There is a quote often attributed to Desmond Tutu; *There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.*

I want to spend the next few minutes talking to you about the river flowing through our work. I'll speak a little about how it took its shape. But mostly, I want to talk about the ways we've found to make it a little better, and the things which we can do collectively in the future to ensure we address the root cause of the challenges we are facing to ensure lasting solutions.

I would like to begin by saying that nothing I am going to speak about today takes away from the gravity of offending, the hurt to victims and the impact on society. I am not trying to make excuses for offending or for the people in our care and custody. What I want to do is provide an accurate and objective picture of the circumstances faced by the vast majority of people who come in contact with the criminal justice system, and those who work with them. Complex childhood trauma, followed later by addiction and mental health and personality difficulties are at the core of what we are dealing with.

For the Irish Prison System, the defining crisis of the past decade has been our struggle to keep pace with the growing demand for spaces. There have been many other challenges but overcrowding is a problem which has steadily worsened, and makes it harder to address every other challenge.

As EuroPris' mapping exercise yesterday highlighted, overcrowding is not unique to us, one-third of EuroPris members face the same issue. Across Europe, this remains a widespread challenge, with some prisons – including many Irish ones - operating at, and above 120% of capacity. And while SPACE figures show that this is not yet a problem for all of us, they also make it clear that in the past few years, the problem has become more widespread. A third of our systems have seen substantial increases in prison population, and only 10% have seen any real decline.

Why is demand continuing to climb? On the surface, it can seem very simple. As the population increases, the number of people in trouble will increase as well. Other factors can influence it; demographics, economics, changing political ideologies and inequality all play their part.

Historic numbers seem almost unreal to me now when I look at today's figures. In 1960, Ireland had 16.4 prisoners per 100,000 people. By 1990, that had climbed to 60.1. In 2020, 74.4 and in the recently published SPACE I report for 2024, 90. Right now, it's estimated at 105 prisoners per 100,000 of the population.

We are still trying to understand the reasons for this increase.

Our system is now at 18% over its maximum capacity, with some prisons, notably our womens' prisons far higher. Although we have committed ourselves to significant increasing prison capacity, building more space takes time.

The reality of overcrowding is that factors can change far more quickly than the time it takes to build a prison, or to train the social workers needed to run a probation system.

It's notable that in this year's SPACE report, overcrowding is reported in countries with lower than average prison population ratios AND countries with higher than average prison populations. It is not a matter of how many prisoners you have; it's whether you could plan appropriately for the increase in advance.

No matter how prosperous a country is, the vast majority of people in its prisons are from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation.

All of us know that the people passing through our care will come from the same places, the same backgrounds, and even the same families. For too many people in contact with the Criminal Justice System, prison is a continuation of a pattern of neglect and lack of opportunity which has blighted their lives and the lives of the people around them.

Alongside an increasing prison population of course is an increase in resources required to run our prisons. However, we might not need that money if we could do more to support children growing up in chaotic and disorderly lives.

People who experience four or more adverse childhood experiences are 15 times more likely to be a perpetrator of violence in the last 12 months and 20 times more likely to have been incarcerated in their lives.

The average school leaving age of those currently in custody in Ireland is 14 years of age. I think this figure is particularly sobering and highlights the need for early intervention. In many cases where children have suffered significantly adverse childhoods, their ability to engage with formal education is often impaired.

The research and lived experiences of those who have gone through the criminal justice system indicates that without a formal education a person is significantly more likely to engage in criminal activity than someone who completes their education and secures employment.

And those adverse childhood experiences play a huge role not just in offending, but also in addiction.

Early in life, when overwhelming and confusing emotions cannot be managed, one powerful regulatory strategy becomes the use of substances.

Substances numb intolerable feelings of fear, shame, anger, or uncertainty, becoming the go-to coping mechanism for individuals who have not had the opportunity to learn healthy ways to navigate their lives, but particularly, their emotional responses to life events. In almost all clinical risk assessments completed by our prison-based psychologists, emotion dysregulation is identified as a fundamental part of the person's offending history, and particularly associated with violent crime.

It is, impossible to talk about prisons without talking about drugs. Across Europe, one of the biggest offence categories for offenders is drug related crime. If we look more widely at the crimes which are committed to feed addiction, drugs may well be the biggest driver of incarceration throughout our systems.

But the impact doesn't stop with how it fills up our prisons; it's also a huge problem within prisons. Over 70 per cent of Ireland's prison population is experiencing some form of addiction. Helping prisoners come to terms with the complex life experiences which led to their addictions has become a central part of our work to rehabilitate prisoners and help them to find better lives.

This would be challenging enough in its own right, but while we work to help them, there are people who seek to prey on them.

Criminal gangs are working constantly to smuggle drugs and other contraband into prisons. The damage is immense. It derails our efforts to help people overcome addiction. The risk of overdose is a significant cause of death and injury – we've seen this worsen as synthetic drugs become more and more common.

And the damage seeps out into the community, because prisoners cannot pay for drugs directly – their families and friends in the community are paying, knowing the harm it will do, but fearing the reprisals they or their loved ones will face if the price isn't paid.

So, many of our prisons are overcrowded, Crowded past the point of safety, our prisons can no longer offer the training and supports which would give at least some prisoners a pathway out of offending and back into the community.

What do we do next? Do we build more prisons? Will that reduce crime, or improve our ability to rehabilitate those in our care? If we want our prisons to be less crowded, we have to keep people out of them, and we have to do more to keep people from coming back.

I'd like to talk first about keeping people out. One model we've tried in Ireland is youth diversion.

It recognises that young people make mistakes, and that sending them to prison – even for short periods – can make the consequences of those mistakes far worse. Both for the young person and for the community they live in.

Our current model does seem to be working – at least up to a point. The number of people between 18 and 21 serving sentences fell by 65% in the 15 years between 2009 and 2024 – while the overall number of people serving sentences increased by 20%. We've seen similar, though not so dramatic, falls in the numbers of people under 25 and under 30.

Obviously, what we hoped was that the people we steered out of the system would live orderly stable lives and never come back into the system, and so over time the prison population would stabilise at a much lower level.

However, since 2016 while the number of young people has continued to fall a little, number in custody overall have increased. Diversion is still making a difference, but there are clearly other factors in play. One factor has been the dramatic increase in older prisoners. In 2009 we had fewer than 300 prisoners over 50; we now have over 900.

This older cohort are presenting challenges in care that we've never had to manage on such a scale before.

More of our prisoners are older, and more of them are serving longer sentences. As offenders get older, the gravity of their offences – and sometimes the sheer number of them over time – moves the courts to impose longer sentences.

How can we as prison systems, respond to this new challenge?

In **Norway**, the CAMEO Programme is a rehabilitation initiative aimed at older inmates. Its main goal is to improve their physical, mental, and social well-being while creating an environment that reflects normal life as closely as possible. The programme has led to improved quality of life, reduced isolation, better mental and physical health, a stronger sense of community and trust, and enhanced behaviour and communication.

More people, serving longer sentences is a significant contributing factor to overcrowding. These people won't be moving on to make room for the people making their way through the system behind them. And though they will be with us long enough that rehabilitation has some chance of making a difference, we don't have the space or the sufficient services to deliver what they need.

Which brings me to keeping people from coming back. Your second sentence is usually longer than your first. The third is longer than the first two put together. We need more ways to break this cycle before the revolving door becomes all offenders will ever know.

In order to stop the cycle of reoffending we need something new. We need to try things we haven't tried before. And we need to learn from each other.

In **Georgia**, the Digital University project has been introduced to transform educational opportunities for people in custody. By offering remote higher education through digital platforms, it enables direct communication with lecturers. This initiative has greatly improved access to education and its quality, supporting rehabilitation and social reintegration by boosting self-esteem and a sense of purpose.

Once someone has been in prison, our communities tend to see them simply as ex-prisoners. It's an identity that they can't shake off, an identity that blocks any road out of offending.

And if there's no road out of offending, then ex-prisoners will continue to offend, and the community will be less safe. We need to change the way that people see people with a criminal conviction.

One promising practice is **Spain's** introduction of Direct Access to Social Inclusion Centres, which holds the possibility that a prisoner can serve their sentence from the outset in an Open Prison setting and perhaps continue with some aspects of their normal life such as attendance at employment.

While, of course, this is an important channel for rehabilitation for the offender, it's also a way in which people in the community can see how integrating prisoners back into the community is safe and effective.

In **England**, the formation of the Employment Team at HMP Hatfield has significantly improved outcomes for prisoners.

A key factor in its success has been the development of a strong employer network within the local community. This allows up to 120 prisoners each day to go on day release for paid employment, helping secure jobs upon their release. The programme has reduced the negative effects of incarceration, provided around 120 employment placements, and ensured that over 90% of released individuals have a job, with 100% leaving with accommodation.

The detention house project in the **Belgian** prison system was launched to create a more humane, effective, and reintegration-focused form of detention.

In these smaller detention houses, residents (not 'inmates') are given greater autonomy and responsibility, with the ultimate goal of supporting successful reintegration into society and reducing the risk of reoffending, thereby contributing to long-term public safety.

When I talk of prisoners who keep coming back, I think most often of women. The majority of women who pass through our system are with us briefly, and repeatedly. I've spoken earlier of the way that addiction is born of complex trauma. This is jarringly true of women in our care.

The chaotic, disorderly, lives that have led women into custody have begun in neglect and trauma, and continue in many cases into addiction.

Sending them to prison compounds things, they're not there long enough for our supports to make a difference, but they are there long enough for them to lose any supports they might have had in the community. And so, within a short time, something else goes wrong and they once again find themselves in custody.

For the most part, female offenders are not a threat to public safety, which is precisely why they generally get such short sentences. Putting them in prison isn't helping them in the long term and doesn't make the community any safer.

We need another way!

One promising practice is Hope Street, in the UK. This is a model I would love to see emulated in Ireland.

Hope Street provides a safe place for women outside of the criminal justice system who would otherwise be committed to prison.

It offers individually tailored programmes designed to enable women to address a wide range of issues in their lives that have resulted in them becoming involved with the justice system. A key facet is that it allows mothers to keep their children with them; the accommodation is designed from the outset to meet this need.

This is the kind of intervention which can break the cycle of chaos and incarceration which afflicts so many of the women in our care.

It isn't always possible to duplicate the successes we see in other countries. Much as the lives of people in prison have involved longer term failures in wider community support, successes in keeping people out of prison often rest on better ways of fostering community well-being.

To improve the lives of the people in our care, we have to become advocates not just of improved prison conditions, but of improved societies.

Lastly, I want to finish on this wider perspective.

Being tough on crime and longer sentences are often de rigor. What society really needs is not for us to be soft or hard on crime, but smart on crime.

For me, being smart on crime means breaking the pipeline between our schools and our prisons. I've seen the data. As I mentioned earlier, children who experience multiple adverse childhood experiences are far more likely to end up in custody.

That’s not their fault. Trauma, substance misuse, and lack of education are powerful predictors of future offending. If we want safer communities tomorrow, we need to support, nurture, and protect vulnerable children today.

Being smart on crime also means treating imprisonment as a last resort, used only when someone poses a genuine risk to public safety.

In Ireland, nearly 80% of people committed to custody each year are there for minor offences with sentences of 12 months or less. Rehabilitation takes time, consistency, and a holistic approach which can’t be delivered in prison in a short period of time.

We need to invest in community-based alternatives to imprisonment which address the root causes of offending behaviour.

In Northern Ireland problem solving justice is a new approach aimed at tackling the root causes of offending behaviour and reducing harmful behaviour within families and the community.

Support hubs have been created - which involve policing, healthcare, local authorities, youth justice, probation and education services to name a few working collaboratively – to help vulnerable people get access to the right supports, at the right time from the right organisation in their local area.

Being smart on crime also means believing in second chances. Many people who leave prison are not the same people who entered. They've taken responsibility, addressed the root causes of their offending, and want to contribute positively to their communities.

But they need those communities to meet them with empathy, not exclusion. I believe every person is more than their biggest mistake and everyone deserves a second chance, and the hope of a better future.

And finally, being smart on crime means a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach to post-custody support. That includes health, education, housing, and social welfare working together to create real, accessible pathways for people leaving prison. Because we know the first three months after release are critical. If we get that right, we don't just reduce reoffending, we prevent future victims.

This is what I mean when I say being smart on crime. It's not just better policy, it's better for all of us.

I opened with a quote about how we need to understand our problems, and I want to close with one about how we try to solve them.

Desmond Tutu – again – says to us, "Do your little bit of good where you are: it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

I am deeply proud of the work done by prison and probation staff in all of our countries doing their little bit of good where they are to support community safety. But we cannot succeed on our own - we have to envision a whole of government, whole of society approach to preventing and reducing offending if we really want to overwhelm the world. We can succeed by working together.

Thank you.