



Ministry  
of Justice

# **Statistical Note and Consultation - changes to Prison Population Projections**

30 July 2015

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## Introduction

The [prison population projections](#) publication currently presents projections of the prison population in England and Wales for the forthcoming six years. They are based on assumptions about future custodial convictions and incorporate the anticipated impacts of agreed policy and procedural initiatives. The projections are produced to aid policy development, capacity planning and resource bidding and allocation within the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

This consultation reflects an internal review by producers of the Prison Population Projections. A number of proposed changes to the publication, which aim to improve the way in which the information is conveyed to users, are put forward in this document. Users' views are invited on these changes and suggestions will be considered before any changes are confirmed.

### The key questions for users are:

1. Do you agree with the proposed changes to the prison population projections annual publication?
2. Do you have any views on how uncertainty in the forecasts can best be communicated?
3. Are there any additional statistical tables you would like to see included in the publication?

### How to contact us with your comments

Comments are requested by **25 September 2015**

Enquiries and responses in relation to this consultation should be directed to Alex Dunnett at the address below.

Please put 'Consultation Response' in the title of any emails:

Email: [statistics.enquiries@justice.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:statistics.enquiries@justice.gsi.gov.uk)

### Justice Statistics Analytical Services

Ministry of Justice 7<sup>th</sup> Floor  
102 Petty France, London, SW1H 9AJ

### What we will do with your comments

We will publish a response to the consultation and confirm any changes to the publication with the Statistics Authority in October 2015.

# **Proposed changes for future editions of Prison Population Projections**

## **1. Improve how we communicate uncertainty**

The publication currently has higher and lower scenarios alongside the central projection. These scenarios were simply designed to be illustrative examples of what may happen to the prison population under a certain set of assumptions. No likelihood was attached to the assumptions in these scenarios, yet they are often misinterpreted as upper and lower bounds on the future population. It is therefore proposed that we replace these scenarios with an alternative method to communicate the uncertainty in the central forecast. What form this alternative method will take will depend on feedback from our users, but could, for example, take the form of fan charts (similar to those used for the Bank of England's GDP forecasts), or show how previous projections have performed against actuals.

It is essential that uncertainty in the projections is clearly communicated to ensure that users do not draw conclusions that are not supported by the statistics. Official statistics inform and underpin important decisions, and therefore users should get the clearest possible view of what the projections really mean.

Users' comments are sought on whether the scenarios still have a useful purpose, and what alternative methods would be best for communicating the uncertainty in the projections. Any final decision on how uncertainty will be communicated in the future will be made with consideration of the outcome of this consultation.

## **2. Reduce the length of the forecast period**

Currently the publication projects 6 years into future, however it is proposed that this is reduced to 4 years for future publications.

Given the levels of uncertainty around crime levels, volumes in the courts, future sentencing trends and the potential impact of new government policy the prison population can be very volatile. With this uncertainty increasing as the projections move further into the future, long term projections can have a very wide margin of error. It is therefore considered more helpful to the users to focus on the short to medium term projections.

A 4 year forecast is also in line with how far ahead the Ministry generally looks when making decisions on prison capacity planning.

### **3. Publish the projections in August rather than November**

The prison population is subject to seasonal variation, such as the Christmas and Easter dips where the population drops temporarily before recovering to the previous level. The magnitude of these brief drops and the speed of their recovery are highly volatile, and can change significantly from year to year.

Moving the publication date to August would mean that the publication occurs during a period where the prison population is relatively stable, and the effects of seasonal factors will be minimised. Given the volatility of the prison population at Christmas, a projection published in November may initially appear more unreliable than a projection published in August. Subsequently, this reduces confidence in the projections.

Also, the annual Offender Management Statistics bulletin, which covers the latest prison population data, is published in July - and moving the publication date to August would enable us to provide a more consistent narrative for users.

If it is agreed that the publication date should be moved to August, the 2016 projections would be brought forward from November 2016 to August 2016. The 2015 projections are not affected, and will be published in November 2015.

### **4. Breakdown the projections into additional sub populations**

The statistical tables supplied with the publication currently provide the population projection broken down by custody type. The categories provided cover:

- Remand population;
- Sentenced population;
  - Determinate;
  - Indeterminate;
- Recall;
- Non-criminals (including persons held in National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Immigration Removal Centres);
- Fine defaulters.

The statistical tables provide breakdowns of the total prison population by gender and age category for:

- Male adults (21+ years);
- Male young adults (18-20 years);
- Female adults and female young adults combined (18+ years);
- Total juveniles (15-17 years);

As part of the November 2015 publication it is planned to include further tables showing projections for populations aged over 50 years and over 60 years old.

Users' comments are sought on any additional tables that they would like to see included in future publications.

## Contact Details

We would welcome views on the proposed changes detailed above, and any further comments on the accessibility, content or structure of the Prison Population Projections publications (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-ns>) to ensure we meet user needs in an efficient and effective way. Please provide comments to:

**Alex Dunnett**

Ministry of Justice 7<sup>th</sup> Floor  
102 Petty France, London  
SW1H 9AJ  
Email: [statistics.enquiries@justice.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:statistics.enquiries@justice.gsi.gov.uk)



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