

The Sylvans

Detailed summary powered by AI

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Motion: we lock up far too many people.

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1. Analysis of the outcome

By eight votes to five with four abstentions, the motion carried without moving anyone. A room that arrived persuaded left persuaded; what the evening supplied was the reasons. Both sides found their best material on the floor rather than in the opening speeches. The opposition won the argument about what the words 'far too many' demand. On the numbers the proposition won, and the numbers were what the room voted on.

The proposition's case: abolition, irreversibility, alternatives

The opening speech defined its terms carefully and then spent most of its time abroad. Prison abolition was redefined in the first minute as ending prison as the default punishment, which removed the most obvious objection before anyone could make it. The history that followed was brief and the main example was American. Three-strikes laws are a vivid illustration of over-incarceration, but they are not British law, and no opposition speaker felt any need to defend them.

The two most original ideas of the evening both came from this speech. A 'convict tax' to recover losses and a choice between five years and 10 lashes gave the room something concrete to argue with, and the chair singled out the tax at once. The lashes did more work for the opposition than for the proposer. One floor speaker answered them directly: the state has no right to beat its citizens, and prison is the measured alternative.

The closing was the stronger half of the case. It drew openly on the floor, taking the university of crime and the 1995 figures, and added the war on drugs as the mechanism behind the gap between falling crime and rising prison numbers. Legalised kidnapping was the line of the night. Its rhetorical effect was to make the opposition's measured loss of liberty sound like a euphemism.

The opposition's case: thresholds, categories, public safety

The opposer conceded the moral ground early and fought on the wording. Prison throws people away, rehabilitation is poorly evidenced and alternatives are welcome, but far too many is a threshold, and meeting it means removing whole categories of offence from prison. That was a disciplined reading of the motion, and every opposition speaker after it adopted some version of it.

It also carried a cost. Having granted that jail rarely rehabilitates, the opposition was left defending prison mainly for its value in protecting the public and punishing offenders, and it needed evidence that those released would offend. The opposer asked the room to look up the statistics. Within two speeches a supporter of the motion had done exactly that, and the figures were for the other side.

The closing tried to reframe those figures rather than dispute them. Illiteracy, ADHD and autism among prisoners, an NHS and a legal system on their knees: these suggested the prison population had grown for reasons other than over-sentencing. Women's safety in London gave the argument a human face it had lacked. Calling the crime statistics fiendish, however, conceded that nobody on the opposition side had better ones.

The ebb and flow of the floor in the prison population debate

Four battlegrounds opened. The proposition held two and the opposition one, with the fourth absorbed by both sides.

The numbers. Crime peaking in 1995 at a prison population of 51,000, and falling while the count rose to 87,000, was the most cited argument of the night. Nobody on the floor contested the figures. The opposition's only reply came in the closing, and it questioned the reliability of crime statistics in general rather than these ones. An uncontested number is very hard to vote against.

Who is actually inside. This was the opposition's strongest ground. One speaker argued that early release provokes outrage precisely because the people being released are the ones the public wants in prison. Another went through what carries a five-year maximum and argued that short sentences follow repeat convictions or violence. Together these were the most effective attack on the proposer's picture of jails full of bicycle thieves. They did not move a vote.

What prison is for. The floor built a list as it went: rehabilitation, protection and punishment, then deterrence from the last speaker. In the closing, the proposer answered the last item directly by claiming deterrence does not work. The argument over lashes and liberty sat inside this battleground, and it was the one place the opposition clearly held the moral initiative.

Causes upstream. Two speakers placed the problem before prison altogether: school exclusions, county lines, illiteracy, communities without anywhere for children to go. Both leaned towards the motion. The opposer then borrowed the illiteracy point for the closing, so the most socially minded argument of the evening ended up serving both sides at once.

What the floor added

This was a rapid debate, with both opening speeches made extemporaneously, and the evening shows the format working. The decisive argument for the motion, the 1995 comparison, arrived second from the floor. The most precise argument against it, the analysis of what five years is actually given for, arrived sixth. Neither opener had either one, and both closings were rebuilt around them.

The most compact statement of the opposition's case also came from the floor, from a speaker arguing both sides on purpose. Saying we lock up too many people, they suggested, is like saying the NHS treats too many patients. Of everything said against the motion, that comparison went furthest towards turning the proposition's central number into a measure of demand rather than excess.

What the prison population debate left unexamined

Nobody settled who 'we' were. The figures were for England and Wales, one speaker noted that Scotland and Northern Ireland differ, the proposer's examples were American and the closing widened the claim to every Western country. A motion about how many people a country locks up was debated without agreeing which country.

Two arguments that could have met never did. One floor speaker said Britain cannot afford £60,000 a year per prisoner; another said Britain must build more prisons. The remand figure, 18 per cent of prisoners awaiting trial or sentence, offered a way to cut numbers without touching sentencing at all, and nobody took it up. Victims appeared mainly through the Harper case.

The cost of prison was raised once and then dropped. If a place costs what one speaker claimed, the motion had a fiscal case to make alongside its moral one, and neither the proposer nor anyone supporting the motion made it. The opposition's call for more prisons was never priced either. A debate about the prison population that left money almost entirely to one floor speaker missed the argument most likely to reach the abstainers.

What drove the result

The room entered at eight to five and left at eight to five. The proposition did not need to persuade anyone. It needed to lose nobody, and the opposition's threshold argument was the only thing likely to cost it votes. The threshold argument struggled because both opposition speakers had conceded so much on the way to making it: that prison rarely rehabilitates, that alternatives deserve a try, and that some people are inside who should not be.

What was left was a quantitative claim about a threshold, set against a number of 26,000, and the number won. The abstentions rose, some of them latecomers, and nobody crossed the floor. The room was asked how many is too many, and answered with the only figure it had been given.

2. Detailed transcript

The prison population motion, and the opening show of hands

So the motion is: we lock up far too many people. Let's do a pre-vote to see who agrees with that at the start, who disagrees with it, and who wants to abstain, and then we'll compare that against the end. Who agrees with the proposition? Keep your hands up while I count. I've got eight there. Who disagrees that we lock up far too many people? Five. And who doesn't agree or disagree at this stage? One.

A prison abolitionist's case

Thank you very much, fellow Sylvans. I'm a prison abolitionist. This might seem like I want to get rid of all the prisons, but that's not the case. What this simply means is that we should abolish the prison as the primary means of punishment in society.

Now, prison, in reality, and in almost every country, is a punitive form of punishment, and it wasn't that throughout most of history. Prison actually was not a thing until really the 19th century. There were prisons. People would be sent to a prison before they would be interrogated, maybe tortured. They would serve their sentence, and they would be sent back home or sent to a grave, whatever was the case back in the day. It originated in the US as a means to supposedly rehabilitate people, so that they would no longer be criminally minded. Over time, however, its original purpose of being a way to reform people was lost, and instead it just became punitive. Whatever you did, you got locked up. Two, three, five years, whatever, for whatever offence, you would be sent to jail.

And the US is one of the most extreme cases, in which you have certain states with so-called three-strike laws, where if you break the law three times, whatever this may be, could be shoplifting, could be some petty offence, just a minor fight on the street, you'd be locked up for life. I can't think of anyone with a sane, rational mind thinking that this is a good use of national resources, to lock people up for life for no reason.

Who should be inside, and the time that cannot be returned

Now, again, this is not to say that we shouldn't have prisons. Of course we do need to lock up some people, and maybe in some cases a lot of people. Murderers should definitely be locked up. Rapists. People who clearly have not demonstrated the capability to coexist in society with others. They are a risk to others, a risk to the physical integrity of others, or a risk to the financial interests of others. Bankers who swindle their clients should probably be locked up. But for everything else, do we really need to send people to jail? Do we really need the expense of sending all these people away for years on end, for a punishment that cannot be undone?

If we accidentally incarcerate someone, we cannot give them their life back. We cannot give them back the time they spent. There have been countless people who've been in jail for 30, 40 years, and they have no way of getting that back. Just no way.

So there are other forms of punishment that we can use. We can definitely use community service, maybe an extra tax on people who commit crimes, which they'll have to pay eventually, especially for crimes that involve money or some sort of property destruction, which can be recovered. Any crime where the loss can be recovered should not be punished by sending someone to serve a sentence of time that they cannot recover. Do you know what I mean? So let's be creative. Let's think of other ways that we can punish people, and not just send someone to jail because they stole a bike or stole a phone.

Community service, a convict tax and 10 lashes

Let's send the people who really do deserve to be away from society, the violent criminals, the murderers, the rapists. Those should be in prison. No mistake about that. And in regard to the recent policy, yes, it is a bit worrying that certain people, like the killers of PC Harper, were potentially being released. That is outrageous. I think we can all agree that we don't want those people back on the streets.

But for the rest of the people, people who do not commit violent crimes, who are not repeat offenders, who may have just caused some kind of property damage, I think prison is excessive. I think it's cruel. Let's be honest. If you were sentenced to five years of your life. Five years. Remember where you were five years before today. Or, and this is an extreme example, 10 lashes. I think I might take the 10 lashes. I'm not saying that we should go back to torture, but think of the time that you would lose just for some petty crime. There are countries where you will go to jail for five years for a petty crime, versus some temporary physical pain or some other form of punishment.

Doing community service for hundreds of hours, or even thousands of hours, is still better than being sent to jail. Or paying some extra convict tax. I'm not sure if there's any country that does this, but I figured you could just tax someone extra until they recover the damage that they cost to society. So let's keep the prisons for the really dangerous people, and let's invent some other, more humane and less resource-intensive ways in which we can punish the rest. Thank you very much.

The opposition: how high "far too many" sets the bar

Thank you, Chair, fellow Sylvans. Good to be here. It is a very important topic. It's relevant given the PC Harper situation, and Andy Burnham coming out saying we need to find a way of stopping this scheduled release from happening. That's an anecdotal example, and the proposer agreed: there are certain people we shouldn't be letting out of jail, and there are whole swathes of types of crime where we need to have people in jail.

I have some sympathy with some of what the proposer has said. Clearly there are some crimes where we shouldn't be throwing people away. It hurts those people individually. It can drain resources from society, whether or not they're being rehabilitated. There's very little evidence that shows that jail is actually leading to rehabilitation. So I think there are real arguments on that side.

That being said, let's look at the motion here. We lock up far too many people. Far too many people. That's a significant bar. We would have to be looking at swathes of crimes and saying, and this isn't about the length of sentence, that this whole type of crime should not carry a jail sentence. Unless you ask judges to use more discretion in their sentencing, which is one option here. But is that the way that we want to go? Will that actually achieve locking up far fewer people?

I think in order to achieve that, you've got to make fairly sweeping changes to the sentencing guidelines and rules, and you're going to have to exclude whole categories of crime from prison. And the reality is, keeping those criminals off the street is going to have an impact, at least in the short run, on the crime rates.

Fraudsters, fines and where to draw the line

So where do we draw the line? We heard murderers, rapists, violent criminals. We had the example of financial criminals, someone who's committed really bad fraud. Someone who's a fraudster, who's sending text messages to thousands of people and, stereotypically, pilfering pensions from pensioners and taking their money. That's someone who's deliberately undertaken a criminal enterprise, has gone out and set this business up, knew exactly what they were doing, and created a whole ton of fraud.

Now the proposer suggests, well, let's levy a gigantic fine and make that person pay that money back. Do we really believe that that individual is going to go off and set up a legitimate business and pay back

a huge fine to the state? There might be cases where that would happen, but we have to think about the average here, and what the overall impact of a change in sentencing approach would be. I think it's really challenging to draw that line and to get a big percentage of the prison population out. I think you're going to have to exempt a lot of people from sentences, and that is not necessarily the way to go.

We can talk about wholesale reform. If you really wanted to be radical, you could look at rehabilitation centres, or things like house arrest with technology monitoring, which could be an alternative to prison. That would be not locking them up, but using a different approach to trying to stop them from reoffending. Those types of programmes would not affect white-collar crime very well, because if they're out in the wild, they're going to have access to the internet. It might reduce certain types of physical crime.

And I'm very open-minded to all that kind of thing. We absolutely shouldn't just be saying jail is the only punishment, the only sanction that we have for criminals. I'm not saying that jail or a fine are the only options we have, but we have a limited range of options today, and we're looking at jail versus non-jail, so we have to look at all those different things.

Drugs, parole and shorter sentences

But we, as a group, on balance, have to say: would we actually be comfortable with having convicted criminals in far greater numbers than we have today, roaming the street right after they've been convicted? That's the ultimate question that we have today. I don't have the statistics. I hope one or two people are ChatGPTing to see how many people we're actually locking up today. Are there some categories of crime where we can look at this and maybe it's right? So I challenge people to pull up some statistics on it, because that will make the debate a little bit more concrete.

But let's take another example: drugs. We could decriminalise drug dealing. Now, low-level drugs in the UK are kind of effectively decriminalised. If you have a small amount of cannabis on you, you're nowhere near doing jail time. If you're a dealer, I don't know where that boundary lies. But if you're a serious dealer, then you absolutely run the risk of being in jail now, and at some level I think that's right. I don't know exactly how far up the ranks and quantities of drugs you have to deal to get to that level. So we already have, in certain areas, this partial or unofficial decriminalisation.

The other thing I would put into the room is shorter sentences, not taking away jail time. Parole is a great way of letting them out: if they behave well, and you hope that there's less risk of recidivism, you let them out, and that might reduce the prison population. But that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about wholesale, big chunks of crimes not going to jail. Thank you.

Cost, the hangman and universities of crime

Well, Mr Chairman, up to a point I agree with the proposer, but only up to a point. We have to go back to earlier times, Roman and medieval. You just could not afford to lock people up. Prisons only served to hold people before they were tried. I think, for complicated reasons, we've gone back to that situation. It costs today about 60,000 pounds to keep a prisoner in prison. 60,000 a year; sentence them to 10 years, and you're over half a million being spent on a miscreant. I would say we can't afford that.

In the past, Roman and medieval, if the crime you had committed couldn't be adequately dealt with by a whipping post, you were handed over to the hangman. We have to go back to something like that. There will be vast opposition to hanging people for minor offences. So I would go along with the proposer in trying to work out other methods of punishment, but whether you could find other methods that are going to be, a, cost-effective and, b, any use at all, I have great doubts.

The other problem with prisons, apart from the cost, is they are also basically universities of crime. You go in there. You've done something wrong, but you're presumably not highly educated in the world of the criminal. But you will be when you come out, if you're in there for any extra time at all. 60,000 pounds a year to train you to be a good criminal. So I think the debate has to be on what else you will do to them, and when you will bring back the hangman. That's my view, and there will be a vast furore about that. But maybe eventually we'll get something. At the moment you can't lock people up anyway, because you run out of prison space, and you have to turn them out of prison almost as soon as they go in. So the whole thing is chaotic.

Crime down since 1995, prison population up

I'm basically speaking in favour of the proposer, and I think you can demonstrate that by what's happened to crime and punishment in the last 30 years. This is about England and Wales, because Scotland is different and Northern Ireland is also different. The peak of crime in England and Wales was in 1995, so 30 years ago. Crime was right up here in 1995, and the prison population was here, at 51,000. Since 1995, crime has gone down and down and down, and the prison population, apart from the year of Covid, has gone up and up and up.

So at a point where crime is extremely low compared to 1995, we now have 87,000 people in jail. We've got 26,000 more people in jail in a time of low crime compared to a time of high crime. It doesn't make sense. Even that demonstrates that surely we're putting too many people in prison, or keeping too many people in prison too long.

I know some people might rail against that because of the Andrew Harper case. But even in that case, the way some people react to it is as if the two who were only convicted of manslaughter rather than murder were always going to be in prison forever, and now we're suddenly going to let them out. Actually we're talking about, I think, a 15-month difference in what their sentence would be, even though it is obviously shocking.

Oh, and by the way, the reason it's gone up and up like that is because politicians keep reacting to public sentiment about certain things. A drunk driver kills somebody: let's have longer sentences for drink driving. The sentences for rape have gone up and up over the years. So it's partly politicians meddling with what they think the sentences should be and changing the law. But I'm with you. I think we have to find new ways of making people pay for their crimes, whether it's reparation, community work, or being put into schemes where they have to learn a skill and get a job, because one thing that will keep people out of prison is if they're employable and can earn their own money.

Investing in people before prison

So, very interesting points from everybody here. I am more with the proposer on this point. But I think one element that we're not touching is that we could do all of this, take everybody out of prison or find other ways to punish them, but when we look at the crimes that are actually being committed, they're ones that start on a community level. If we actually invest in the people and in the community and in the youth, we wouldn't have to deal with such high crime rates.

There was a school in America. Obviously their gun violence is very, very bad, and there was a town where literally 90 per cent of the kids were doing it or involved in it. They had nowhere to go. They didn't have anything to do. And so one of the schools opened up on the weekends and after school for the children to go to and just hang out in and just be in. And they saw a 70 per cent decrease. Okay, we have to check the facts, but it's a huge, huge decrease in the rate of gun violence and crimes between the children, literally 12 and 14, these little ages.

So I think if we're going to even propose doing something like this, we need to think about what we're actually putting into the people, because then it would be looking at rehabilitation. What would it look like, instead of actually giving punishment to people when they're shoplifting? Yes, there are these huge gangs running rings of shoplifting. But I think a lot of people just don't have the money. Nobody has the money. That's why these gangs are rampant, because people are buying it off them, because they can't afford it from the stores. So I think we need to look not at what's happening inside the prisons, but what's happening in between, in the people, and then we'll find a solution to how we can actually deal with any of the prisoners. And I think that's me done.

The case for building more prisons

So, a lot of speakers in favour of the motion. I will be arguing against the motion. The idea that we put far too many people in prison is very easy to say in the abstract. Wouldn't it be nice if you just had a few people in prison, and everyone was holding hands and dancing around the maypole? Problem is, when you actually start releasing people from prisons early, as this government is trying to do, immediately people hate it. Oh, we don't want actual criminals, people who've committed crimes like killing people, out on our streets. Immediately, people hate it.

I think we should put weight on that, and on the fact that when we start releasing people, we have to start releasing those sorts of people. That undermines the notion that there are these swathes of people in prison who have just committed minor crimes, like not paying their speeding tickets. No. Our prisons are so underfunded and overcrowded, due to a lack of capacity, that the people we put in there are those that we really want to be in prison in the first place.

Now, we should consider what the purpose of prison is. There are normally three reasons to put people in prison and have punishment. One is to rehabilitate. Two, to protect, to make sure they're not just out in public. And three, to punish. And I think that last one is worth emphasising. When someone does something wrong, they should be told that it is wrong, and they should be punished for it. And prison is a measured punishment. It deprives people of a sacred right of liberty, and that is a weighty thing to do. But it's not cruel. It's not beating people or hanging them, which the state should not do. The state has no right to beat its own citizens, nor to kill them where there's no threat to life. Prison balances the two: it punishes, but in a measured way.

Now, the alternatives mentioned by my learned friend in proposing the motion. Community service: I don't think that really punishes people. Sure, you can do it for low-level crimes, but if someone nicks my phone, no, I actually want their liberty to be deprived: first, to protect other people, but also to show them, no, you can't bloody well do that. Secondly, fines. That doesn't really work when a lot of people who commit crimes, as the previous speaker said, don't really have any money in the first place. And in any event, if someone steals money, even if they go to prison, you can still sue them for civil compensation. So I don't think that one's the solution anyway.

As I prefaced at the start of my speech, the huge problem here is that we just haven't built enough prisons. We are still using crumbling Victorian prisons, built back when the population was far smaller. They're now all falling apart. Our population has grown. We need more spaces, and you can use those to make sure that the people we think are really violent, who are now being released because we have no spaces, are still in prison. Thank you.

Bed and board, exclusions and county lines

First of all, I want to say something about those teenagers who were locked up for being passengers in the car that dragged the policeman. They probably didn't even know what was going on. They got caught up in it. The chap who got murdered, his mother has done good PR, and is making a terrible fuss

about it, I tell you. So I think they should stop. It's just mucking up the debate about it.

Secondly, there's the ironic thing about being put in prison, which is that you get free bed and board. There are people who are out; they've got no money, they've got no job, they're out on the street. It's actually quite a good move to get into prison. You get bed and board for quite a few years. So it's not actually a punishment to deprive people of liberty, as people say.

A lot of people who end up in prison are the sort of children who get excluded from school. Schools are in competition for exam results, and the children who aren't doing very well are the ones who get excluded and get put on the street, and then get, what do they call it, when they have to go up and down the country selling drugs? County lines. And a good proportion of the people in prison are illiterate. So if they do get into prison, it should be about education and rehabilitation and teaching them job skills, rather than punishment. So I think the whole argument is topsy-turvy.

And also, the quality of employees looking after the prison population is probably not good enough to do all the work that's needed to look after them. The government has cut funds to the prisons, so they're not providing an institution that's going to help the situation. Also the probation officers: they cut probation. It was privatised at some point, and it's a tough job trying to keep track of these people who've been let out. So the whole thing needs to be re-evaluated to try and improve the situation.

Recall, remand and the prison population

I'm definitely arguing against the motion. I agree with a lot of the arguments that we need to change the prisons, and I think we need to change a lot of how we approach the whole process, including what happens after people leave prison. For example, one of the reasons prisons are overcrowded is that we have a lot of returns to prison. Not just reoffending, but when people formally miss some appointments or something, we often bring them back into prison, which I think is ridiculous, especially for people who genuinely behave well. I think in a lot of prisons in the UK there is a strong correlation between how good the situation is in prison and how likely people are to reoffend. So there is definitely an argument that we need to change that approach.

However, I think it's slightly manipulative to argue that we're putting far too many people in prison, and that there are a lot of people who are wrongly removed from society for some period of time. There is still an element of punishment to this, and I think we maybe have a slight misunderstanding of who usually goes to prison for short sentences. It's not petty theft. It would need to be multiple convictions for petty theft to go to prison for a short sentence, or it would require a violent element. And I think a lot of people would agree that if someone does it multiple times, or if someone is doing it violently, there is an argument for them to go to prison.

The proposition used a number, five years: what if a person goes to prison for five years? Well, let's see what the UK actually puts people in prison for five years for. Assault with bodily harm has a maximum sentence of five years, and I genuinely think this is not an easy crime. Class B drugs have a maximum of five years, and that's actually rarely enforced. Theft of significant value, or robbery: those are the kind of things that get you five years, and it's still at the higher end of sentencing for those crimes. I think we have a general misconception of what people go to prison for, how dangerous those crimes are, and why we do this.

I think there are a lot of things we can look at and try to improve. For example, 18 per cent of people in prison are still awaiting trial or awaiting sentencing. That's one of the things we should be looking at. People who went on parole and were returned to prison. What we do in prison. Those are the things we should be looking at, but not necessarily softening sentencing. We need to use both the carrot and the stick, and I think the stick is still an important part of rehabilitating and improving society. Thank you.

One speaker, both sides of the argument

I might say a couple of things. It's been a great debate, and there have been a lot of great arguments, a lot of angles. I'm just going to try and fill in things I think maybe have not been said yet, because it might add something.

If I was going to argue for the proposition, I would say something like this, and it would be very heavily informed by the earlier point about the statistics, where crime was going down but the prison population was going up. There's a bit of us demanding heavier sentences for the same crime than, say, 20 years ago, and I think there's a lot of truth in that. There's a lot of media in that.

I think that's possibly a function of how difficult it is to live in a law-abiding way and just earn money through work. The cost of living is a big political issue now. I think people are very heavily taxed. The prices of things go up, and, fuelled by a bit of media, people get angry when they see others cheating, and want to see heavier punishments. So I think we've become, wrongly, more annoyed at criminal behaviour, and we want to see heavier sentences. There is media sensationalisation of the most heinous crimes, which sometimes can deviate from the facts.

And then on the other side, if I was going to argue against the motion, you might say it's the wrong question. You might say that saying we lock up far too many people is like saying the NHS treats far too many people. Illness and crime are both social ills that have to be treated: one we treat through medical intervention, one we treat through punishment. But we don't say, oh, we treat too many people, so let's leave people outside the NHS with their limbs ripped off and have them fend for themselves.

In the same way, if people are committing the crime, they should do the time. And if there's too many for the prisons, then build more prisons, or stop the crime being done. Don't say, oh well, we'll tolerate more crime but reduce the prison population and hope people don't notice. Those would be my two cents on either side. Thanks.

Deterrence, and what each prison place costs elsewhere

I will be brief, because I arrived a bit late. I don't know if it was mentioned earlier, but I liked the speeches of a few people here that tried to categorise the different purposes of justice: the punishment, the protection, the rehabilitation. I would add to this deterrence. When you punish, it is not only an act of retribution for the harm that was caused to people, to society, but it is also to deter people from committing this very crime. So there is another aspect of it, which is the sustainability of the society. One thing may not be fair locally, but it is for the best, for the greatest number of people.

When we talk about having more people or less people in prison, we're really talking about investing more or less in prison as well. If you want to put more people in prison, and if you have standards of how many people per square metre you need to have, then you need to invest in them.

This money that is invested is money that is not invested in other sectors: health, the regalian domains, security, the army, education. The education one is maybe the most symbolic here. If you build more schools, are you going to lower the prison rate or the crime rate later in the future? So I think we need to ask ourselves these questions, and put an importance on all of those ethical values that we try to maximise in our society. By answering these, we will be able to tell whether we need to have more people or less people in prison.

Closing for the opposition: what the motion actually asks

Thank you, Mr Chair. It's been a good debate, and I've definitely learned some things. I'm really glad to hear people coming from different perspectives, and that's what this is all about. I'll try to summarise a

few things. I want to bring up one new point that hasn't been mentioned; it was briefly touched upon earlier. Prisoners are heavily skewed towards illiteracy, but also conditions like ADHD and autism. So we have to keep in mind the context here: part of the increase in the prison population may be driven by factors that are totally different. The legal system is on its knees. The NHS is on its knees. There are other problems that are actually feeding into some of that.

So when we talk about the motion, we lock up far too many people: in order to change that, going back to what an earlier speaker was saying, you really have to change the sentencing guidelines on categories of crime, and say these kinds of crimes, significant robbery, multiple offences, don't get a prison sentence. Yes, we can address it through changes in the community, investing in people, fixing the NHS, social care, all those other elements that would lead us not to lock up more people. But if we're talking about the prison system and stopping locking up people now, I think that's what you have to do. So that, for me, is part of the choice here.

I appreciate the speaker who brought in the types of crime that you actually need to commit in order to get five years. It is a high threshold today. Some crimes will have a shorter sentence, of course. Then there were the statistics on 1995 versus today, and other people bringing up that people are still so reactive when we say let out this type of criminal, let out that type of criminal. That is a real fear, of having these criminals go back onto the street. Women in London still don't feel safe at night, so there are major problems that we have, and part of the driver of that is that we have criminals who are not being locked up or not being dealt with. Locking up is not the only solution, but we have to take that context. It's simply true.

So I take the numbers on the prison statistics in 1995 versus today, and that probably is a correct trend. Some crimes have definitely gone down. But the statistics on that are fiendish. There's a whole BBC Radio 4 series on that, which started today and which I haven't listened to. It's a very difficult statistic. So if people don't feel safe, we've got to address that, and there's still too much crime. Maybe less in some areas, but there's still too much crime.

And if you look at all of this in the round, then again, the motion is: we lock up far too many people. This isn't to say we need to cut back a little bit. This is saying we need to take swathes of people and not put them in prison for that crime. That's what we're voting on tonight, so I just want everyone to be clear on that. I urge you to oppose the motion.

Closing for the proposition: drugs, deterrence and legalised kidnapping

Thank you. Like all these short debates, it's not always possible to fully prepare for what you're going to say at the beginning, so I'm glad that some of you made some points that I forgot to make. One of which was this idea that prison is a university of crime, which it absolutely is. If next year you see me at the Sylvens and I'm jacked like a monster with a couple of teardrop tattoos, you can safely assume that I probably did some time.

The statistics on crime going down are, for me, really the best argument for why we do incarcerate way too many people. We can agree that maybe the statistics in the UK might be, I won't say dodgy, but maybe there's more nuance to them. But this is a phenomenon that has been seen in almost every Western country: since the 90s, crime has gone down, and yet the prison population has gone up. And the main reason for this is the so-called war on drugs. The number of drugs convictions that have led to prison sentences has absolutely skyrocketed, in the US, here in Britain, in Europe, everywhere else.

So is locking people up for drug offences really necessary for society? This is not just a criminal issue. This is a social and, I would say, medical issue. If people are medically addicted to a drug, and they commit crime because they are addicted and want to consume more of that drug, then there's clearly an

underlying health issue there that needs to be addressed. And this has all been an excuse for a lot of countries to lock up their undesirables. Minorities tend to be the ones who are most incarcerated for drug offences, so there is a racial aspect to this, which is pretty notorious.

There's also plenty of evidence that shows that deterrence doesn't work. I know that a lot of right-wing governments say we need to tighten sentences, but there's no real evidence, unless you get to really draconian, Saudi Arabia levels, which I think are probably inconsistent with most Western democracies.

Now, I mentioned the idea that we should be able to recover damage. If someone vandalises your property, sending them to prison will not recover the damage. It will not recover the loss.

There's also this idea that prison is somehow more humane than physical punishment. Well, no, it isn't. Prison is legalised kidnapping. When we see in the news that someone kept an Albanian migrant in a shed for 20 years, we're absolutely appalled. We think this is the most horrible thing. That's what prison is. We have this very bizarre difference in what we accept as a society. A punch-up in a pub is fine, but getting locked up in a shed for 20 years is terrible. Well, that's prison. Do you want to be 20 years in prison, or do you want to get 10 lashes? Not that I'm saying I prefer the lashes, but maybe if there was a choice, I think most people would actually prefer the lashes. Anyway, I'm done here. Thanks, and I hope you support the motion.

The vote

Let's move to a vote. After hearing all the speeches, who is still in favour of the motion that we lock up far too many people? Keep your hands up, please. I'm not counting the speakers; I didn't count them at the start. Eight again. Who is against the motion? Five. And who is abstaining? Okay, more abstentions. Four. So the proposition has it: we are locking up far too many people.