



Reducing the Prison Population: Lessons from Around the World

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The Problem:

Criminal justice systems differ widely across the world, as do imprisonment rates. Yet most western nations confront a common problem: a high use of imprisonment as a sanction. Prison populations are highest across the US, but they are also high in many other jurisdictions including England and Wales, Canada and Australia. Mass incarceration is not purely an American phenomenon. In addition, certain visible and Aboriginal minorities and immigrant groups are disproportionately imprisoned -- relative to their numbers in the general problem. Again, the problem is near universal. High or rising prison populations are particularly a problem in an era of austerity, when governments are seeking to cut the costs of public services, including criminal justice. There is great interest in devising ways of punishing offenders without the human and fiscal costs of imprisonment.

The Project:

This project consists of an evidence-based review of recent initiatives to reduce the use of custody as a sanction. The number of initiatives that have been implemented is long and includes the use of pre-trial diversion programs; sentencing guidelines; new alternatives to imprisonment; and forms of community custody including electronic monitoring, to name but a few. Some of these reforms aim to divert offenders from custody, others reduce the amount of time spent in prison (and hence the total prison population).¹

We will identify the strategies that have been deployed and explore the evaluations of these programs to reduce the use of imprisonment in a safe and principled way. In addition, the study examines public attitudes towards different approaches to reducing the prison population. Here too, there has been a great deal of data collected in various countries, although to date there has been no attempt to draw general conclusions about which approaches are most likely attract public support.

The Outputs:

The research project will result in a number of outputs of interest to many jurisdictions. These will include:

¹ Some of these are reviewed in Roberts, J.V. (2006) Reducing the use of incarceration: A Review of Recent International Experiences. *Judicial Studies Institute Journal*, 5: 41-53.



- An updated website containing the latest information on recent initiatives to reduce the use of custody;
- Bulletins summarizing research evidence pertaining to the effectiveness of different interventions
- Scholarly publications focusing in greater depth on specific programs and findings.

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