

Press Release

For immediate release



SOUTH AFRICAN
INSTITUTE OF
RACE RELATIONS

South Africa's Leading Research and Policy Organisation

www.sairr.org.za

5 March 2012

Media Contact: Kerwin Lebone

Tel: 011-482-7221

E-mail: kerwin@sairr.org.za

More prisoners or just longer sentences?

The proportion of South African prisoners serving sentences longer than ten years increased by more than 2 400% between 1995 and 2011, according to the latest *South Africa Survey*, published by the South African Institute of Race Relations.

The number of prisoners serving sentences shorter than six months has decreased by 90% since 1995. The number of prisoners serving sentences of between five and seven years also decreased, by more than 40%.

There has, however, been a large increase in the number of prisoners serving long sentences, most notably life sentences. The number of people serving life sentences, which stood at 433 in 1995, had risen to 10 349 by 2011 – an increase of no less than 2 290% over the period.

In 1995 over 70% of sentences being served did not exceed 24 months. Only 2% of prisoners were serving sentences of more than 10 years. This pattern has been reversed over the period covered, with only 11% of sentences in 2011 amounting to 24 months or less and 48% exceeding ten years.

The Institute's analysis was based on data from the Department of Correctional Services.

The total number of people in prisons, including both prisoners who have already received their sentence and those still awaiting trial, has increased by 44% since 1995. The number of prisoners serving a sentence has increased by more than 30%, but the number of prisoners awaiting trial by 82%. The proportion of prisoners awaiting trial, which was at a record high of 37% in 1998, has since declined to just above 30% in 2011.

Over the same period, available prison accommodation increased at a slower pace than the prison population, leading to a 37% degree of prison overcrowding in 2011.

'The number of people in prison has been rising since 1995, putting increasing pressure on prisons in the country,' said Mr Kerwin Lebone of the Institute's research department. 'While the re-introduction of minimum-sentence legislation in 1997 had a significant effect on the duration of sentences, it is not clear whether the rise in the prison population is due primarily to more criminals being sentenced or the increase in the average length of sentences being served.'

ends