Letters to The Guardian

• There is broad consensus that the catastrophe in our prisons will only end when the government has a coherent plan to reduce prison numbers. There are now more than 4,000 women in prison – the majority sentenced for non-violent offences like theft, often driven by mental ill-health, abuse, addiction and poverty.

This summer’s prison crisis has unfolded alongside reports of woeful provision in the community of mental health services, substance misuse treatment and a lack of supported housing. It would be astonishing and shameful if the plan to build [five new women’s prisons](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37854358) was to go ahead in this context. Instead, investment in community alternatives to custody and specialist support such as that provided in women’s centres (proven to be more effective at reducing reoffending) could half the women’s prison population by 2020.  
**Kate Paradine**  
*Chief executive, Women in Prison*

• The reported unexpected (only by those of a Panglossian disposition) rise in the prison population presents two complex difficulties to two critical groups operating within the criminal justice system: sentencers and prison staff. With the privatisation of the majority of the probation service into what are called community rehabilitation companies (CRCs), and the consistently critical HM Inspectorate reports about the ineffectiveness of those privatised sections, sentencers must be disheartened by the ability of those CRCs to offer any meaningful interventions which will reduce reoffending. Such disappointment will inevitably increase the likelihood of custodial sentences being imposed.

Prison staff, particularly frontline officers, must despair at the cavalier manner in which the government promises “jam tomorrow” (ie extra staff) but seems unable or unwilling to engage with the problems experienced today – for example, rises in violence and self-harm, disturbances that sometimes become riots, and the growing frustration of being able to do little or nothing more than contain prisoners without any opportunities to offer activities that contribute towards reducing or eliminating future offending.

As has been said countless times before, the criminal justice system needs a radical rethink, and not one that nudges it further and further into the for-profit sector, to the detriment of effective and humane sentencing.  
**Andy Stelman**  
*(Former assistant chief probation officer), Bishops Castle, Shropshire*

• When I was a youth court judge and member of the Youth Justice Board, there was a dramatic reduction in the number of young people receiving custodial sentences as a direct result of increased confidence in alternatives provided by local youth offending teams. Many will conclude that the ever-increasing number of adult offenders going to prison has some connection to the part privatisation of the probation service.  
**David Simpson**  
*Datchet, Berkshire*

• The justice secretary, David Lidington, speaks of the need for sentencers to have confidence in the options to prison before they might forbear from consigning ever more offenders to a prison estate full to overflowing. But then it was his cabinet colleague, [Chris Grayling](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/chrisgrayling), who contracted out the probation service to calamitous and confidence-sapping effect.

It is an altogether perverse swimming against the tide to have fewer offenders brought to court and yet ever more of them incarcerated. Everyone possessing even a nodding acquaintance with the situation on the ground knows that carrying on as we are is illogical and wrong. In terms of reoffending rates and further societal alienation to come, keeping on keeping on with a non-policy which was acknowledged publicly by senior criminal justice service personnel as wrongheaded in the early 1990s (with then prison numbers around 46,000) is unprincipled and cowardly.

Seriously hampered by Grayling’s fixation on outsourcing or not, an urgent release of swaths of non-violent – and as a specific example harmlessly geriatric offenders – to be managed in the community is the only sane way to proceed. To achieve that wholly desirable aim through executive release may be politically bold but nonetheless right. Then policy can emerge, rather than the present inexorable drift to all that is wrong and hateful in the worst of the United States’ prisons.  
**Malcolm Fowler**  
*(Solicitor and higher court advocate), Birmingham*