



Effects of custodial versus non-custodial sanctions on re-offending



Poster - Men's Group 2008. Photo: Titan View Pty Ltd. (CC by 2.0)*

High quality studies show that custodial sentences are no better or worse than non-custodial sentences in reducing re-offending

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review compares effects of custodial and non-custodial sentences on re-offending. The authors found fourteen high-quality studies, including three randomised controlled trials and two natural experiments.

Custodial sentences, such as prison, are no better than non-custodial sentences in reducing re-offending.

What is this review about?

Those who commit illegal acts may re-offend. It is important to know which sanctions reduce re-offending and if some approaches are more effective than others.

There are two kinds of sanctions. Custodial sanctions deprive offenders of their freedom of movement by placing them in institutions such as prisons, halfway houses, or 'boot camps'. Non-custodial sanctions (also known as 'alternative' or 'community' sanctions) include community work, electronic monitoring, and fines. This review examines whether custodial and non-custodial sanctions have different effects on the rates of re-offending.

Which studies are included in this review?

Included studies had at least two groups: a custodial group and a non-custodial group. Sanctions had to be imposed following a criminal offence, and there had to be at least one measure of re-offending, such as new arrests.

Fourteen high-quality studies comparing custodial and non-custodial sentences are included in the analysis. The studies span the period from 1961 to 2013 and are mostly from the USA, Europe and Australia.

Do custodial sanctions have different effects from non-custodial sanctions on re-offending?

No. High quality studies show that custodial sentences are no better or worse than non-custodial sentences in reducing re-offending.

Some studies with weaker designs suggest that prison is followed by higher re-offending rates than non-custodial sanctions. However, these results may be affected by selection bias; that is, offenders who were less likely to re-offend were



Serving my sentence. Photo and model: Christopher Thomas. (CC by 2.0) *www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/

How up to date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies done from 1961 up to 2013. This Campbell Systematic Review was published on January 2, 2015.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

It was written by Robyn Mildon (Campbell Collaboration) and Karen Harries-Rees (Parenting Research Centre). It is based on the Campbell Systematic Review 'The Effects on Re-offending of Custodial vs. Non-custodial Sanctions: An Updated Systematic Review of the State of the Knowledge' by Patrice Villettaz, Gwladys Gillieron, and Martin Killias, (DOI: 10.4073/csr.2015.1). Anne Mellbye (RBUP) designed and Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration) edited the summary.

more likely to be given a non-custodial sentence.

What do the results mean?

Imprisonment is no more effective than community-based sanctions in reducing re-offending. Despite this evidence, almost all societies across the world continue to use custodial sentences as the main crime control strategy.

In terms of rehabilitation, short confinement is not better or worse than "alternative" solutions.

Many studies of sentencing practices were found that used weak and biased methods. Better evidence should be used by policy makers and practitioners, for example from randomised controlled trials or natural experiments. Although several such studies are included in this review, additional high quality studies are needed.

Other non-custodial approaches to offender rehabilitation also need to be evaluated, such as those provided through employment or other social networks.