

Secondary Effects of Imprisonment: The New Direction of Prison Research

Jessica Breen*

Summary: This paper outlines the features of mass imprisonment and introduces an emerging field of research focusing on the ‘unintended’ or ‘collateral’ effects of the over-use of imprisonment. While recognising the differences in the scale of imprisonment between the US and the Republic of Ireland,¹ the paper argues that the questions raised in relation to the secondary effects of mass imprisonment are appropriate for any society in which imprisonment is not evenly distributed among the general population. A brief overview of theoretical approaches and empirical research on the secondary effects of imprisonment is presented, underscoring the dearth of knowledge on the subject area in the Irish case.

Keywords: Mass imprisonment, secondary effects of imprisonment, unintended consequences, prison, families, recidivism.

Introduction

This paper outlines the features of mass imprisonment in the United States as defined by Garland (2001) and introduces an emerging field of research focused on the ‘unintended’ (Vera Institute of Justice, 1996) or ‘collateral’ (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002) effects of imprisonment. It argues that this body of work represents a shift in paradigm in prison research, away from focusing primarily on prisoners and towards a more holistic understanding of the way in which punishment operates. A preliminary introduction to some theoretical approaches and empirical studies on the secondary effects of imprisonment is presented, with

* Jessica Breen is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Her research is an exploratory investigation into the secondary effects of imprisonment on family in Dublin’s North Inner City. Email: jdbreen@tcd.ie

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all references to Ireland or, ‘the Irish case’, or ‘the Irish context’ in this paper refer to the Republic of Ireland only.

reference to a growing a body of mainly US- and UK-based literature. While recognising the significant difference in the scale of imprisonment between the US and the Republic of Ireland, this paper argues that the questions that have been raised in relation to mass imprisonment are appropriate for any society in which imprisonment is not evenly distributed among the population.

Mass imprisonment and the new direction of prison research

It has been argued that ‘among mainstream politicians and commentators in Western Europe, it is a truism that the criminal justice system of the United States is an inexplicable deformity’ (Stern, 2002, p. 280). A main element of this ‘inexplicable deformity’ is mass imprisonment, which is defined as:

a rate of imprisonment and a size of prison population that is markedly above the historical and comparative norm for societies of this type ... The other feature is the social concentration of imprisonment’s effects. *Imprisonment becomes mass imprisonment when it ceases to be the incarceration of individual offenders and becomes the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population.* (Garland, 2001, pp. 5–6, emphasis added)

Garland has argued that mass imprisonment is an exclusively American phenomenon and ‘should be differentiated from imprisonment as it occurs in other comparable nations’ (2001, p. 5). America is, without doubt, exceptional in terms of the scale of imprisonment. With a rate of incarceration of 756 per 100,000 population, the US holds the record for imprisoning more people than any other nation in the world (Walmsley, 2009). However, this extreme case has acted as a catalyst, prompting scholars from a range of disciplines to explore how mass imprisonment is shaping the social life of America. These enquiries challenge the abstract atomistic conception of offenders that underpins many criminal justice sanctions in the US and elsewhere (e.g. Ireland). Instead, they recognise that prisoners are often embedded in both family and community networks. By broadening the scope of study beyond the experiences of individual prisoners, they have shown that in addition to the financial burden incarceration places on the state, there are often great social costs associated with imprisonment (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Travis and Waul, 2003).

This reflects a paradigm shift in the direction of prison research away from primarily questioning why individuals are sent to prison, or the individual effects that imprisonment may have on those who are incarcerated, and towards a holistic examination of the social and economic consequences of imprisonment. In other words, while criminological investigations into the causes of crime have long looked to factors such as the influence of family structure or community context, the ways in which penal policy impacts on these variables is now being fully acknowledged and examined in a systematic manner.

The secondary effects of imprisonment

Prompted by the phenomenon of mass imprisonment, US academics are producing a growing body of literature exploring the unintended consequences of imprisonment (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Travis and Waul, 2003). Such secondary effects range from the more direct emotional and financial effects on prisoners' individual families (Comfort, 2008; Fishman, 1981) to wider social outcomes related to labour market participation (Western, 2002), civic engagement (Uggen and Manza, 2002), and community health (Thomas and Sampson, 2005).

Furthermore, while most of the empirical research on the secondary effects of imprisonment has come from the US, investigations into such collateral consequences are now being explored in a number of other jurisdictions including Australia (Aungles, 1994), England (Codd, 2008; Meek, 2008; Murray, 2007), Jordan (Al Gharaibeh, 2008), New Zealand (Kingi, 2009), Northern Ireland (McEvoy, O'Mahony, Horner and Lyner, 1999), and Portugal (da Cunha, 2008).

What is the economic impact of having a family member incarcerated? How do individual family members experience the imprisonment of a relative and how does this inform their view of the criminal justice system? How does imprisonment influence family life, including roles and relationships? What impact does imprisonment have on children with a parent in prison? How might having a larger than average number of families affected by imprisonment in one geographical area affect that area? These are the types of question that research on the secondary effects of imprisonment is beginning to address. The following sections provide an introduction to two dominant streams of research on the secondary effects of imprisonment.

Effects on families

The field of research that has received the most attention to date focuses on the effects of imprisonment on families. Two assumptions underpin this diverse body of work: firstly, offenders and prisoners are embedded within personal networks such as families and larger kinship groups; and secondly, imprisonment is a dynamic process that occurs over time. This body of work therefore endeavours to understand how different stages of the process are experienced by different family members, including the prisoner themselves, as well as tracking long-term outcomes related to the imprisonment of a family member.

The first point of difficulty arises when attempting to define what is meant by 'family'. Hairston (2003) notes that much 'family'-based research has tended to focus specifically on women in intimate relationships with male prisoners or on the children of female prisoners.

More recently, however, there has been an increasing focus on fatherhood and imprisonment. For example in 2005 the journal *Fathering* published a special issue dedicated to men who are fathers in prison. This touched on a range of relevant issues including contact and visitation of children with their imprisoned fathers and the role that mothers play in gatekeeping within this context (Roy and Dyson, 2005). It also explored the way in which fatherhood is situated within the prison environment (Arditti, Smock and Parkman, 2005) and how the prison experience can interrupt men's identities as fathers (Dyer, 2005).

The focus on promoting a positive fathering identity for men in prison is often discussed with relevance to prison parenting programmes, as it is thought that the fathering role may contribute to both successful desistance from crime and re-entry into society. For many men involved in criminal activity, becoming a father is a significant turning point and *can* act as a catalyst for positive change in their lives.

For those who are *already* fathers, children can also often provide a motivational force to enact personal change. Generally, such individual – and largely internal – transformations need to be accompanied by changes in routines and supported by structural opportunities in order to meet basic needs such as financially supporting oneself and one's family through legal means (Healy and O'Donnell, 2008; Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt and Joe-Laidler, 2009).

Although there are complex linkages between poverty, imprisonment and diversity of family form, research has generally found that imprisonment has a negative economic impact on families. Early research

by Morris (1965) on prisoners' families in England found that following the imprisonment of their husbands, 63% of wives experienced deterioration in their financial situation. In Washington, DC, Braman (2004) found that the annual cost to families of having a relative imprisoned was \$12,680. Despite the different social policy context in the US and the UK, a recent study on poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families found that they were often forced to depend on welfare benefits and the resultant 'loss of a prisoner's or partner's earnings averaged £6,204 over a six-month period ... the average personal cost to the family and relatives was estimated at £1,050 over a six-month period' (Smith, Grimshaw, Romeo and Knapp, 2007, p. 70). Dependence on family members for help during this time of crisis often led to strained network ties and, on occasion, to the severing of those ties and isolation of prisoners' families. This is because remaining caregivers, most often female partners or relatives, are forced either to leave employment to care for children or to take on additional work hours and so burden other family members (such as grandmothers) with childcare responsibilities (Arditti, 2003).

Because it is mostly women that care for both prisoners' children (regardless of the sex of the prisoner) and who are visitors to prisons, a growing body of work focuses on the intersection of the domestic and penal spheres. Comfort (2003) contends that the female partners and wives of prisoners are subjected to 'secondary prisonization, a weakened but still compelling version of the elaborate regulations, concentrated surveillance, and corporeal confinement governing the lives of ensnared felons' (p. 101). This process extends social control beyond the reach of the prison to include the regulation of prisoners' female partners and family members (e.g. children) in terms of time, resources, behaviour and emotions. The influence of the prison extends into the domestic sphere as women struggle to maintain strong bonds between their families and their incarcerated partners. However, these efforts often lead to both an 'institutionalization' of family life as well as the 'penitentiary becom[ing] a *domestic satellite*' in which the acts of private family life, such as meals or celebrations, are played out in the correctional setting (Comfort, 2002, pp. 470–471; emphasis in original).

Merging between sites of formal (the prison) and informal social control (the family) has led some to argue that the increased use of formal social control (i.e. higher incarceration rates) is a contributing factor to the increased inability of families in frequent contact with the

criminal justice system to exercise informal social control. As Fox and Benson (2000) have observed in the American context:

The justice system is increasingly called upon not simply to act as an agent of social control and social regulation, but as a family institution as well. As a larger proportion of the population spends ever increasing amounts of its life course incarcerated within the justice system, that system inadvertently becomes a substitute for adult family roles and settings for its inmates and a destroyer of the very family relationships that, in the past, have offered the surest pathways away from crime. (p. 19)

The prospect that over-exposure to the criminal justice system might be supplanting the traditional disciplinary and structuring role of families has been noted with reference to its implications for preventing delinquency and crime (and subsequent imprisonment) in the next generation.

One of the most prominent research topics on the secondary effects of imprisonment has been the impact of incarceration on the children of prisoners. However, while this is a topic that is often pushed to the forefront of the research agenda, it is notoriously difficult to conduct such research due to ethical and practical considerations. One reason for this is that many children are not fully aware of where their parents are, having been either partially or completely deceived about their imprisonment (e.g. told they are in the army, hospital, or more generally 'being punished'). Furthermore, such research requires a design focused on change over time, like a prospective longitudinal design. This type of research is expensive and complex and, consequently, most studies on children affected by imprisonment have collected cross-sectional data from their (most often female) carers and avoided engaging with or observing children directly (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003).

While the evidence is still mounting, in general, the negative effects of parental imprisonment have been found to be a consistent risk factor for the poor life chances of children (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). In one of the few prospective longitudinal designs employed to date, Murray and Farrington (2005), in an analysis of longitudinal data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), found that separation due to parental imprisonment during the first 10 years of life predicted all antisocial–delinquent outcomes for boys over and above similar types of separation or other individual risk factors. Their results

were reconfirmed when they replicated the study by comparing data from the CSDD with data from Project Metropolitan (in Sweden) on 15,117 children born in the same year as the English cohort (1953). In England, parental imprisonment predicted criminal behaviour of children when measures of parental criminality were controlled for. In other words, English children who had a parent imprisoned fared worse than their peers who had parents with the same level of criminal involvement or behaviour. For English children, the imprisonment of a parent in and of itself contributed to criminality in the next generation; however, in Sweden the effects of parental incarceration disappeared after the criminality of the parent was statistically controlled for.

One possible explanation for this differential impact put forward by the authors is the different types of sentences and family policies in prisons, as well as differences in general social attitudes towards crime and punishment in the two jurisdictions. Swedish prisons facilitated greater contact between prisoners and their families and imposed shorter sentences than English prisons, while prisoners and their families in England were generally stigmatised to greater degree (Murray and Farrington, 2007). This kind of parental stigmatisation has been identified by Murray (2007) as one of the ways that prisoners' children are socially excluded and can lead to children taking on a deviant self-identification. It would seem that the policy and ethos of institutions such as the prison matter in terms of the welfare of the children affected by imprisonment.

Community-level effects

When incarceration impacts families frequently and in a geographically concentrated manner, it is thought that imprisonment becomes part of the socialisation process for community members, as:

Every family, every household, every individual in these neighbourhoods has a direct personal knowledge of the prison – through a spouse, a child, a parent, a neighbour, a friend. Imprisonment ceases to be the fate of a few criminal individuals and becomes a shaping institution for whole sectors of the population. (Garland, 2001, p. 6)

In the US, the astronomical rate of imprisonment for black men has meant that African American communities have generally received the most attention in this regard. According to a recent report from the US

Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2008 the incarceration rate for black males was 3,161 per 100,000 population, six and a half times the rate for their white counterparts. For black women the incarceration rate was 149 per 100,000 population, three times the rate for white women (Sabol, West and Cooper, 2009). Black women therefore face multiple and compounded challenges as they are disproportionately affected by the imprisonment of men in their families, as well as being over-represented in the criminal justice system themselves (Christian and Thomas, 2009).

Furthermore, imprisonment is not just concentrated socially in the African American community but is also geographically concentrated. For example, in their study of prisoner re-entry in Ohio, Lynch and Sabol (2001), using census block groups to define communities, found that 20% of all the state's prisoners came from only 50 block groups in Cuyahoga County. In other words, a fifth of all Ohio prisoners came from an area that represented a mere 3% of county blocks within a single county in Ohio. More dramatically, 8% to 15% of young African American men (aged 18 to 29) living in blocks with high incarceration rates (defined as a one-day rate of incarceration of 0.75 or more) were in prison on any given day (Lynch and Sabol, 2001, pp. 14–15).

Investigations into the possible secondary effects of having so many individuals and families affected by imprisonment in a single area have tended to examine the effects of incarceration on communities within a systemic framework. The systemic model conceptualizes community as a 'complex system of friendship and kinship networks and formal and informal associational ties rooted in family life and ongoing socialisation processes' (Sampson and Groves, 1989, p. 777). It is a holistic perspective, which recognises that prisoners are embedded in systems such as these (Rose and Clear, 1998).

Clear and colleagues have written extensively on the impact of incarceration on communities, and contend that geographically concentrated incarceration (and eventual re-entry) disrupts social networks such as marriages, families and friendships that are the basis for trust, social support and informal social control in neighbourhoods (see Clear, 2007 for an overview). These community level effects have led Clear to assert that:

Incarceration can operate as a kind of 'coercive mobility,' destabilizing neighbourhoods by increasing levels of disorganization, first when a person is removed to go to prison, then later when that person re-

enters the community. In high-incarceration neighbourhoods, the processes of incarceration and re-entry create an environment where a significant proportion of residents are constantly in flux. (2007, p. 73)

According to this model, high levels of imprisonment foster social disorganisation and negatively influence the capacity of those left in neighbourhoods to address community problems.

For example, qualitative research by Rose and Clear (2003) shows that when individuals affected by incarceration (e.g. family members, neighbours) hold negative views of formal mechanisms of social control (e.g. law enforcement agencies, prisons), they also tend to have a negative perception of informal social control. In other words, in neighbourhoods with a high level of incarceration, imprisonment and subsequent 're-entry can diminish safety by directly reducing informal social control' (Rose and Clear, 2002, p. 331). Parents in such communities thus face raising their children in areas with little informal social control in the presence of crime and, at best, ambivalent attitudes towards law enforcement and public authority. Such communities eventually become stigmatised by and isolated from wider society as incarceration becomes a way of life (Clear, Rose and Ryder, 2001).

Rose and Clear (1998) have explained this phenomenon in terms of a 'tipping point'. They argue that at low levels, incarceration may in fact contribute to reducing levels of crime; however, when the rate and concentration of imprisonment reach a high enough level the impact of incarceration reverses and actually *increases crime*. They connect this to the concept of coercive mobility, postulating that the removal and return of large numbers of individuals to neighbourhoods creates negative, destabilising community-level effects at an aggregate level.

Empirical evidence for the coercive mobility theory's assertion that significantly high levels of incarceration lead to an increase in crime by reducing levels of informal social control is still being gathered. The first two tests of the theory were carried out by Clear and colleagues in Tallahassee, Florida and found a curvilinear² relationship between the rate of incarceration and rate of crime (Clear, Rose, Waring and Scully, 2003; Clear, 2007). What this means is that for the Tallahassee

² A curvilinear relationship is one that does not follow a straight line (i.e. is not linear). A good example of a curvilinear relationship is age and health care. They are related, but young children and older people both tend to require higher levels of health care services than teenagers or young adults (Cohen and Cohen, 1983).

neighbourhoods under investigation, crime initially decreased as the rate of imprisonment rose; however, eventually this trend reversed and crime began to *rise* in communities that sent many individuals to prison. Subsequent studies specifically testing the coercive mobility hypothesis on a range of types of crime have all found some degree of support (see Clear 2007, for an overview). For example, Fagan, West and Holland's (2003) research on the impact of imprisonment on New York neighbourhoods found that initially it appeared that crime and imprisonment were related as the prison population rose alongside an increase in crime. However, over time incarceration became independent of crime and merely led to more incarceration. This led the authors to conclude that 'at some tipping point incarceration transitions from an externality in local social networks to become integrated in social networks and an essential part of the dynamics of social control' (2003, p. 1593). Taken together, these studies make a compelling case for the inclusion of imprisonment as an ecological factor in the understanding of social processes at a neighbourhood level.

The social and spatial concentration of imprisonment in the Republic of Ireland

So how does this relate to the Irish context? Simply stated, Ireland does not have a high rate of incarceration. In fact, at 76 per 100,000 population, the imprisonment rate in Ireland is moderate when compared with European countries of a similar size; for example, it is lower than Scotland (152 per 100,000) and higher than Denmark (63 per 100,000 population) (Walmsley, 2009). The US rate of incarceration is almost *10 times* the rate in Ireland.

However, while the rate of imprisonment in Ireland may not be above the comparative norm, the Irish prison population is conspicuously homogeneous and not reflective of Irish society in general. The young urban men³ who populate Irish prisons are the product of a multi-staged filtering process directed by the decisions of various agents of formal social control such as the Gardaí and the courts (O'Donnell, 1997). Two

³ In 2008 women represented only 3.5% of the total daily average population in Irish prisons. This is in line with a general trend from the foundation of the Irish State, in which the number of women imprisoned has decreased and the prison has become an 'increasingly male-dominated institution' (Irish Prison Service, 2008; Breen and O'Sullivan, in press).

main dimensions along which incarceration is concentrated in Irish society are family and geography.⁴

Family

A 1986 survey carried out by O'Mahony in Dublin's Mountjoy prison found that most of the inmates were characterized by concentrated and multiple social disadvantages. Many had left school early and came from families disrupted by desertion or separation of the parents. Furthermore, in 40% of cases, prisoners had at least one first-degree relative who had also been imprisoned, with 7% reporting that their father had been imprisoned (O'Mahony, 1997).

In 1996 O'Mahony replicated the survey conducted in Mountjoy in 1986 and found evidence that the experience of imprisonment had become even more socially concentrated during the intervening 10 years. The proportion of prisoners reporting the imprisonment of at least one first-degree relative had increased to 50%, with 15% now reporting that their father had been imprisoned. Slightly less than half of the sample (44%) reported having had at least one sibling in prison, with 20% reporting the imprisonment of more than one sibling, mostly brothers. Overall, the proportion of prisoners with *more than one* imprisoned first-degree relative had increased from 19% to 28% in a decade (O'Mahony, 1997).

When compared with a contemporaneous survey of state prisoners in the US, this within-family concentration is even more striking. A 1991 survey of state prisoners found that 37% of inmates had an immediate family member who been in prison, with this proportion increasing to 42% for African American prisoners. Overall, 6% of US state prison inmates had a father who had been imprisoned, and 31% had a brother who had done time (Beck et al., 1993). While the data are not directly comparable, it would appear that, at least for prisoners in Mountjoy, the concentration of imprisonment of men within families is even more intense than for their US counterparts.

⁴ A third dimension, which is beyond the scope of this article, is the concentration of imprisonment within certain minority groups in Irish society, such as the Travelling community. This is an issue that requires further exploration in an Irish context (more generally see Carr, 2008).

Geography

The majority of inmates in O'Mahony's previously mentioned research (1997) came from a strikingly small number of geographical areas. In fact, over half (56%) of those held in Mountjoy in 1996 came from just six postal codes in Dublin, with the greatest concentration coming from the north inner city (D1) and the south inner city (D8),⁵ 'areas characterized by a high proportion of corporation housing and often by the prevalence of opiate drug abuse and high levels of long-term unemployment' (O'Mahony, 1997, p. 61).

Overall, O'Mahony's research led him to conclude that prisoners in Mountjoy (and the Republic of Ireland more generally) were broadly similar to the prison population of most developed western countries in that 'they tend[ed] to be young, urban, under-educated males from the lower socio-economic classes and the so-called underclass, who have been convicted predominantly for relatively petty crimes against property without violence' (2002, p. 620). He further argued that the Irish prison system is systematically biased, citing the fact that prisoners in Mountjoy were disproportionately more likely to be economically disadvantaged than is the case in England and Wales, with 49% of prisoners in England and Wales unemployed prior to imprisonment compared to 88% of prisoners at Mountjoy. Based on such evidence, he argues that Ireland is more similar in 'the extent to which [it] deploy[s] prison as a means to control a specific underclass and their particular crimes, to the American situation, where the ghetto-dwelling, black man is seven times more likely to end up in prison than his white fellow citizen' (O'Mahony, 2002, p. 627).

More recently, research by O'Donnell and colleagues utilising PRIS⁶ records for all prisoners released in 2004 confirmed that the spatial distribution of imprisonment is highly concentrated at a national level, with 1% of electoral divisions (EDs) producing nearly a quarter (24%) of all prisoners in the country, despite containing less than 5% of the overall population (O'Donnell, Teljeur, Hughes, Baumer and Kelly,

⁵ The other four areas overrepresented in the survey were Dublin 7, Clondalkin, Coolock and Finglas (O'Mahony, 1997). A similar pattern was found in a survey of female prisoners in Mountjoy women's prison (Carmody and McEvoy, 1996).

⁶ In 2000, the Irish Prison Service began phasing in the Prisoner Records Information System. This computerised system assigns a unique identifier (PRIS number) to each prisoner, and allows the recording of some demographic information and criminal background history (O'Donnell et al., 2007).

2007). This research provides the first comprehensive empirical evidence of where prisoners come from in Ireland and has a striking resonance with Lynch and Sabol's (2001) findings in Ohio. Again, one of the most salient conclusions of the research was that the bulk of prisoners in Irish prisons are young, male and from deprived urban areas. At the conclusion of their article, the authors note that 'prisoner re-entry is not just about the number of prisoners returning home. It is also about the impact of those prisoners on the communities to which they return; communities which are already disadvantaged' (O'Donnell et al., 2007, p. 7). This judicious reminder resonates with the growing body of literature on the secondary effects of imprisonment on communities.

Irish research on the secondary effects of imprisonment

Criminology is often referred to as Ireland's 'absentee discipline' (O'Donnell, 2005). The lack of a criminological research tradition has meant that little research has been done on the topic of crime and punishment in Ireland in general, with this neglect extending to research on its secondary effects. Consequently, we know very little about the ripple effects of imprisonment on prisoners' families (Breen, 2008) or the ways in which imprisonment impacts on communities that experience above-average rates of incarceration and re-entry.

In the 1990s a small number of studies were carried out that tended to focus specifically on Irish politically motivated prisoners and their families; for example, portraying the family ties of politically motivated prisoners in England as being stronger than those of non-politically motivated or 'ordinary' prisoners (Borland, King and McDermott, 1995). McEvoy et al.'s (1999) research in Northern Ireland found that although the strength of family ties of politically motivated prisoners was stronger than that of non-politically motivated prisoners, their overall experiences were more similar to 'normal' prisoners than previously thought. They concluded that political ideology 'does not insulate such families from the practical, emotional and financial consequences of imprisonment' (McEvoy et al., 1999, p. 193).

Even less research has been devoted to examining the impact of imprisonment on the families of non-politically motivated prisoners in the Republic of Ireland. One small-scale survey carried out at the visitors' centre at Mountjoy Prison found that, similarly to the US and UK, extended families were the main source of support for primary

caregivers of prisoners' children. Respondents reported challenges relating to single parenting, financial hardship, difficulties with visiting, and stigma (Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER), 2002).

More recently the Bedford Row Family Project, an organisation established in 1999 to respond to the needs of families affected by imprisonment in Limerick, published a report entitled *Voices of Families Affected by Imprisonment* (Kelleher Associates, 2008). The report documents the findings of 52 semi-structured interviews with family members, including 11 ex-prisoners, and provides an insight into the everyday impact of imprisonment on families in the mid-western region of Ireland. The research echoed the findings of the survey carried out at the Mountjoy visitors' centre (CSER, 2002), but several new themes also emerged including the difficulty of arranging visits over long distances and fear and intimidation caused by feuding gangs or families. Interviewees expressed concerns about the lack of after-care for imprisoned relatives and the burden this creates for them, as they felt that they are left with the responsibility of trying to reintegrate prisoners back into both families and communities.

Little is known about the unintended impacts on communities of having a significantly high number of individuals going in and out of prison. This is despite the fact that the prison has largely been unsuccessful in meeting one of its major objectives, decreasing crime. In an econometric analysis of imprisonment and crime rates in Ireland, O'Sullivan and O'Donnell (2003) found that a dramatic rise in the Irish prison population⁷ was not the reason behind the drop in crime that began in 1996. Although the increased use of imprisonment did have some incapacitative and deterrent effects, they were rather marginal. By comparing the actual rate of imprisonment against three projected elasticities, O'Sullivan and O'Donnell were able to calculate estimations of the effect of non-prison factors on the crime rate. The results of this analysis led the authors to conclude that non-prison factors such as improvements in the general economy and methadone treatment services were largely behind the drop in crime, and that 'crime rates would have fallen steeply around this time even if the prison population had not gone up. If not a single pound had been spent on prison building the crime rate would have fallen steeply' (O'Sullivan and O'Donnell, 2003, p. 57).

⁷ Between 1982 and 1985 and again between 1995 and 2000 the daily average number of prisoners increased by over 40% (O'Sullivan and O'Donnell, 2003).

This raises the question: If the increase in the prison population did not have the intended effect of reducing crime, what *unintended* effects, if any, did it have?

Conclusion

Generally, discussions surrounding the phenomenon of mass incarceration portray the American situation as beyond compare. This seems to be the case whether it is in reference to the scale of imprisonment, the harshness of the punishment meted out, or the concentration of its effects. The US is an extreme case; however, designating America as incomparable to other western nations discourages meaningful comparative exercises important to criminological enquiry. While the extreme scale of mass imprisonment is not found elsewhere, in countries where the distribution of punishment via imprisonment is highly concentrated both geographically and socially, some of its consequences may be. The questions raised in relation to the social effects of mass imprisonment are therefore of a wider relevance than first impressions may convey.

International literature indicates that the effects of imprisonment often reach far beyond their impact on the individual prisoner. However, little is known about these secondary effects in an Irish context. Research is needed that considers the specific historical and cultural influences that have shaped the experiences of families and communities most affected by imprisonment. This is a largely unexplored subject area calling out for more investigation.

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