Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

It's time to end big government's grip on our prisons [1]

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Ben Gummer MP has an interesting article in the Daily Telegraph today calling for reform in the UK?s prison system [3]. We have twice as many men and women incarcerated in England and Wales as there were in the mid-1990s. In short, our prisons aren?t working. Spending on prisons has continued to rise to close to £4bn, while reoffending rates have stayed the same. Ben Gummer argues that now is the time, during this period of austerity, to finally address the issue and bring real reform to the penal system.

In his article, Ben Gummer argues for:

> ??the need to re-connect victims and communities with sentencing, to make punishment more local and purposeful, and to remove as far as possible the impersonal and failing bureaucracy of the state. For many criminals, prison is just another welfare dependency, and we might challenge its over-use on those grounds alone.?

He also points out that prisons often fail to rehabilitate prisoners and treat the root causes of criminal behaviour. Bad prisons? ?failure to tackle mental health, profound psychological disorder, drug and alcohol addiction and moral vacuity, is in itself a crime on society?s part. We put people behind walls and then forget about them. That is wrong.?

Ben Gummer raises some important issues in his article. Unfortunately for far too long it has been implicitly accepted that sending people to prison is an effective way of tackling crime. A fascinating paper released by the Howard League for Penal Reform this week [4] undermines this assumption, showing that prison?s effect in deterring people from committing crime can be overestimated, while reconviction statistics highlight the failure of the penal system to reintegrate convicts in society.

A one-size-fits-all approach to the penal system isn?t working. The state doesn't have the knowledge necessary to determine a single ideal imprisonment system, despite the highly centralized nature of our criminal justice system.

As the ASI's Sam Bowman argued in an event with the Howard League this week, we should learn from free markets. Central government cannot run prisons and criminal justice any better than it can run hospitals and schools. It is only through experimentation and a more localised approach to punishment that we can discover effective ways to solve our current prison problem.

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Links:

[1] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/liberty-justice/its-time-to-end-big-governments-grip-on-our-prisons
[2] http://www.adamsmith.org/authors/sally-yarrow
[3] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/9856966/Britains-spending-on-ramming-people-in-jail-is-lunacy-at-a-time-of-austerity.html
[4] http://www.howardleague.org/intelligent-justice/
[5] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
[6] http://disqus.com