Estonia's Experience: Reducing Imprisonment While Improving Public Safety

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Across Europe, prison overcrowding remains one of the most significant challenges facing prison administrations. Different countries face different realities, but the message emerging from our shared experience is clear: there is no single solution. Sustainable progress requires action across the entire justice chain, not only within prisons.

Against that background, I would like to share Estonia's experience.

Twenty-five years ago, Estonia had one of the highest imprisonment rates in Europe. We inherited overcrowded institutions, a prison system largely shaped by Soviet-era practices, and a criminal justice culture heavily reliant on imprisonment.

Today, the situation is fundamentally different.

Around the turn of the millennium, Estonia had approximately 4,800 prisoners. By September 2026, the prison population had fallen to around 1,720. Our imprisonment rate decreased from more than 340 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants to 127 per 100,000.

At the same time, registered crime fell by approximately 50 percent between 2005 and 2025, while recorded killings and murders declined by around 80 percent.

For us, the central lesson is simple:

Reducing imprisonment and improving public safety are not contradictory goals. When reforms are evidence-based and sustained over time, both objectives can be achieved simultaneously.

What worked?

The first factor was a long-term political commitment to criminal justice reform.

Estonia gradually moved away from a custody-first approach and adopted the principle that prison should be reserved for cases where it is genuinely necessary to protect society. The focus shifted from punishment alone towards preventing future offending.

Second, we built a strong probation service.

Today, little less than 3,000 offenders are supervised in the community every day. Probation created a credible alternative to imprisonment and gave courts confidence that community-based sanctions could be both effective and accountable.

Third, we expanded alternatives to imprisonment.

Community service, conditional sentences, treatment programmes, mediation and behavioural control measures became increasingly important parts of the criminal justice system. The objective was never to avoid accountability, but to find responses that are more effective in reducing reoffending.

Fourth, we invested in gradual reintegration.

We expanded conditional release, electronic monitoring and open prison regimes. Rather than releasing people directly from prison without support, we developed mechanisms that combine supervision, rehabilitation and reintegration.

Finally, we fully modernised our prison infrastructure.

Estonia replaced 10 large dormitory-style institutions with 3 modern cell-type purposebuilt prisons based on smaller units, professional staff control and rehabilitation-focused regimes. This improved safety, reduced the influence of informal prisoner hierarchies and created better conditions for reintegration.

Why was the reduction sustainable?

Many countries manage to reduce prison populations temporarily. Sustaining those reductions is much harder. In Estonia, three elements proved essential.

First, reforms were pursued consistently across several governments and over many years.

Second, we addressed the entire justice system rather than prisons alone. Sentencing policies, probation, release mechanisms, rehabilitation and reintegration were all developed together.

Third, we focused on reducing reoffending rather than simply reducing prisoner numbers.

The key question was never how many people we could send to prison. The key question was how many future victims we could prevent.

Lessons from the wider European experience

As President of EuroPris, I would add three observations that extend beyond Estonia.

First, overcrowding is not merely a question of occupancy rates. When prisons become overcrowded, pressure increases on staff, healthcare services, education, mental health care and rehabilitation programmes. Overcrowding affects the entire functioning of a prison system.

Second, prison administrations cannot solve overcrowding alone. The drivers often lie elsewhere: sentencing practices, pre-trial detention policies, criminal procedure, social

services, mental health provision and reintegration support. Sustainable solutions require cooperation across government and across institutions.

Third, short-term and long-term responses both matter. Sometimes administrations must rely on operational measures to maintain safety. However, long-term success generally depends on broader reforms that address the causes of prison growth rather than only its consequences.

What did not work?

One lesson we learned is that alternatives to imprisonment do not automatically reduce prison populations.

If community sanctions are added to the system rather than replacing imprisonment, they can increase the number of people under criminal justice supervision without reducing prison numbers. Policymakers must therefore pay close attention to implementation.

A second lesson is that technology is not a solution by itself.

Electronic monitoring is valuable, but it works best when combined with probation supervision, treatment programmes and practical reintegration support.

Finally, prison construction alone is rarely a sustainable answer to overcrowding. Additional capacity may be necessary in some circumstances, but long-term population management depends on criminal justice policy, not on buildings alone.

Conclusion

Allow me to conclude with three reflections.

First, prison overcrowding is fundamentally a criminal justice challenge, not simply a prison administration challenge.

Second, effective alternatives to imprisonment require professional probation services, public confidence and adequate resources.

Third, sustainable prison population reduction requires patience, consistency and cooperation across the entire justice chain. Estonia's experience demonstrates that substantial reductions in imprisonment are possible while maintaining public safety.

Finally, Estonia's experience also reminds us that criminal justice policy is not developed in a political vacuum. Calls for tougher punishment and increased imprisonment remain a recurring feature of public debate. Yet there is little appetite to return to the situation Estonia faced decades ago, when imprisonment rates were among the highest in Europe and prison conditions reflected the shortcomings of that era. The results achieved over the past two decades show that a balanced approach, combining accountability, rehabilitation and effective community supervision, can deliver better outcomes. For

policymakers, this evidence has so far remained the strongest argument for continuing the current course rather than reversing it.

The wider European experience demonstrates that there is no universal solution. Yet one lesson is common across all successful reforms: lasting change requires coordinated action, long-term commitment and a clear focus on what actually reduces reoffending.