

# Reflection: Environment and Prisons

If you visit modern prisons the first thing that might strike you is how bare they are. Before the prison is built all the trees on the site will have been cut down, all the vegetation bulldozed. No doubt all this is done in the name of safety and risk avoidance, but the visitor's overwhelming impression will be that prisons are at war with nature.

For prisoners as for all human beings, however, a healthy natural environment is essential for their well being and health. Where, as in Roeburn, the summer temperature can reach 50 degrees, being locked in a cell in an unsheltered building is close to torture. Recent research sponsored by Jesuit Social Services, too, has shown how important for human development is access to parks and vegetation both to moderate high temperature and for human wellbeing. And yet precisely it is people who are disadvantaged and whose world was confined to acres of houses in treeless streets, that are most likely to be confined in prisons where is no colour, little greenery and no gardens.

For children held in juvenile detention centres the effect of being confined in a built environment is even more destructive. To grow as human beings children need space in which to play, plants, trees and birds through whom to appreciate nature, and houses open to the world. Being confined for long periods to cells that look out on walls, fences and other buildings compounds the effects of the lack of meaningful activity. When this deprivation is exacerbated by inadequate staffing and by extremes of temperature, frustration can beget a violent response.

The lack of humanity in juvenile detention is not an indictment of the officers supervising the prisons. They are also victims of a justice system and society which treat children as criminals who deserve punishment for their wrong-doing. The deprivation of freedom and of association with family and friends, the harsh and artificial environment in which nature is seen as a threat, the solitary confinement and spit hoods, are all seen as a deterrent from a life of crime. In fact they make graduation to adult prisons more likely because in the years of their lives when young people most need encouraging and mentoring they are deprived of opportunities to connect with others and to contribute to society.

The loss of hope, the alienation from the natural world and from other human beings and the diminishment that imprisonment inflicts on children is a tragedy both for themselves and for a society that does not support its young. Children who act antisocially need to be accompanied by people who care for them and help them to take responsibility for their actions. They need, too, to be enriched by opportunities that will encourage them to learn and to work. Some, of course, will need to be detained in order to protect society. But their confinement should be in secure, but not punitive, surroundings open to the natural world. Other children should be accompanied while living in the community.

Children matter. They need a supportive environment in which to grow.

By Fr Andrew Hamilton