

I was in prison and you forgot about me ...

Jesuit Tony O'Riordan works with prisoners and lives in Portadown.



In September 1994, I made my first visit to a prison. It was a Saturday morning, and I was visiting a teenager who had just turned sixteen. Only weeks earlier, he had been part of a summer programme I helped run for homeless youth in a hostel managed by Fr Peter McVerry. His birthday marked a turning point, not in celebration, but in incarceration. He was committed to St Patrick's Institution, a grim facility within the Mountjoy prison complex, housing boys and young men aged 16 to 21.

That visit marked the beginning of

a journey, one that has spanned over three decades and countless encounters with Ireland's prison system and the men and women sent there. My most recent visit was just a few weeks ago. Much in our prison system has changed, but disturbingly, much of the fundamentals remains the same.

St Patrick's Institution was finally closed in 2017, following years of pressure. Today, young people under 18 are no longer imprisoned alongside adults, a long-overdue reform. But beneath the surface, deeper issues persist. We continue to send peo-

ple to prison who are suffering from addiction, often with limited access to treatment. We incarcerate individuals in desperate need of mental health care, despite prisons being fundamentally unsuited to treat mental illness.

Those most affected are overwhelmingly from poorer backgrounds. Their offences often stem from trauma, homelessness and untreated health conditions. Prison has become the catch-all solution for problems society has failed to address elsewhere.

One of the most striking changes is the doubling of the prison population. In 1994, fewer than 2,500 people were incarcerated. Today, in 2025, that number has surpassed 5,500. This increase is not a reflection of a more dangerous society; it reflects policy choices that prioritise punishment over prevention. Of course, some prisoners have committed serious crimes such as murder or sexual assault, and around 500 people are serving life sentences. But the growing reliance on imprisonment remains rooted in a frustrated criminal justice system trying to respond to the underlying causes of less serious crime: trauma, addiction and mental health. Overcrowding has become the norm, often resulting in early releases that can undermine public confidence in the justice system.

Among the lack of change and the series of regressive changes I see, is the diminished role of the Church in prison life. The Church in Ireland seems less concerned for those in prison than in earlier decades. The professionalism of the prison service and the decline in religious vocations have diluted the role of the chaplain.

For years, prison chaplains released independent annual reports, often hard hitting and deeply insightful. These reports shone a light on the hidden realities of prison life and were trusted by advocates for prisoners' rights. Today, these reports are no longer published, and their absence represents a loss of moral accountability.

Equally troubling is the sharp decline in family and friend visits to prisoners. Between 2019 and 2024, an average of 2,900 prisoners per year received no standard visits. In 2024 alone, 2,946 inmates had no such visits, over 40 per cent of the prison population. This disconnection has serious consequences. A study by the Irish Prison Service found that prisoners who receive family visits are 39 per cent less likely to reoffend.

Families face multiple barriers: unfriendly visiting hours, long travel times, booking difficulties and technical failures in virtual visits. These obstacles contribute to family breakdown, emotional isolation and increased recidivism. Prison should support rehabilitation through connection, but the current system often does the opposite.

That teenager I visited in 1994 is now nearing 50. He is a father and a grandfather. He has spent many years in recovery, managing his addiction and overcoming trauma, including trauma experienced while in prison. Faith and prayer are central to his ongoing healing. To my knowledge, none of his children or grandchildren have been in trouble with the law. A cycle has been broken. I can now visit him in his home anytime I am in Dublin.