

About the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation

The Centre is the justice reform arm of Prison Fellowship International, an association of Christian NGOs active in over 100 countries. The Centre assists governments, its affiliates, and other NGOs in addressing problems in the criminal justice system.

The Centre promotes restorative justice policies and practices as a promising approach with benefits for victims, communities and offenders.

While operating in the Christian tradition, the Centre seeks common ground, dialogue and collaboration with people from all backgrounds and traditions.

About the 10 Keys

Criminal justice practitioners around the world seek practical measures to address the serious crises that exist in many justice systems. The purpose of the 10 Keys Project is to offer practical ideas to assist them in doing that.

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10 KEYS TO IMPROVING CONDITIONS IN OVERCROWDED PRISONS



 CENTRE FOR JUSTICE & RECONCILIATION
PRISON FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL

IMPROVING CONDITIONS IN OVERCROWDED PRISONS

Prison overcrowding is a major contributor to problems including

- *reduced staff morale*
- *security and control difficulties*
- *increased health and wellbeing problems for staff and inmates*
- *increased levels of conflict and violence*
- *failure of rehabilitation resulting in increased re-offending*

While building or expanding prison capacity can reduce overcrowding there are things that can be done to improve conditions in overcrowded prisons.

Inside are ten keys – practical measures – to improve conditions in overcrowded prisons and jails. These were assembled by the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation with two criteria in mind: first, does it improve the quality of life of prisoners and prison staff, and second, could it be done (or at least begun) without new legislation or large amounts of money.

Actually solving prison and jail overcrowding requires a firm commitment from the government and cooperation within the justice system. The Centre stands ready to assist governments and justice officials who choose to do this, by:

- *suggesting practical measures to significantly reduce prison populations*
- *offering examples of governments that have done so*
- *demonstrating how restorative justice can help reduce prison populations*
- *providing long-distance or on-site consultation*

10 KEYS TO IMPROVING CONDITIONS IN OVERCROWDED PRISONS

SECURITY

Overcrowded prisons are more difficult to manage and frequently plagued by increased conflict and violence. Often the movement of prisoners is restricted as a means of controlling the situation. Unfortunately this adds to the stress and hostility felt by inmates.

1. Reduce Idleness

Reduce inmate idleness by increasing opportunities for exercise, sports, cultural and religious activities. Active inmates are less likely to feel stressed and hostile.

2. Classify Prisoners

Classify and house prisoners according to their level of risk. Lower risk groups require less security and can be managed on a lower security basis.

CONDITIONS

Overcrowded prisons are more difficult to manage humanely and effectively. As need for living space increases the space available for educational, recreational, cultural, and religious activities is often reduced or entirely eliminated.

5. Use Volunteers

Increase the involvement of volunteers, community groups and NGOs to provide meaningful programmes for prisoners. Even where space is limited the involvement of volunteers contributes to improved morale and reduces inmate idleness.

6. Train Staff

Train staff members in basic relational skills including effective communication, building respectful and humane relationships, anger management and conflict mediation. This will improve both staff and inmate morale.

HEALTH

As toilet, sanitation, and cooking facilities become inadequate to serve a growing prison population, the health of staff and inmates is at risk, making it more difficult to control contagious diseases.

3. Improve Sanitation

Organize and train inmates in preventative health care including basic sanitation, food preparation and personal hygiene.

4. Grow Food

Involve low risk inmate labour to cultivate vegetable gardens, raise livestock (e.g., cattle, sheep, pigs, perhaps poultry) to provide additional and more varied food for the prison. This will improve nutrition and also provide inmates with meaningful activity.

NON-SENTENCED PRISONERS

Prison overcrowding is sometimes caused by a slow court system and as a result the number of remand or non-sentenced prisoners increases substantially. Some non-sentenced prisoners may not have appeared in court due to lack of legal representation and others may be eligible for bail.

7. Review Cases

Reduce the number of non-sentenced prisoners by establishing a process for lawyers, prosecutors and judges to review the legal status of individual detainees and make appropriate recommendations to the court.

8. Speed Release

Organize volunteer lawyers or paralegal volunteers to help inmates prepare for bail hearings and thus reduce the amount of time they may have to wait for their cases to be heard.

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

Prison overcrowding is an entrenched problem and solutions require careful work and strong political will. Some of the creative measures taken to address this problem have included:

- Mobile judges travel to prisons to hold court hearings. This reduces the number of remand prisoners.
- Judges use probation and community service as an alternative to prison.
- Legislators adopt sentencing reforms to reduce the length of sentences
- Parole boards are given authority to release and supervise prisoners early who pose little danger to society.
- Parole boards sanction technical parole violators (e.g., fail to report on time) outside prison.

SENTENCED PRISONERS

Many persons who have been sentenced to prison do not represent a real danger or threat to the community. The court has ordered them imprisoned because few other meaningful alternatives for punishment exist. Effective alternatives can be used to reduce the prison population.

9. Increase Alternatives

Convene a meeting with judges, politicians, community leaders, lawyers and other relevant groups to discuss the use of alternative community-based punishments rather than prison for non-dangerous offenders. Consider holding the meeting at the jail or prison to expand awareness of existing conditions.

10. Use Furloughs

Unless there are legal obstacles, permit trustworthy prisoners to leave during the day or weekends for employment, family visitation or community service activities.