

RESEARCH IS THE KEY TO PRISON SERVICE REFORM

John Lonergan, former Governor of Mountjoy Prison, believes that a lack of in-depth sociological research into Ireland's prison population is restricting the potential for positive reform in the criminal justice system. He shared his own thoughts on 'Unlocking a Positive Future for Offenders' at a recent event hosted by Social Entrepreneurs Ireland in Dublin. Report by Elaine O'Regan.





John Lonergan is pictured with Gary Doggett, founder of the Pro-Social Drivers Programme.

Since the publication of the late Paul O'Mahony's 1997 report, 'Mountjoy Prisoners: A Sociological and Criminological Profile', research into Ireland's criminal justice system has fallen behind.

That's according to John Loneragan, former Governor of Mountjoy Prison, who was one of the main speakers at the recent Impact Series event, 'Unlocking a Positive Future for Offenders', hosted by Social Entrepreneurs Ireland.

"That was 29 years ago and, since then, we really haven't done any worthwhile research," said Loneragan, who was joined at the event in Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre by Gary Doggett, founder of Pro-Social Drivers Programme and Stephen Plunkett, chief executive of U-Casadh.

"If you were to look up Google for research, you'd find it difficult to get any sort of sociological or criminological background on people," said Loneragan.

RECIDIVISM IS COMPLEX

"We have never done [a national report] and that's something that social innovators would look at, because without information, without the facts, how can you plan? You do need the facts, you do need research."

Recidivism, which describes a person's relapse into criminal behaviour, is itself a "very complex issue", noted Mountjoy's former governor. "It's not as black and white as people may think. It means nothing really if you haven't the connection between the crimes," he said.

"You could have a person who went to prison or into detention at 16; he comes back at 26 with a motoring offence and he's a recidivist, but there's no connection in the world between the two crimes.

"Then, if people don't come back what happens them? Is it



Recidivism means nothing if there is no connection between the crimes, said Loneragan.

FACTFILE – JOHN LONERAGAN

John Loneragan was Governor of Mountjoy Prison for 26 years until his retirement in 2010. A vocal advocate of social justice and prison reform, Loneragan joined the Irish Prison Service in 1968, aged 20, initially working in Limerick for four years, before transferring to Shanganagh centre in Dublin for a further two years.

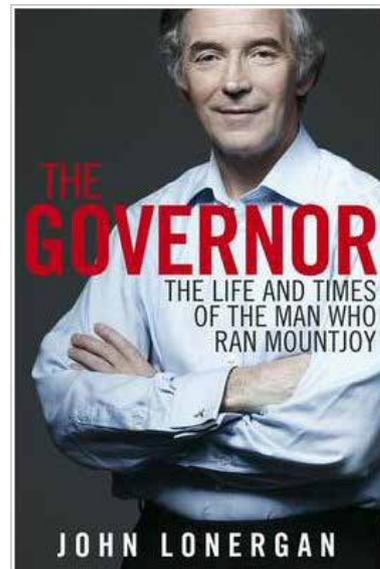
He moved to Loughan House in 1972 and, from there, to the Training Unit in Mountjoy Prison. In 1976, he was promoted to Assistant Governor, followed by Deputy Governor in 1983.

The following year, at the age of 36, he was appointed Governor of Mountjoy Prison. A native of Bansha, Co. Tipperary, Loneragan published his memoir 'The Governor: The Life and Time of The Man Who Ran Mountjoy' in 2010.

Post-retirement, he continues to give talks to secondary and third level students on a range of issues such as social justice issues, the reality of prison and how the penal system works, the scourge of drugs in modern society, and confronting bullying in schools and colleges.

Speaking to local communities and voluntary organisations his talks focus on issues like the importance of community, why we cannot enforce change on others, drugs in our society, confronting bullying in our society, reducing the risks of suicides, balancing our lives between work, home and family. For parents he presents a talk entitled 'Parenting – the challenges and the rewards', which is a reflective and awareness-raising look at parenting.

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that they're not committing crime or is it that they're not caught? People used to cynically say to me when I was in Mountjoy, 'it's a university for crime'.

"I would say 'well, it's a very poor one, the results are very bad', because everyone on prison is a failed criminal. The real criminals never get caught. You wouldn't learn a lot in Mountjoy about crime, only how to get caught."

SMALL PRISON POPULATION

Compared to other countries, Ireland's prison population is relatively small, according to Loneragan. "Lots of people do not know this, but we have a tiny prison population relative to other countries," he said.



“Great ideas, great buildings and great facilities don’t necessarily help people to change. The changing of people is a different process. It takes time, it takes great patience, and a great belief – a belief that in every single person is the ability and the capacity to change.”

“We have about 3,800 people roughly on any one day incarcerated in Ireland, and about 600 of those are remanded in custody awaiting trial, so they wouldn’t have been convicted of anything.

“There are that many people in one prison in England. You have about two million in America and 70,000-plus in England, Scotland and Wales. We have a tiny number of people, so the

problem is not as big as we think.”

Ninety-seven per cent of Ireland’s prison population is male and the vast majority – 97 to 98 per cent – come from Ireland’s poorest areas, claimed Lonergan. “They’re not a cross-section of Irish society. I can identify most of the areas where people come from and they’re mainly urban areas and they’re the poorest areas in Dublin, Cork and Limerick.”

A low level of education is common among people who serve time in Ireland’s prisons, he noted, adding that in Mountjoy, about seven per cent stayed in school after 16.

“The consequences of that are huge in terms of responding to their needs when they come out of prison. Most of them (88 per cent) would not have worked before they went into prison, so they have no job record.”

“HORRENDOUS OBSTACLE”

A criminal conviction, combined with a prison sentence, can be a “horrendous obstacle” to employment for many, according to Lonergan. “A criminal conviction is not as inhibiting as a criminal conviction along with a prison record, because now you really have a problem,” he said.

“The main thing for people coming out of prison is ‘do I tell people?’, so you go in for a job and they say ‘where were you for the past two years?’ and you say ‘Mountjoy’, sure, you haven’t a

SOCIAL & ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS ADDRESSED

Social Entrepreneurs Ireland has supported over 190 enterprises nationwide with the primary aim of addressing social or environmental needs, since it was set up 12 years ago.

Two such enterprises include the Pro-Social Drivers Programme, a road safety initiative rolled out in Donegal in 2012 to help improve the driving behaviour of higher-risk driver groups. The Waterford-based U-Casadh project provides people in the community, who have an ‘occupation with purpose’ to reduce their chances of returning to prison.

For details on Social Entrepreneurs Ireland visit www.socialentrepreneurs.ie U-Casadh, on www.ucasadh.ie Pro Social Drivers Programme on www.psdpireland.com



The Pro-Social Drivers Programme helps to improve the driving behaviour of higher-risk driver groups.

Compared to other countries, Ireland's prison population is relatively small – there's about 3,800 people on any one day incarcerated in Ireland, compared to two million in American prisons.



hope of getting the job.

"My main concern at the moment would be with the areas they come from, where they're often now in their third or fourth generation of families going in and out of prison. Particularly for males, their role models are into drugs, into crime, so they don't have positive role models and that's the reality."

Lonerger described Ireland's public housing policy as "the greatest scourge we have created for ourselves in relation to alienating people." Connecting with people, he said, was the biggest challenge, "because most of them are disconnected from what we would consider mainstream society".

"These people come from areas where they feel alienated and disconnected. You have to disconnect them with criminality, and their lives of criminality, but you can't force change - don't even try.

"You can nurture it and that is what social innovation is about. It's about creating environments and it's about creating ideas and it's about supporting and nurturing it and leading it."

DRIVING SAFE BEHAVIOUR

Social Entrepreneurs Ireland was set up 12 years ago to support enterprises around the country whose primary aim is to address social or environmental needs.

The organisation has since supported 190 social enterprises, among them the Pro-Social Drivers Programme, a road safety initiative established in Donegal in 2012 by Gary Doggett to help improve the driving behaviour of higher-risk driver groups.

Also among them is the Waterford-based U-Casadh project, set up by former prison officer Stephen Plunkett to provide people in the community having an "occupation with purpose" to reduce their chances of returning to prison.

Initiatives like these were welcomed by Lonerger as a means to enable positive change through self-empowerment. "You have to bring people along with you and you have to get their consent and agreement," he said.

"For me, I have always said, the biggest challenge in prison is to get the consent and agreement of the individual. You start by listening to them and what they want to talk about, and try to reassure them that what they're looking for is realistic and you can help them to achieve that. It's a slow process," he noted.

A TRYING TIME

"For people who have completed a prison sentence, their first two or three months in the outside world can be a trying time. They need an awful lot of hand-holding at that stage to try to help them to readjust, if they can or if they want to," said Lonerger.

"I'm afraid, in many areas, those services are just not there, so they leave Mountjoy with a black bag and they go back to where they came from. They're immediately re-entered back into the same environment, the same friends, the same culture, the same everything.

"It is difficult to make that break, it is difficult to stay out of crime, and we must offer them alternatives. I learned that in Mountjoy. Great ideas, great buildings, great facilities are great, but they don't necessarily help people to change.

"The changing of people is a different process. It takes time, it takes great patience, and a great belief – a belief that in every single person is the ability and the capacity to change."

