

8 DECEMBER 2008: BUILDING TITAN PRISONS IS A COSTLY FAST-TRACK TO A FAILED US PRISON SYSTEM

Building American-style Titan prisons to warehouse thousands of prisoners could fatally undermine the justice system's ability to cut crime by reforming offenders and instead set England and Wales on the fast-track to copying the damaging and discredited US prison system, a leading US civil rights lawyer will warn tonight at the Prison Reform Trust's annual lecture.

Professor Bryan Stevenson's lecture. *Warning from America: the social and economic impact of over-incarceration and how to avoid it*, is a direct challenge to Justice Secretary Jack Straw who has in the past criticised over-incarceration in the US and vowed it would not be replicated here.

The Prison Reform Trust believes we have nothing to be complacent about and asks 'as the recession bites, can we afford to spend 2.5% of GDP on the criminal justice system, a higher per capita level than in any other EU country or the USA?' As a proportion of our population, we already hold more people in privately run prisons than is the case in the States. Black and minority ethnic groups are massively over-represented in prison populations here and in the US.

Prof. Stevenson will identify the unjustified and counterproductive use of prison for petty offenders, children, the mentally ill and addicts in need of treatment as the main cause of the US system's current problems and the UK's fast-rising prison population.

Prof. Stevenson will argue that the UK must not repeat the US mistake of dealing with the symptoms rather than the causes of prison overcrowding. He will add that if large, American-style prisons are built in England and Wales then that would, in effect, signal the end of the government's desire for prisons to reform offenders. Instead these prisons would become giant warehouses from which large numbers of offenders are released ready to offend again.

Prof. Stevenson will challenge sceptics of this view to read the Prison Reform Trust's Bromley Briefing Prison Factfile, published today, and see how the prison system in England and Wales is holding large numbers unnecessarily, for longer and longer at huge cost and for little or no public benefit. He will explain why and how states across the US are questioning the effectiveness and sustainability of incarcerating so many people.

In his lecture, Prof. Stevenson will also talk about his experiences representing young, poor and marginalised prisoners some of whom as young as 13 years old face a life sentence without hope of parole.

Earlier this year, a report on the prisons in the US by the respected Pew Centre think tank concluded that harsher sentencing and growing prison numbers are 'saddling cash-strapped states with soaring costs they can ill afford, and failing to have a clear impact either on recidivism or

overall crime". Prof Stevenson will argue in his lecture that investing just a fraction of these resources in communities in order to treat the mentally ill and break drug and alcohol addictions would produce better outcomes in terms of preventing reoffending and cutting crime.

Prof. Bryan Stevenson will say:

This is a time when fear and anger about crime and security is very high which is why our thinking about crime policy has to be sober, sensible and effective. The U.S. has made serious mistakes with its criminal justice policy over the last 35 years, the UK should learn from these mistakes, reject the idea of Titan prisons and pursue cost-effective, humane and responsible strategies that avoid mass incarceration and inspires hopefulness rather than the inevitability of imprisonment which has so devastated many American communities.

Juliet Lyon, Director of the Prison Reform Trust said:

This timely warning from America could 'sink the titan nick' and save the British Government from making a gigantic, costly mistake. In fairness to victims we should be helping people break free from addictions, stop binge drinking, diverting the mentally ill into proper healthcare and making sure that petty offenders do community service to pay back for the harm they have done, not building super-sized prisons. It is shaming enough to be the greatest incarcerator in western Europe without slavishly copying America's failing prison system.

Alison Hannah, Director of the Penal Reform International, said:

Other countries have followed a different route. In Finland and Canada, for example, where criminal justice policy is not so highly politicised, serious investment has been channelled towards alternatives to prison – and the evidence proves that this change of policy has not resulted in higher rates of crime.

You can download a copy of the Prison Reform Trust's Bromley Briefings prison factfile [here](#)

Notes

1. In August 2008, the Prison Reform Trust produced a report on Titan prisons:

<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/temp/Titansbriefingsp28.08.08hs1hs.pdf>

2. It took the US prison population less than 40 years to rise from 300,000 in 1972 to 2.3 million today. The Penal Reform International states that the US has the highest prison population rate in the world – 2.3 million people are behind bars in state and federal prisons, and in local jails. The incarceration rate is 750 per 100,000 – the highest in the world. www.penalreform.org

3. Prof. Bryan Stevenson teaches at New York University and, since 1989, has been Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a private, nonprofit law organization he founded that litigates on behalf of condemned prisoners, juvenile offenders, people wrongly convicted or charged, poor people denied effective representation and others whose trials are marked by racial bias or prosecutorial misconduct. Stevenson's work has won him national acclaim. In 1995, he was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship Award Prize. He is also a 1989 recipient of the Reebok Human Rights Award, the 1991 ACLU National Medal of Liberty, and in 1996, he was named the Public Interest Lawyer of the Year by the National Association of Public Interest Lawyers. In 2000, Stevenson received the Olaf Palme Prize in Stockholm, Sweden for international human rights and in 2004; he received the Award for Courageous Advocacy from the American College of Trial Lawyers and the Lawyer for the People Award from the National Lawyers Guild. In 2006, He has also published several widely disseminated manuals on capital litigation and written extensively on criminal justice, capital punishment and civil rights issues.