



Justice, Beneficence, and Respect: Towards Equitable and Uniform Research Remuneration for Incarcerated Participants

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Abstract

People in prison frequently contribute to criminological research, providing insights that are crucial to improving correctional practices, rehabilitation efforts, and health service delivery. Yet, despite the significance of their contributions, which often involve revisiting traumatic experiences, people in prison rarely receive any form of remuneration for their involvement as research participants. This is largely due to prohibitive policies and practices adopted by corrective services. This article argues that people in prison should be appropriately remunerated for their participation in research and advocates for a more consistent, equitable approach to research remuneration across all Australian states and territories.

Keywords: Prison; research; remuneration; corrective services; ethics

Introduction

Criminological research involving people in prison offers valuable insights for improving correctional systems, rehabilitation programs, and health services. While research participants in the community are often offered incentives or remuneration for their time and contribution, incarcerated research participants rarely receive any remuneration, as this practice is commonly prohibited by correctional agencies (Simpson et al., 2025). A recent scoping review from Mambro and colleagues (2024) of global practices found that 65% of prison-based studies did not offer payment to incarcerated research participants. This study included research from selected databases and grey literature published until September 30, 2022. Where reasons for non-payment were stated, the researchers typically cited departmental and/or system-level policies disallowing the provision of incentives and, less often, the researchers' use of discretion. Among the 35% of studies that did provide reimbursements, the most common form was a one-time monetary compensation, which ranged from US\$3 to US\$610 (Mambro et al., 2024).



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The most common justification for denying research remuneration to people in prison is the concern that financial incentives might unduly influence a person's decision to participate in research, an especially contentious issue in prison settings, where power imbalances are pronounced (Abbott et al., 2018). However, recent Australian research involving incarcerated "citizen juries" challenges this assumption (Simpson et al., 2025). Participants argued that, with clear communication about a study's intended purpose and risks, people in prison can voluntarily and meaningfully consent to research participation, stating that concerns about their capacity to give informed consent are often overstated or unwarranted (Simpson et al., 2025).

Currently, remuneration policies for research participation vary significantly across Australia. Most states and territories prohibit payment, but with some variation in their approach, leading to inconsistencies that affect participant equity, research quality, and ethical integrity. These disparities also overlook the time, effort, and lived expertise that people in prison contribute to research, including First Nations Peoples who are grossly overrepresented in prisons across all Australian states and territories (AIHW, 2025) and are the most researched population globally (NHMRC, 2018). The absence of national standards on this issue to guide Australian researchers also creates uncertainty and underscores a broader lack of engagement with what constitutes ethical and respectful research practice with incarcerated populations. This article calls for a nationally standardised approach that appropriately values the contributions of incarcerated research participants, while also addressing institutional concerns about security and undue influence.

International Approaches to Remuneration for Incarcerated Research Participants

Limited research has been conducted on remuneration policies for incarcerated research participants globally and much of the existing literature is potentially outdated. A 2009 review by Smoyer, Blankenship and Belt gathered information on compensation practices for incarcerated research participants from 46 states in the United States, the District of Columbia, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Of the 48 jurisdictions studied, 21 (44%) permitted compensation, while the remaining 25 (56%) prohibited such payments. However, only 42% of jurisdictions had a publicly available written policy about the payment of incarcerated research participants.

In Canada, formal policies are uncommon: Matheson et al. (2012) found that 92% of provincial and territorial corrections departments lacked written guidelines on research incentives. However, nearly half (46%) permitted incentives on a case-by-case basis, through unwritten policies or established practices (Matheson et al., 2012). In Europe, data is more limited, though compensation is reportedly prohibited in the Netherlands (Bouw et al., 2019).

Research Remuneration Across Australia

Our research reveals that the approaches on remunerating incarcerated research participants vary widely across Australia's states and territories (see Table 1). Only two jurisdictions currently support remuneration: New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

Table 1*The Approach by Corrective Services Across Australia*

Jurisdiction	Approach to research remuneration	Permitted	Formal policy
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	Supports incentives, though current policy does not explicitly address them. Updates are in progress, with incentives requiring Commissioner approval. Researchers must deposit payments directly into participants' accounts; amount is included in weekly limit of \$150.	✓	X
New South Wales (NSW)	Payments are allowed but subject to Custodial Operations Policy and Procedures (COPP) section 8.7. Funds must be deposited into trust accounts, with a \$100 deposit limit.	✓	✓
Northern Territory (NT)	Research remuneration not permitted.	X	X
Queensland (QLD)	Incentives are not permitted for research participation in prisons.	X	✓
South Australia (SA)	Generally prohibits incentives for incarcerated individuals. Exceptions require explicit approval from the Chief Executive.	X	X
Tasmania	Does not support incentives, but allows participants to enter a draw for reimbursement.	X	✓
Victoria	No reimbursement allowed for incarcerated individuals or those on orders/parole.	X	X
Western Australia (WA)	Incentives to participate must not be offered to prospective research participants.	X	✓

Corrective Services NSW recently reversed its previous position on this issue, with its 2023 guidelines now permitting compensation (capped at \$100). They recognised that overturning their previous 2002 guidelines was necessary, because excluding people in prison from being remunerated for their research participation contradicts the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC, 2023) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (hereafter, the National Statement) principles, including those of *justice* and *respect*. The NSW Corrective Services Ethics Committee (2023, p. 2) guidelines noted:

Respect means to recognise human beings as autonomous individuals able to make their own decisions about taking part in research and offenders should not be treated differently to other participants in terms of payment for their participation. This principle extends to prisoners whose autonomy is restricted, but who otherwise have the capacity to make informed decisions about participation in research.

ACT Corrective Services also supports research remuneration for people in prison, although, at the time of writing, their policy did not explicitly address this issue (J. Rodgers, personal communication, February 13, 2025). We were informed that updates were in progress and incentives would be permitted, subject to the Commissioner's approval.

In contrast, Queensland, South Australia (SA), Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia (WA) generally prohibit incentives, with only minor variations: SA allows exceptions with approval from the Corrective Services' Chief Executive (M. Hwa Ting, personal communication, February 6, 2025), while section 2.5.5 of the WA's Department of Justice (2024) Code of Conduct for Researchers provides that "incentives to participate must not be offered to prospective research participants" (p. 5). Clarification was provided by a Project Officer from WA, who noted that "remuneration for participant time is permitted, so long as it is not used as an incentive. In any event, please be aware that remuneration for incarcerated participants specifically may potentially not be approved" (L. Sims, personal communication, February 6, 2025). In Victoria, reimbursement is not permitted "in any form" for incarcerated individuals or those on orders or parole (Corrections Victoria Research Committee Secretariat, personal communication, February 18, 2025). Similarly, Queensland Corrective Services' (2018) current policy "does not support the offer of reimbursement or incentives to any prisoners as inducement to participate in research" (p. 43). The research guidelines from the Tasmania Prison Service (TPS, 2024) note that TPS "does not support the offer of

reimbursement or incentives to any prisoners as inducement to participate in research however participants may be offered to go into a draw to receive such a reimbursement" (p. 35). Elsewhere, the rationale for this position is provided:

... payments, incentives or inducements cannot be used to unduly influence prisoners to participate. It must be remembered that any possible advantages or opportunities for payment, accruing to a prisoner through his or her participation in research can have a much greater effect than similar advantages or payments would have in a non-prison population. Any incentive within a custodial setting can be seen as providing advantages that are not available to the general prison population and hence are potentially coercive for that reason. (p. 15)

We understand that no formal policy exists in the Northern Territory and no information was available regarding that jurisdiction's approach to this issue.

Ethical Guidance on Research Involving People in Prison

The National Statement outlines the ethical responsibilities of researchers in Australia, including when conducting research with people in prison (NHMRC, 2023). Section 2.2.10 permits payment to research participants, but states that payments must not be disproportionate to the time involved or serve as an inducement that could encourage participants to take on risks they would normally avoid. Section 2.2.11 further advises that decisions about remuneration should reflect the customs and norms of the communities, in which the research is to be conducted, an approach that should also be extended to the distinct context of correctional environments.

The National Statement does not prohibit offering research remuneration to people in prison. However, it advises caution, in contexts involving unequal or dependent relationships, such as between prisoners and prison authorities (see Chapter 4.4). A key ethical concern is the risk of people in prison becoming "over-researched," due to their relative accessibility. Clause 3.1.21 highlights that researchers and ethics reviewers must assess whether offering any form of incentive could exert undue influence on individuals to participate, particularly in studies involving more than low risk. This reflects the overarching commitment to autonomy and voluntary participation, especially in environments where power imbalances may limit freedom to decline involvement.

Nonetheless, the ethical principles underpinning the National Statement - *justice, beneficence, and respect* - support the fair and proportionate payment of research participants in prison. *Justice* requires equitable distribution of research benefits, *beneficence* requires that risks be justified by likely benefits, while *respect* recognises individuals' ability to make autonomous decisions.

Thus, there is no ethical basis in the National Statement for prohibiting the provision of research remuneration to people in prison. Rather, it acknowledges the unique considerations associated with correctional research and calls for careful, ethical design, to minimise coercion and ensure genuine, informed consent. These issues must be addressed clearly, when applying for ethics approval.

The NHMRC (2019) reinforces this view in its guidelines regarding the payment of research participants, where it states that such payment "is ethically appropriate if it is equitable and proportionate to the burden of the research" and does not compromise voluntary or informed consent or unduly influence the person to accept a risk or burden that is greater than they would otherwise accept (p. 2). The NHMRC acknowledges that, although the autonomy of people in prison may be restricted, they "otherwise have the capacity to make decisions about participation in research" and should therefore not be treated differently from other participants in terms of payment for research participation (p. 3). The responsibility for determining whether proposed payments of participants are adequate, proportionate, not excessive, and fair is the role of review bodies (e.g., ethics committees). Importantly such bodies are not required to establish that there is no possibility of undue influence, but rather, to ensure that the potential for this is minimised (NHMRC, 2019).

Arguments Favouring Research Remuneration

Notwithstanding the concerns outlined above, there are many compelling reasons that favour remuneration for people in prison who participate in research. Providing remuneration to research participants is common practice, with payments intended to acknowledge both the time and effort required to participate in research (Ravi et al., 2018). From a human rights perspective, the decision not to reimburse a person in prison for their research participation, particularly in circumstances where other research participants may be paid or reimbursed for similar types of research, is discriminatory and exploitative (Roberts & Indermaur, 2008). Providing research remuneration affirms the humanity of people in prison and recognises the value of their

participation (Rodrigues et al., 2024), as well as their ongoing status as citizens (Brown & Wilkie, 2002). There is also precedent for compensating other marginalised groups for research involvement, including people who inject drugs (Fry et al., 2006). Further, we argue that the failure to appropriately reimburse people in prison undermines ethical research standards, by failing to acknowledge individuals' capacity to make their own decisions about participating in research and, where applicable, not appropriately recognising participants' time and contributions.

Accordingly, we suggest that fair remuneration should apply to *all* research participants, irrespective of their incarceration status. Participation in research is a "worthwhile activity that contributes to the public good" (Hanson et al., 2012, p. 1392). We recognise that people in prison are an over-researched population, who are often asked to share traumatic experiences to advance academic knowledge. We argue that expecting them to do so without fair remuneration further exploits their lived experiences for academic and policy gains. Given the significance of the contributions made by people in prison, we contend that providing remuneration for their participation in research is not only justified, but imperative.

Given that large amounts of money are not typically offered for research participation, people in prison are unlikely to be "better or worse off financially through participation in research" (Roberts & Indermaur, 2008, p. 316). We recognise, however, that many people in prison come from disadvantaged backgrounds (AIHW, 2023) and failing to compensate them perpetuates systemic inequities, reinforcing their economic and social exclusion, even as they contribute valuable insights to research. Providing a small amount of remuneration appropriately acknowledges the person's contributions and their time and effort in participating in research (Roberts & Indermaur, 2008).

Fair remuneration practices offer significant benefits not only to participants, but also to the overall quality and integrity of research. When participants are compensated appropriately for their time and contributions, they may be more likely to engage meaningfully, leading to richer and more accurate data. This enhanced engagement can improve participation rates and data quality, ensuring that findings are more representative and meaningful (Singer & Ye, 2013).

Valuing First Nations Peoples' Contributions to Criminological Research

Globally, Indigenous Peoples have a longstanding history as research subjects (Goodman et al., 2018) and First Nations Australians are considered the most researched peoples in the world (NHMRC, 2018). However, the relationship between First Nations Peoples and post-colonisation research has frequently been characterised by a lack of mutual respect and benefit. Historically, these relationships have been shaped by exploitative practices, cultural misrepresentation, and disempowering methodologies that reflect a poor understanding of First Nations cultures and their ways of being, knowing, and doing (Davey & Day, 2008; Putt, 2013; Sherwood, 2010).

Critical Indigenist and decolonising frameworks provide essential context for understanding why these historical dynamics persist and why ethical research must actively dismantle colonial practices. Smith's (2012) work on decolonising methodologies argues that research has long been a tool of imperialism, and calls for approaches that prioritise Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems. Similarly, Sherwood and Anthony (2020) emphasise cultural safety and reciprocity as foundational to ethical research, while Rigney's (1999) Indigenist research principles advocate for research that is by, with, and for Indigenous peoples, centring self-determination and resistance to colonial domination.

Australia has made some progress in reshaping the relationship between researchers and First Nations participants (for discussion, see Smyth et al., 2024, Part II). National guidelines now emphasise the importance of prioritising Indigenous self-determination and leadership in research design, while also maximising the impact, value, and sustainability of research for First Nations communities (NHMRC, 2018). Further, Principle 3 of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2020) *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* highlights that research should be of *benefit* to First Nations individuals and/or their communities and embed the principle of *reciprocity* into their research design, emphasising mutual benefit, respect, and responsibility between researchers and participants. This is particularly important, given that many research projects involving First Nations Peoples ask them to "contribute knowledge, practices innovations, cultural expressions and intellectual property, skills, know-how, cultural expressions and products" (AIATSIS 2020, p. 20). Blagg and Anthony (2019) highlight how systemic injustice and colonial legacies shape both research and policy, while Tauri (2018) critiques Western criminological paradigms for marginalising Indigenous voices by sustaining Eurocentric epistemologies and carceral logics (see also Cunneen et al., 2023). These frameworks collectively underscore that remuneration for incarcerated First Nations participants is not merely a procedural matter, but rather a decolonising practice that affirms the value of Indigenous knowledge and resists exploitative norms.

The current practice of denying remuneration to incarcerated research participants stands in direct contradiction to these guidelines, undermining key ethical principles, such as self-determination and reciprocity. First Nations Peoples frequently contribute valuable knowledge, including Indigenous cultural intellectual property, and lived experience to criminological research conducted in prisons. Denying remuneration based on incarceration status not only dismisses the significance of these contributions, but also perpetuates colonial research practices and violates the principles that underpin ethical research with First Nations communities.

Recommendations

With these considerations in mind, we offer several recommendations for researchers, corrective services agencies, funding bodies, and ethics committees, to ensure the equitable treatment of participants who are incarcerated, while also minimising associated risks.

1. Create a uniform and consistent policy across Australia

The variation in remuneration policies across Australian jurisdictions leads to inequitable treatment, particularly in multi-jurisdictional studies. In some states and territories (NSW, ACT), people in prison may receive compensation for their research contributions, while in most, compensation is not permitted. This inconsistency creates disparities in the treatment of participants, based on their location. We therefore advocate for a consistent policy position across all Australian jurisdictions. The policy should be transparent, publicly available, and clearly articulate acceptable remuneration processes, including appropriate payment forms and payment amounts.

2. Change terminology from “incentives” to “remuneration”

In research involving incarcerated participants, we recommend that the terminology shift from “research incentives” to “research remuneration”. The term “incentive” is often used interchangeably with “inducement” and commonly refers to money or in-kind support provided to participants, to encourage their enrolment or continuing participation in research (NHMRC, 2019). This may imply that participants may be motivated to engage in research, primarily due to potential monetary gain, which could lead to concerns about undue influence or coercion. Conversely, “remuneration” is a form of monetary compensation that acknowledges the time, effort, and potential risks associated with research participation and aligns with NHMRC (2019) guidelines. Accordingly, “remuneration” is the more appropriate term in correctional research contexts and upholds the ethical principles of fairness and respect, without implying coercion or that participants are profiting from crime.

3. Remuneration as standard practice

Fair remuneration should be the default position for research involving people in prison. The onus should be on researchers to incorporate fair compensation into research budgets and to justify, with clear rationale, instances where remuneration is not appropriate. Funding bodies should require grant applicants to provide a clear rationale for the compensation structure and ethics committees should assess these justifications, to ensure that compensation practices are fair, transparent, and consistent with ethical guidelines.

4. Outline appropriate payment amounts and form

Beyond allowing for remuneration, guidelines should also be provided to assist researchers with determining the appropriate payment amount and form. Rodrigues and colleagues (2024) identified three primary approaches to remunerating incarcerated participants. The first is to base payment off existing prisoner wages. However, prison wages often fall significantly below community standards (Collins, 2024; Maycock & McGregor, 2023); thus, this approach potentially perpetuates exploitative prison practices. The second option is to adjust payment, to reflect the differing living costs between prison and community settings (i.e., a purchasing power approach) (Rodrigues et al., 2024). Yet, quantifying this disparity is challenging, due to the varied expenses incurred by incarcerated individuals, compared to those in the community. The third approach aligns remuneration with what a community-based participant would receive for similar types of research activity (Rodrigues et al., 2024). We contend that this approach is the most equitable, ensuring that incarcerated individuals are compensated fairly for their time and contributions.

In line with the current NSW Corrective Services Ethics Committee guidelines (2023), we recommend payments of *up to the value of \$100* and that this be reviewed, as required. In determining the appropriate payment amount, researchers should consider (1) the time commitment required; (2) the complexity and skill level of the task; (3) any physical or psychological discomfort; and (4) the potential educational or therapeutic benefits for participants. Payments should ideally be deposited into participants’ “buy-up” (commissary) accounts. Gift cards should be used with caution, due to the risk of expiration before they

can be redeemed. Where appropriate and feasible, gift vouchers could be sent directly to a nominated family member or friend if their address is available.

5. Take appropriate steps to minimise risk

While some argue that financial incentives may coerce participation, existing ethics frameworks already safeguard against coercion for all participants. A well-regulated remuneration system can balance fairness with ethical considerations. Incarcerated participants should be informed about the compensation structure, during the consent process. To mitigate the risk of coercion, we recommend compensating individuals even for partial contributions, rather than conditioning payment solely upon full study completion. This approach aligns with the NHMRC's (2019) recommendations, as it allows participants to withdraw from the research at any stage without facing financial penalties, thereby upholding their autonomy and ensuring the decision to participate remains voluntary.

Conclusion

People in prison are routinely asked to contribute to criminological research, often by recounting deeply personal and traumatic experiences. Yet, in most Australian jurisdictions, they are expected to do so without remuneration, based on concerns about undue influence that are inconsistently applied and often overstated. These concerns appear to overshadow the broader risks of coercion within prison environments, such as pressure from staff and participation driven by boredom (Rodrigues et al., 2024), risks that ethics committees are already well equipped to evaluate. The current practice of blanket prohibitions on remuneration, imposed by many corrective services agencies, bypasses this ethical review process and denies people in prison the same respect and recognition afforded to research participants in the community.

This approach raises important ethical and human rights concerns. It disregards the autonomy of incarcerated individuals and their capacity to make informed choices about research participation and perpetuates historical patterns of exploitation for academic purposes. It also entrenches inequities, particularly for First Nations Peoples, who are both over-represented in prison and over-researched. Accordingly, the failure to provide fair remuneration further marginalises their voices and contributions. This is particularly striking, at a time when many corrections agencies are drawing on and remunerating the expertise of lived experience panels. For example, the Victorian Government has committed to “seeking out and listening to people whose voices are rarely heard and have been traditionally limited or excluded from shaping reform” (2022, p. 6), including:

remunerating their participation where appropriate, thereby acknowledging and overcoming power imbalances and barriers to participation. We will also recognise historical experiences of our stakeholders, including over-consultation, exclusion, and their experiences with the justice system (p. 20).

In line with this, Australia urgently requires a nationally consistent approach to research remuneration for incarcerated participants – one that is grounded in the ethical principles articulated in the National Statement. Ethics committees, not correctional authorities, should be the appropriate bodies to assess whether proposed remuneration is fair, proportionate, and ethically sound.

Providing appropriate remuneration will not eliminate all ethical challenges in prison-based research, including the need for such research to be undertaken and led by people with lived experience of prison themselves (see e.g., Antojado et al., 2024; Doyle et al., 2021). Nevertheless, our proposal is a critical step towards treating incarcerated research participants with the fairness and respect they deserve. It will also enhance research quality and integrity, by ensuring that participation is voluntary and valued. If we are to stop the exploitation and devaluation of people in prison as research participants, this change is not only necessary, but long overdue.

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