

## Improve or reinvest?

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### Abstract

This brief article describes the emerging debate as to whether we should construct new prisons and improve existing ones, or engage more deeply in justice reinvestment with a view to diverting people from prison and reinvesting the savings in initiatives that serve to keep people from entering or returning to prison.

### Should we invest in new and improved prisons or engage in justice reinvestment?

In 2019-20, prisons cost Australian taxpayers \$5.2 billion per year, or more than \$330 per prisoner per day. AIC calculations for total net cost of imprisonment per prisoner per day (taking into account all costs and savings associated with imprisonment) is \$391.18 per prisoner per day (Morgan, 2018, p. x), 60% higher than the average for OECD countries (Knowles, 2017).

Then-Commissioner Richard Spencer of the Productivity Commission stated, 'For low risk prisoners [imprisonment] doesn't keep society safer. We must look at alternatives'. Current Commissioner Stephen King agrees: 'Despite this expense, the system isn't working as well as it could be. Sixty percent of prisoners have been there before – one of the highest rates in the world... Prisons are essential for violent and high-risk offenders. But there is a revolving door for people convicted of low-to-medium risk crime. We can achieve better outcomes for them and society by carefully using alternatives to prison' (Productivity Commission, 2021; refer also Sarre, 2021).

One promising way to achieve alternatives to prison is justice reinvestment. There are many ways to achieve this that involve various combinations of justice investment, reinvestment and/or diversion from prison, and such initiatives may be implemented before, during or after incarceration. As one example, a justice reinvestment initiative may involve calling a moratorium on new prisons and extensions, rapid decarceration and diverting the money that would have been spent on prisons towards initiatives that would keep people out of prison, such as improvements in the environment for the most disadvantaged communities. Improved environments need not be confined to the physical environment (such as new public parks and public housing accessible to the criminalised and highly disadvantaged women and families - Build homes not prisons, 2022), but could encompass other aspects of improved circumstances (such as education, training, mentoring, jobs, waste removal, infrastructure, health services, sports, recreation and other investment in wellbeing and opportunities).

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