

# How a Small Advocacy Organisation Advanced Big Reforms: The Irish Penal Reform Trust



Trying to shift policy and practice in order to address the rights of people who are marginalised from society is a daunting task for any organisation, especially a small one. But not only is such change possible, small organisations can bring singular strengths to pressing, if unpopular, issues. The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) is an example of a small organisation with limited staff and resources that successfully influenced policy on a largely invisible, minority issue.

## Background

IPRT was established in 1994 by a group of advocates, academics and citizens who were concerned about the poor conditions and invisibility of prisoners in Ireland. In 2009 IPRT received core funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies, which allowed it to greatly expand its size and enhance its capacity by hiring three key staff members to assist its executive director.

With expanded staffing, IPRT developed a carefully thought out strategy with three key components:

- Generating useful research on sentencing, prison and prisoners' rights issues
- Building alliances, particularly with government and prison officials
- Creating a communications approach that focused on gaining attention to penal reform issues, rather than IPRT

## Accomplishments

An independent case study in 2015 noted IPRT's key accomplishments:

- **A shift in focus from building more prisons to finding more effective approaches to criminal justice.** IPRT helped change the political centre of gravity on penal reform, which had been for expansion, to one for moderation. Prior to 2011, most parties favoured more prisons as the only response to crime and over-crowding in prisons. Over a short period of time, this mind-set shifted. Political acceptance now exists to support the notion that the prison population needs to be reduced and that it can be done without risk to public safety.
- **Significant progress in addressing the most serious human rights issues in prisons.** Among IPRT's achievements include a significant reduction in the number of prisoners on 22-hour lock-up and a planned end to 'slopping out', a practice where prisoners had no access to toilets from 8pm to 8am. IPRT also made progress in accountability mechanisms on prisoners' complaints and deaths in custody.
- **New emphasis on research in making policy.** IPRT's focus on using evidence and research as the basis for constructive policy change has influenced the government's approach to penal policy. At a time when the government was looking for new ideas, IPRT was able to present ready-made proposals. Policymakers and legislators are now more likely to look to authoritative research when making policy.

## For more information

To learn more about the Irish Penal Reform Trust, read the full case study at <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/> and visit IPRT's website at <http://www.iprt.ie/>