

The impact of COVID-19 measures on the NSW adult prison population

Nicholas Chan

SUMMARY

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BACKGROUND

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the NSW Government implemented changes across government services to minimise the risk of transmission. Within the criminal justice system, significant changes to the operation of the Courts and Corrective Services NSW took effect from 15 March 2020. Key changes involved the postponement of many District and Local Court matters, changes in bail decisions and the review of previous remand decisions.

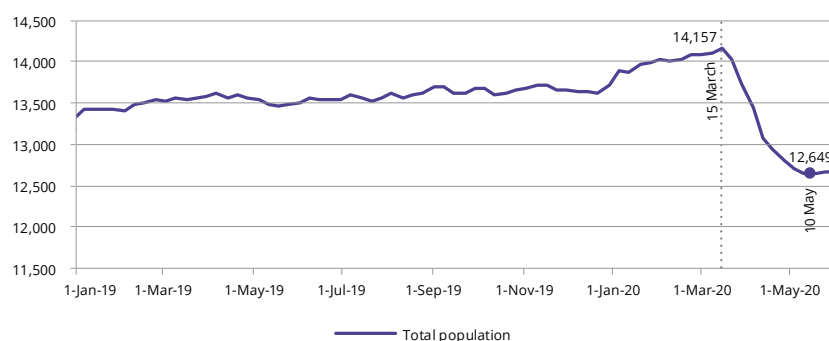
This brief examines the impact of these changes on the NSW adult prison population. Weekly trends in the NSW adult prison population, and the number of receptions and discharges, between January 2019 and May 2020 are presented.

KEYWORDS

- prison population
- social distancing
- COVID-19
- Coronavirus
- remand
- sentenced custody

KEY FINDINGS

Total NSW adult prison population



- From 15 March 2020 to 10 May the NSW prison population fell sharply, declining by 1,508 people or 10.7%.
- Most of the decline occurred in the remand population (down 1,049 people or 70% of the total decline). The sentenced prisoner population fell by 559 people (30% of the decline).
- The remand population fell due to both a decrease in remand receptions and an increase in remand discharges. Remand receptions declined for two reasons. Firstly, we saw a short-term decline in the number of Court Attendance Notices issued by Police (down 10% in the 4-weeks from 15 March). Secondly, police and court bail refusal rates fell from mid-March to the end of May (police bail refusal fell 14% and court bail refusal fell 26% respectively). Remand discharges increased due to the number of remandees being released to bail nearly doubling in April 2020.
- The decline in sentenced prisoners occurred due to a drop in sentenced custody receptions associated with reduced numbers of court finalisations.

CONCLUSION

The size of the NSW adult prison population decreased substantially from mid-March to mid-May 2020. The timing of the changes to remand admissions and discharges and sentence receptions are consistent with criminal justice changes intended to minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission.