

# **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR? EXPLORING THE PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF NEW PRISON BUILDS**

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## **Abstract**

Over the last twenty years the prison population in the UK has been rising at an unprecedented rate. In 1971 the number of people held in prisons and young offender institutions (hereafter in prison) numbered 45,046, in 1991 it was 50,736 and in 2001 it was 66,300. At the time of writing, April 2008, the UK prison population stands at 82,945. De Silva et al (2006) have sought to make projections as to what the UK prison population might be in 2013. Based on the assumption that recent sentencing trends continue into the future, they projected that the prison population would be 98,190. This 18% increase would require room for an additional 15,000 inmates. The largest existing single prison in the UK - HMP Wandsworth, holds on average 1,461 prisoners. If all the new prisoners in 2013 had to be housed in new prisons of this size, ten new prisons would have to be built in the next five years to accommodate them. Possibly anticipating that ten more new builds would be an expensive proposition, the Justice Secretary Jack Straw announced in 2007 that in addition to more traditional medium sized prisons, three 'Titan' prisons would be commissioned and built over the next five years to hold 2,500 inmates each. The policy of imprisoning ever larger numbers of people has been subject to considerable research and commentary over the last ten years. The focus of criticism has been on the efficacy and philosophy of imprisoning more and more people. This article does not seek to reproduce that debate; rather it focuses on what is known about the impact of a new prison build on the prisoner and local community experience. As the prison building programme evolves over the next few years, local debates about the perceived desirability and impact of new prison builds are likely to flourish. This article aims to provide a focus and make a contribution to those debates to better inform decision making in this area.

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## **Introduction**

In 2008 the announcement was made that to address the 1800 estimated shortfall of prison places in Wales, a new medium sized prison would be built there. Subsequently four

sites have been identified for such a prison - two in South Wales and two in North Wales. Possibly anticipating and rehearsing the debates that are likely to follow in respect of other proposed prison builds in the UK, local opinion has been divided in terms of the perceived desirability of a prison within both South and North Wales. In general however there has been resistance in South Wales to the idea of a new prison being built there, but in North Wales there has been significant support. In North Wales for example the Local Criminal Justice Board held a conference in November 2007 at which leaders from all the main criminal justice agencies in that area, along with local Judges, magistrates and politicians called for a prison facility to be built in North Wales. The conference was widely reported and in generally positive terms in the local media. In South Wales on the other hand it is reported that Torfaen council vigorously oppose a prison at Cwmbran and an "Oppose the Prison Action Group" has already been formed.

As is common in instances when policy makers support a prison build, arguments for a prison are predicated on the view that such a build would have a significant positive impact on prisoners from that area who would otherwise have to be housed further away. In addition to this, arguments for a prison are predicated on the perceived positive economic impact such a prison would have on the region (Shichor 1992). Arguments against a prison on the other hand are largely mobilised around the perceived detrimental economic impact it would have on the local economy; and on its perceived social consequences in terms of higher crime rates and social problems. This article seeks to stimulate and inform further debate on the issue, by considering firstly the literature about the potential impact of prison siting decisions on offenders and their families. What is known about the impact that being near or far to home has on a prisoners experience is explored. Secondly, the economic impact of a new prison build on an area is explored. What is known about its effects on local economies, businesses, and employment in an area is reviewed. Finally the social impact of a new prison build is explored. Considered are its effects on crime rates, perceptions of safety, house prices and quality of life. Where relevant, reference is made to what is known about any differential effect depending on whether the prison is a medium sized or titan prison.

## **Impact of Prison Siting Decisions on Offenders and their Families**

In some areas, arguments for a prison may be predicated on the idea that a community needs a new or another prison because some or all prisoners from that area are currently located far from their homes, with negative consequences for them and their families. Such an argument is currently made in North Wales for example. Adult male prisoners from North Wales are currently accommodated at HMP Altcourse in Liverpool, whilst adult females are currently accommodated at Styal in Cheshire. In 2003, prisoners in the UK were held, on average, 53 miles away from their home (Hansard 2003). Evidence given to the Welsh Home Affairs Select committee indicates the average for adult male and female prisoners from North Wales on the other hand is 67 miles and 74 miles respectively (WHASC 2007). In such instances it is argued prisoners face discrimination

because prisoners located closer to their home area may receive more visits and therefore be better able to maintain family, social and economic ties to the communities to which they will return. It is further argued that the nearer a prisoner is housed to their home area, the better that will be in terms of that prisoner's health and rehabilitation and ultimately, for an area's crime rate. The YJB appear to accept this argument and aims to place as many young people as possible within fifty miles of home and to minimise the average distance between each young person in custody and their home area (Konn 2004).

There is some evidence that the further away a prisoner is kept from their home area, the fewer visits they receive. In 2003 the Howard League suggested the relationship between visits and distance was straightforward. It suggested that visits to prisons reduced as distance from home increased. Research by Niven and Stewart (2005) into the prison visits received by 1,945 prisoners in 2003 suggested that one third of prisoners who did not receive visits, cited distance and cost of travel as the main reason they were not visited.

As to the significance of this, research has been conducted into the relationship between prison visits and mental health, self harm and/or suicide rates. Liebling (2001) found in her studies of suicide in prison that prisoners who had committed suicide, or thought about doing so, missed their families more and received fewer visits than those who did not. Being in prison can be a depressing and difficult experience for prisoners. However Mills (2004) suggests that active family support can "help to ameliorate the pains of imprisonment thereby potentially reducing the risk of suicide/self harm" (p.1). This is because receiving visits from family and friends can serve to remind prisoners that there is a life for them after the prison sentence. If visits are inversely correlated with distance to prison, then particular concerns should exist in relation to the practice of placing young offenders, whose identities and independence are evolving, at a distance from their home area.

As significant as receiving fewer visits however may be that prisoners kept in prisons away from their home areas are likely to be in unfamiliar surroundings relative to other prisoners who are local. There is a significant body of evidence that prisoners kept in conditions where they do not understand the primary culture, dialect or languages being used for example, can face higher levels of stress than normal. It has been argued that such prisoners face problems in terms of sustaining a positive sense of identity (Richard et al 1995a, Richards et al 1995b, Davies 2001, Finkelstein 1997, Bhui 2005.) For example a concern that arose for the Wales Home Affairs select committee was about Welsh speakers from Wales being imprisoned in English jails. Hughes and Madoc-Jones (2005) explored the experiences of young Welsh speaking offenders in English jails from the perspective of youth justice workers. The workers associated the imprisonment of Welsh speaking youths in English jails with emotional and psychological distress. Conversely, evidence also exists that just as prisoners from Wales are particularly vulnerable in English jails, the reverse is also true of English prisoners in Welsh jails (WHASC 1997).

Whilst this research focuses on problems sustaining a robust sense of national or ethnic identity in prisons, Melucci suggests that globalisation and pan-national political organisation has served to reactivate the importance of the local context. Consequently individuals may increasingly identify with their local contexts to give a stable and recognisable basis to their identity (P.111). Prisoners kept outside of their local communities may therefore face similar problems in terms of sustaining a positive sense of identity. Billig (2001) argues that identity is a subjective construct affirmed through banal routine activities such as using particular dialect or language, reading a particular newspaper, attending a particular religious service, keeping certain company, watching particular television or singing songs and telling of tales. In certain contexts, some prisoners may experience their identity being oppressed from not having the ability to engage in activities that are important to them. Locating a prisoner nearer their home may therefore have positive effects on that prisoner in terms of helping them sustain a local identity.

Research has also been conducted into the relationship between prison visits and subsequent re-offending rates. A number of reports have suggested that maintaining prisoners' relationships with family and friends is a key aspect to their successful resettlement on release (Howard League 1994, Woolf 1991). Studies in the USA (Ditchfield 1994) and U.K. (Haines 1990) indicate that prisoners without family support are between twice and six times more likely to offend in the five years after release than those who have maintained family ties. Shafer (1994) has explored the relationship between prison visits and subsequent parole success in the USA. He concludes they are "an essential component of the rehabilitative process" (p.17). Research into why offenders stop offending in the UK shows that social bonds such as family ties are usually the most powerful incentives to change and promoting desistance from crime (Maruna 2001). A prisoner who has family and friends to return to after their release from custody is likely to have a greater state in conformity than an offender with no such social relationships.

A significant consideration concerning the impact of a new prison build on offenders and their families is that a new prison only addresses the above concerns as long as it houses people from the local area. A Titan prison is projected to hold 2500 inmates. It seems likely that in any part of the country such a large facility would inevitably hold many prisoners from outside its immediate locale. Consequently such prisons may increase overall the average distance between a prisoner and their home area, and widen the experience of problems associated with this.

On the other hand whilst it might be anticipated that in bigger facilities it might be more difficult to maintain order and so the prisoner experience might be more brutal, research by Useem and Piehl (2006) suggests that the most critical factor in relation to disorder in prison is not its size, but rather the quality of the management structures and leaders.

## **Prisonomics**

Arguments for siting a prison in a locale may be made on economic grounds. It has been reported for example that the chairman of the North Wales Economic Forum described any new prison as a "glittering economic prize" for any area in which it is built (Evening leader 28/3/08). Shichor (1992) argues that it is very common for it to be perceived that a new prison will have a positive economic impact on a region. UK research would appear to validate such a perception. It suggests that a new prison brings significant economic benefits to the area.

In 1993 a Home Office report suggested that a new prison in an urban area generates, during the construction phase, around 230 jobs and introduces £3million a year into the local economy over a three year period. Following completion it brings 480 new jobs and £8 million a year into the local economy over a three year period. In the region as a whole it generates around 620 jobs during the construction phase, and introduces around £8 million per year into the regional economy over a three year period. During its operational period it generates around 560 new jobs into the region and injects £9 million into the economy a year over a three year period (Home Office, 1993).

Hill and Roberts (1995) considered the construction phase of Parc Prison in Bridgend and argued that during the construction phase it was likely it would employ an average of 400 people. They argued a substantial proportion of the workforce would be local, adding directly to local incomes. They argued the project would involve a substantial one-off capital injection into the region- estimated at around £88 million, and would also create an additional 841 jobs over the two year period by indirect employment primarily in the supportive construction, distribution and transport sectors. During the operation phase the annual expenditure would be £10 million with 62% of the expenditure on staff costs, 7.2% on utilities and 29.9% on supplies and services (Hill and Roberts 1995). During the same phase 350 staff would be employed "the vast majority of which would be permanent employees recruited locally" (p.10).

In the UK, the research that has explored the economic impact of prisons has been commissioned works. Research therefore commissioned and conducted primarily for the Home Office about a particular part of its activities. Although this work has been carried out by University research teams it has not been published and thereby subjected to peer review processes. The findings stand in contrast with peer reviewed academic research conducted in the USA. Whilst communities in the south of the USA in particular have tended to see new prisons as "economic development projects" (Hoyman and Weinberg 2006 P.97), more recent research suggests their impact is at best minimal.

Carrying out robust research into the economic impact of a prison is a challenging task. Besser and Hanson (2004) argue that because prisons are usually located in metropolitan communities, identifying an economic impact either way is problematic. Controlling for all the relevant factors that might produce effects is a methodological problem. Often cited studies by Abrams and Lyons (1987) and Carlson (1992), which suggested prisons

had a positive economic impact on an area in the USA, have been subject to considerable criticism on the basis of their flawed methodologies. The former for choosing a control group that was also subject to the influence of the prison being considered, the latter for having no control sample.

Very recently however more robust research that has been peer reviewed has been conducted into the impact of new prisons sited in smaller community settings in the USA. (Besser and Hanson 2003, King et al 2003, Farrigan and Glasmeier 2003). Being subject to peer review the standards adopted in the research have been more rigorous, and focussing on smaller rural prisons, the changes being examined have been easier to detect. Although also subject to methodological challenges, these very different research studies have produced very similar conclusions. This body of research does not reject the finding that some jobs and wealth are created when a new prison is built. However it suggests that in the longer term, prisons tend to have a zero effect on the economics of an area (Besser and Hanson, 2004, King et al 2003, 2004, Farrigan and Galsmeier 2003). Besser and Hanson (2004) for example used 1990 and 2000 census data to examine the economic and demographic impact of new prison builds on small town economies compared to changes in matched small towns without prisons.

At least part of the reason for the absence of a positive local impact is that a new prison cannot be totally staffed by new staff and so initially many employees come from outside of an area to work. Equally that a prison is labour intensive but offers very low wages. Being labour intensive a prison may, over time, come to employ many local people, but according to Hooks et al (2004) the absence then of potential employees acts as a disincentive to new investors which might pay better wages. Chuang (1998) argues that because prisons contain staff canteens and facilities, the amount of money that is introduced into a local economy by a new prison is minimal. He measured consumer spending in the local area before and after prisons had been built in the USA. He found no impact in three quarters of the 42 sites he surveyed.

In the U.K. it is possible to speculate that additional costs will arise for a community in which a prison is sited. These additional costs in general do not figure in the research that has been conducted into the impact of prisons in the USA. Prisons hold some of the most damaged individuals away from the community, but being damaged, they have multiple health and welfare needs. Contracts to run private prisons in the UK come with the expectation that arrangements will be made to address prisoners' health issues. Whilst additional funding is made available to Primary Care Trusts to commission healthcare in state prisons, local limits are likely to exist in terms of the infrastructure available to support developing and sustaining new services inside a prison, whilst maintaining existing standards outside a prison. The numbers of doctors and nurses that are available for re-deployment into a prison for example may be limited. Space for additional consulting rooms or beds may be limited on a community hospital site. Particular security arrangements have to be made for prisoners in hospital which may place further demands on the infrastructure. In a review of prison healthcare in 1997 Reed and Lynne reported

that physically ill prisoners requiring either a consultant opinion or transfer to NHS inpatient care "were often advantaged over NHS patients; the wait for an appointment or admission was generally not long" (p.1422).

Prisons are big institutions that make demands on local authority services such as roads, planning and environmental services. They are also places of crime. There were on average 15,000 instances of assaults in UK prisons per year from 2002 to 2006 (Hansard 2007) Some of these assaults required the local police to investigate and the local criminal justice system to prosecute offenders. Local authority and policing costs are partly born by local communities through the council tax system. They are also partly covered by central government grants. Local authorities may increase council tax but the police and other criminal justice agencies in the UK are not guaranteed more grant income to cover any additional costs that arise for them because a prison is built in their jurisdiction. This is because the UK Government has moved to multi-year settlements for local authorities. A prison population will therefore take some time to be factored into grant allocation decisions. Whilst sub-national population projections are used to review the level of grant given by Governments to local authorities, only prisoners who have been in a prison for six months at the time the population is counted are included in the returns. The Government also bases the amount of grant it gives local authorities on the projected number of band-D equivalent properties within an area. Depending on where it was built a prison might displace or reduce the number of band D properties within an area. If an increase in grant income is identified as being necessary, a local authority may still not qualify for it. This is because the Government ensures that every authority receives at least a minimum percentage increase in grant year-on-year if their projections reveal they need it. In order to pay for the cost of this, it scales back the increases in grant above the minimum percentage for some local authorities who require big increases. Depending therefore on the level of the average minimal increase chosen by Ministers, there may or may not be an increase in the amount of grant that local authorities would receive had a prison not been sited in their jurisdiction. (CLG Local Government Finance Directorate-private communication 2008, WAG- private communication-2008).

Overall therefore, whilst the economic balance sheet in respect of siting a new prison is complex, what may be said is that there is very little peer reviewed research from the USA or UK that suggests that prisons have a strong positive economic effect on the communities in which they are built. The economic effects of different types of prisons are not known and most of the research relates to medium sized facilities. However if the effects of such a prison were to simply make more pronounced the effects that are already seen as a consequence of a medium sized prisons, a titan prison might be expected to have a slightly more pronounced, but not significant, negative economic effect on an area.

## **Social Impact of Prisons**

Whilst political parties often find that promising harsher sentencing of offenders is a vote winner, ironically new prisons generally engender a negative reaction. This reaction comes from two quarters; from those opposed to increasing the numbers of people in custody and those likely to live in the immediate vicinity of such establishments (Hoyman and Weinberg 2006). Takashi and Gaber (1998) for example conducted a survey in the USA into public attitudes towards various types of controversial facilities (e.g. power stations, prisons, toxic dumps, homeless shelters etc) and found prisons to be one of the facilities with the highest level of community rejection. Maxim and Plecas (1983) in the US suggest there are four areas of concern: concern about the value of neighbourhood property, concerns for family safety, concerns for general quality of life and neighbourhood instability. Concerns of all these types have begun to be raised in relation to a prison in North Wales (Daily Post 18.3.08), and, according to Shichor (1992) arise routinely when new prisons are being proposed.

## **Value of Neighbourhood Property**

Because prisons are negatively perceived, it is expected to be the case that people do not want to live near them and as a result property prices around prisons fall. DLMD (1998) note that the impact of a prison on house prices in a local area rest on the positive impact of a prison on local income and the perceived negative impact of the prison on the immediate vicinity and these influences vary over time. Overall however, studies in the UK find that prisons have little or no impact on house prices- the effect fluctuates and is more significant during the building phase but then disappears (Home Office 1993, Pineda 1995, DLMD 1998). Whilst the impact on individual houses may fluctuate, this overall finding holds true in peer reviewed research in the USA as well (King et al 2004).

Associated with this are concerns that a prison might act as a disincentive to new business ventures in an area. This might be because it soaks up any reserve army of labour or because new companies are eager to avoid association, even tangentially, with any such institution. Very little research has researched this topic in the UK. Pineda (1995) however canvassed the views of business leaders and found that there was no evidence that indigenous or inward looking companies consider that prison development or presence has any impact on their investment decisions.

## **Concerns for Family Safety**

Prisons are clearly designed to keep offenders, some of whom might be dangerous, away from the general public. There is evidence however that a widespread fear amongst those living close to prisons is that prisoners will escape and inflict harm on the local community (Carlson 1988). This eventuality is a feature of many stories about prisons that appear in the media. The Prison Media Monitoring Unit at Cardiff University found that in April 2006 there were 108 prison stories in a series of popular newspapers and some of the more common themes were that the regimes were too cushy, security was too lax, and escapes were occurring (PMMU 2006) Escape from custody however is a rare event.

Absconds should be distinguished from escapes. When an individual is in an open prison they abscond and usually when they are already in the community- on home leave or working etc. The number of “escapes” from custody in the UK is low and there were only 3 escapes in 2006 (HMPS 2006).

Martin and Myers (2005) in the USA suggest that local residents fear is more related to concerns about those who visit prisons than those in prisons who are locked up safely behind concrete walls. Crime and criminality shows strong family links (Paternoster and Bachman 2001). Overall however research finds ‘no evidence’ of increased crime rates around prisons (King et al 2004). Hawes (1985) for example looked at seven cities with prisons in the US and found they had crime rates 22% below the average for comparable cities without prisons. Millay (1989) tried to assess crime rates change before and after establishing a prison and found no significant changes occurred. This may be because in large conurbations the effect may be hidden. Equally it may be because no increase in crime occurs. If so it may be hypothesized that these findings may be due to the psychological effect being near or visiting a prison has, or the deterrent effect of having lots of ‘law enforcement’ related personnel in a given area.

That said, some research has suggested crime rates are higher in locations where prisoners are released and settle in the area of the prison (Shichor 1992). This presents as a more likely scenario in open conditions however where prisoners form associations in the community of the prison, than in secure conditions where no such allegiance can be formed. Shichor (1992) points out that this should be a greater concern for smaller communities because of the relative proportional weight prisoners may come to have in a small population. The larger the prison of course, the greater is the number of prisoners that might settle in its surrounding areas.

Despite prison facilities being generally perceived as negative, some research suggests that community reaction to a prison is not so negative once a prison is established in an area and its minimal social impact is more widely experienced. Martin and Myers (2005) surveyed 3795 people in a county in which the construction of a new prison had just begun. The majority (1659) were neutral at worst about a new prison. Some American research has considered people’s perceptions about quality of life before and after a prison is built in their locale. Most individuals report ‘no change’ (Abrams et al 1985).

## **Quality of Life and Neighbourhood**

Fear of crime however is not an insignificant factor. It can create a sense of unease, breed mistrust and damage community relations. In the U.K. context a prison is likely to have an affect on the reported local crime rates. This is because since 2005, crimes committed in prison are counted in local crime reduction figures. Clearly, the larger the prison, the greater will be the effect on the crime rate. Whilst this crime has little bearing on the true crime rate in the community, nor significant direct impact on the populace as a whole, there are ancillary effects that might arise from this in terms of the association of an area

with high crime rates. There may be a loss therefore of community prestige, leading to practical consequences such as, at the very least, the potential of higher insurance costs.

Environmentally the picture is complex and depends on whether a prison displaces another potential industry. Clearly a prison may be more carbon neutral than a factory, or less carbon neutral than a farm park. The environmental impact a prison makes may be exacerbated or effectively displaced by 'environmentally friendly' or unfriendly practices. A prison will increase noise compared to a no build option in any area, but a standard specification for new prisons is non-opening cell windows to ensure noise disturbance is kept minimal by preventing inmates from communicating externally between cells (Cabinet 2004). A prison will also increase light pollution relative to a no build option, technologies exist however to ameliorate the effects.

In relation to differential social effects depending on the size of prison, clearly the more open the prison the more community interaction and potential for benefits and problems exist. On the other hand the more open the prison the more safe, theoretically, prisoners are meant to be. Titan prisons are new developments in the UK and so their effects cannot be known for sure. Concentrating prisoners, staff and visitors in one area however might make more visible some social problems that are currently not statistically visible for being diffused across several medium size prisons and locations. For example it would concentrate in one area the increased pollution, or additional crime that might otherwise be diffused across five medium sized prisons.

## Conclusion

Further research is required on the issue of prison siting in the UK in general and the effects of different prisons in particular. However drawing on the available academic literature in the USA and research reports available in the UK some tentative conclusions may be drawn about prison siting issues.

In respect of arguments for a prison to be sited in a locale founded on the distance prisoners would otherwise be from their home area- research exists which suggests that helping prisoners maintain links with their family and community ties promotes desistance from crime, rehabilitation and mental health. Economically, research suggests that when the balance sheet is drawn to include all relevant factors, the most common scenario is that a prison has a zero effect on the economy of a local area over time. Socially, compelling evidence that a prison produces negative social effects does not exist. Prisons mostly have little effect on house prices and crime rates and technologies exist to ameliorate their environmental impact. There is little published research on what the impact of a Titan prison in particular might be on prisoners and local communities. It seems probable that overall however such prisons might lead to more prisoners being housed further from their home areas than previously. Whilst research suggests issues of disorder are related to internal management structures rather than the size of the prison, outside the prison gates it is possible that concentrating offenders, staff and visitors in one

area may make more significant and visible social or economic problems that have hitherto been hidden.

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