

JCFJ MEDIA ADVISORY

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Prison Estate Must be Reduced, Not Expanded

Yesterday's comments by Minister for Justice Helen McEntee TD at the launch of the 2021 Annual Report of the Irish Prison Service at Limerick Prison are alarming, and indicative of the Government's commitment to an agenda which is contrary to what we, in the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, believe to be necessary for the welfare of prisoners and a humane and compassionate society. Speaking with prison staff and management about the prison's new construction projects, McEntee repeatedly referred to the need for 'adequate capacity' in the future and how this will be 'central to the development of the new Irish Prison Service Capital Strategy 2023.'

When completed, the expansion will consist of a new accommodation block for male prisoners — with an additional 90 spaces available — and a new separate female prison which can accommodate 'a minimum of 22 additional prisoners.'

Keith Adams, Social Policy Advocate at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice says: "As a policy centre which has long advocated for an approach of penal minimalism and restraint, we understand that the development of modern prison facilities is important as sections of the Irish prison estate are outdated, but modernising the prison estate must only replace existing capacity and not expand it."

INCREASED SHORT SENTENCES & INCREASED CAPACITY

Due to the Court Service's increased capacity in 2021, following reduced cases during the pandemic, the IPS Annual Report revealed that committals under sentence have increased by 5.4%. In addition there has been a dramatic increase in short sentences. Sentences of less than three months increased by 16% from 2020 to 2021 while sentences between three to six months increased by 14.5%.

Experience teaches us that increased prison capacity always results in more prisoners. Adams responds: "A commitment to continued Government investment in more prison places and the significant increase in committals under sentence in 2021, particularly sentences of less than six months, means we will see the prison population increase, ensuring more decades of penal excess. The Government should commit to an agenda of planned prison reduction by investing in non-custodial sanctions and a suite of social supports to combat poverty, homelessness, mental ill-health and addiction among offenders."

POLICY DECISION TO IMPRISON MORE WOMEN

Taking the opportunity to acknowledge the specific needs of women in prison, the Minister for Justice praised the new womens' prison as being 'carefully designed to meet these needs.'

Adams concluded: "Female imprisonment is the area of our justice system which should demonstrate the most restraint, but instead there has been a clear policy decision to imprison more women, despite the availability of other options. The design being tailored to women's needs does not change the fact that a prison is still a prison."

ENDS

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About the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice is an agency of the Irish Jesuit Province, dedicated to undertaking social analysis and theological reflection in relation to issues of social justice, including housing and homelessness, penal policy, environmental justice, and economic ethics. Established in 1978 by a small group of Jesuits living and working in Ballymun, on the northside of Dublin city, the Centre was intended to promote social justice and critically examine issues of structural injustice and poverty.