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It costs a million dollars a day to keep low-risk defendants on remand. More prisons aren't the answer

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The government has framed its NZ$503 million budget spending on prisons as necessary to maintain public safety and manage a growing prison population, forecast to increase by 36% from the current 10,000 to 14,000 by 2035.

The appeal to public safety is tied to the goal of reducing violent crime, which most voters will understandably support.

But this broad messaging obscures two crucial facts. Most assaults in New Zealand happen inside private homes, not in public spaces. And the increase in the number of people in prison comes from an excessive remand population (people awaiting trial), not from an increase in serious offending.

More than half of those who are remanded will not receive a prison sentence once their case is heard. This shows they don't present a risk to public safety.

As of March 2026, there were 4,537 people held on remand. Each is costing the taxpayer about $414 per day. This means the large share of the remand population that poses no threat to public safety is costing taxpayers nearly $1 million every single day.

From a fiscal perspective, it is a striking decision to build new prisons for the growing remand population instead of changing the law to release those who pose no risk on bail.

Why the remand population is growing

The remand population currently accounts for 41% of the prison population, up from 13% in 2000.

Over the past 25 years, a series of legislative changes has steadily increased the number of people on remand.

The most consequential change came when the previous National-led government amended the Bail Act in 2013 to tighten bail eligibility. Until then, most defendants were granted bail automatically.

It was largely on the prosecutor to prove the defendant posed a flight risk, might reoffend or interfere with justice – by intimidating witnesses for example – while on bail.

This amendment shifted the burden of proof onto defendants. Instead of bail, remand became the new norm, because it is harder to prove something will not happen. For example, how can you prove you will not intimidate witnesses?

As a result, more people are being detained, not because more people pose a proven risk, but because the legal threshold for release is now higher.

For the men and women held on remand, the consequences are often severe. People lose jobs, housing and family connections, all of which increase the likelihood of offending. Remand has become a costly and counterproductive system that harms both individuals and the public purse.

Because Māori are already more likely to be arrested, charged and have prior convictions due to long-standing systemic inequalities, a bail rule that forces defendants to prove they are not a risk perpetuates existing disparities.

The $1 million daily cost for keeping people unnecessarily on remand would be better divested into early intervention. We know a large number of people behind bars live with learning disabilities, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, traumatic brain injuries and severe unresolved childhood trauma.

Many end up self-medicating with alcohol or drugs because they have never received proper support. Prisons are not designed to treat these underlying issues. Often they can make them worse.

The misleading appeal to public safety

Bail laws were tightened to protect public safety and the 2026 budget decision leans on that same argument.

The idea of public safety invokes images of physical threats in communal spaces. This overlooks that most violence in New Zealand happens at home. In 2025, around 10,500 people were convicted of a violent offence, of which more than half occured within families.

Family violence is a complex and often inter-generational problem.

Prison cannot teach emotional regulation, repair relationships or undo childhood trauma. Instead, it disrupts employment, isolates people from whānau and increases the stress factors that fuel further violence.

What works to address family harm is stable housing, addiction treatment, early intervention by specialist services and long-term therapeutic support.

These approaches strengthen families, reduce harm and cost far less than imprisonment. If we want safer homes and communities, we need to invest in solutions that change behaviour, not just contain it.

It is an old line, but it remains true: every dollar invested in early childhood support saves around 13 dollars in criminal justice costs later on.

A society that keeps expanding its prisons is admitting its social policies are not working. If we are serious about reducing crime, the government needs to invest earlier.

Antje Deckert

Associate Professor in Criminology, Auckland University of Technology

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