

[Justice reinvestment](#) seeks to reduce the number of people in prison by investing money that would have been spent on prisons in early intervention, prevention and diversion. It involves working with communities to design local solutions to address the drivers of crime and imprisonment.

In 2013, a [Senate committee](#) recommended that the Commonwealth take a leadership role in supporting the implementation of justice reinvestment and provide funding for a trial of justice reinvestment in Australia.

Read more: [***As Indigenous incarceration rates keep rising, justice reinvestment offers a solution***](#)

In 2017, the [Australian Law Reform Commission](#) released its Pathways to Justice report on the over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It recommended that Commonwealth, state and territory governments establish an independent justice reinvestment body and justice reinvestment trials. Both of these should have significant Indigenous involvement.

There has not been any coordinated response to either of these reports, but there are small justice reinvestment projects in most states and territories. In New South Wales, the [Bourke Maranguka Justice Reinvestment project](#) has recorded:

- a 23% decrease in police-recorded incidents of domestic violence
- a 14% decrease in bail breaches for adults
- a 42% reduction in days spent in custody for adults
- a 31% increase in year 12 student retention rates
- a 38% reduction in charges across the top five juvenile offence categories.

An [impact assessment by KPMG](#) found the project achieved savings of \$3.1 million in 2017.

The ACT example

The ACT has one prison, the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC), which houses all prisoners. The prison opened in 2010 as Australia's first human rights prison, [but has failed to live up to its goals](#)

This is partly due to it being overcrowded. According to the [Report on Government Services](#), the AMC operated at 108% of its design capacity in 2017-18. Operating at or above 95% “[compromises the ability of prison management to safely and humanely manage prisoners](#)”.

[The ACT imprisonment rate](#) has increased by 24% since 2015, compared with a 13% increase nationally.

The ACT government was advised it would cost \$200 million to expand the AMC. Last week, it [announced it had ruled out expansion](#). Instead, it will redirect \$14.5 million into a range of community programs, legislative reforms and policy initiatives. These include:

- improving rehabilitation options, including a purpose-built “reintegration centre” for up to 80 prisoners. This will allow for a wide range of programs, including trauma and relationship counselling, alcohol, tobacco and other drug rehabilitation, and job training skills – all of which have been associated with reduced reoffending

- establishing a bail accommodation support service and exploring accommodation issues for detainees after their release – [one in three detainees at the AMC](#) were homeless or living in a hostel immediately before they were imprisoned

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expanding the Strong Connected Neighbourhoods program, which supports people in high-density housing and [has been shown to reduce crime](#)

continuing a [family-centric program delivered by Indigenous-run organisations](#), which has shown promising results.

The female imprisonment rate in the ACT [has increased by 98% since 2015, compared with a 19% increase for men](#). In addition, [32 of the 36 women \(89%\)](#)

who entered the AMC in the September 2018 quarter were unsentenced, compared with 85% of men and 75% of prisoners nationally. The increase in women's imprisonment nationally has been the subject of recent

[media attention](#)

, especially in the context of their

[experience of family violence](#)

and

[imprisonment for unpaid fines in Western Australia](#)

Read more: [***FactCheck Q&A: are Indigenous Australians the most incarcerated people on Earth?***](#)

Unfortunately, the government's announcement did not expressly consider the [specific needs of women](#),

including the intersection between their victimisation histories, substance abuse, mental illness and offending behaviour. The need for gender-sensitive responses has been the subject of previous research in

[the ACT context](#)

Nevertheless, the ACT is to be commended for its initiative. This represents the most far-reaching commitment by an Australian government to justice reinvestment. It is significant that the policy is called “Building Communities Not Prisons”. As the [ACT justice minister](#) has stated:

Justice reinvestment is honest about the reality of incarceration in Australia. While crime rates are going down, incarceration rates are going up. The most just justice system is a system that acts early to help prevent the kinds of circumstances that can lead to crime in the first place.

How Australia can address its addiction to prisons

[Australia's imprisonment rate has risen year on year since 2011](#) . [We have a higher imprisonment rate](#) than Canada and every country in Western Europe.

Read more: [***State of imprisonment: can ACT achieve a 'human rights' prison?***](#)

In 2016, the NSW government announced that it would spend \$3.8 billion building new prisons. The corrections minister, David Elliott, [said](#) :

This is, it must be said, not money the state government is happy to spend ... My personal preference would always be that this money, this NSW taxpayers' money, is spent on schools and hospitals.

But governments do have a choice in how they allocate the public's money. And the evidence supporting justice reinvestment is strong and growing.

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In September 2018, the Queensland government asked the Queensland Productivity Commission to undertake an inquiry into imprisonment and reoffending. In its [draft report](#), the commission described imprisonment as a “growing policy problem” and stated that “increasing imprisonment can make the community less safe”. It also recognised that imprisonment “is costly, and this cost is borne by the community”.

It remains to be seen what the commission recommends, but all Australian governments should have the courage to follow the ACT's lead and invest in communities, not razor wire.

Lorana Bartels has received research funding from the ACT Government to advise on issues relevant to this article. She is a member of the ACT Government's Reducing Recidivism Advisory Group, the ACT Law Society Criminal Law Committee and the Prisoners Aid ACT Management Committee. She was previously a member of the ACT Government's Behavioural Law Responses Expert Reference Group, Justice Reform Strategy Advisory Group, Justice Reinvestment Advisory Group and Law Reform Advisory Council. Professor Bartels has also received funding from the Australian Research Council, Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse and Tasmanian and Victorian governments.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/australian-governments-should-follow-the-acts-lead-in-building-communities-not-prisons-111990>