures. As Dr Carol Hedderman, a former senior Home Office researcher, stated: “Prison will never be an effective crime-control tool because the evidence clearly demonstrates that it actively creates or compounds the factors that contribute to offending.”
- Prisons are discriminatory and harmful, targeting people of colour, immigrants, poor and working class communities, people with learning disabilities, people with mental health issues and many others.
- We don't have to imprison people. Britain currently imprisons around 3,000 children, some as young as 10 years old. Yet many countries do not imprison children at all.
- Prisons are expensive! Building one new prison space costs approximately £100,000. It costs £110 per day to keep a person in prison. More effective alternatives, such as community sentences, drug treatment and mental health supports, can cost as little as £5 – 20 per day.
- There is widespread public opposition to prison expansion. The main supporters for expansion are private companies who want to profit from prisons and politicians who use “tough-on-crime” rhetoric to win votes -- even though prisons don't actually make our communities safe.

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**BACKGROUND ON
PRISON EXPANSION IN BRITAIN**
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