

Does Prison Reduce Crime?

Criminal Justice

The incapacitation effect, and why its returns fall as imprisonment expands.

The incapacitation case

- Someone inside cannot offend outside
- The effect is real while the term runs
- Largest for high-rate prolific offenders
- Removes the most active from circulation

What limits the effect

- Diminishing returns as the population grows
- Replacement in organised and drug markets
- Criminogenic effects after release
- Very high cost per crime prevented
- Harms to families and communities

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

Incapacitation is real but expensive, and its marginal return falls sharply as imprisonment expands.

Educational reference. Estimates of the crime-reduction effect of imprisonment vary widely by study, country and period.