

## Children pay the price of our addiction to prisons - 5 Jun 2008

Gino Vumbaca, 5 June 2008



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A few years ago it was discovered that about one in every 25 children in this country had experienced the pain of having a parent in prison at some time in their lives. This means that, on average, one child in every classroom is affected, as Michael Moore from the Public Health Association recently put it. The figures for indigenous children, like all our corrections data on indigenous people, shows an even worse picture of one in five having a parent in prison at some time.

Australia has more than 27,000 adults in prison and more than 40,000 people pass through the prison system each year. This week the NSW Government committed nearly \$100 million to expanding prisons, including a new 500-bed prison to be built in Nowra.

It may be easy to say "lock 'em up and throw away the key" in response to news of a crime, but how many of us would say that if it were our child, father, mother or sibling who was facing a stint in prison?

As people blindly nod in agreement with tougher sentences, few stop to see the damage that imprisoning parents can have on their children, particularly the distress from separation, the shame, the stigma and the need to undergo torturous weekend visits to see them.

In the end we must realise that the impact of prison reaches far beyond those inside. The children of prisoners are truly innocent victims.

Children of prisoners are more likely to end up in prison themselves. When the background of juvenile detainees was examined in one study, it was discovered that one in 10 had a parent in prison at the time they were imprisoned themselves. One in four had a parent who was or had been in prison.

So, are we doing enough to prevent future generations from being cast into a life of crime? If we insist on using prisons as our front-line deterrent to criminal activity, then the evidence on reoffending says we are not.

A cult Japanese television show aired in Australia in the 1960s, Phantom Agents, had as its catchphrase "a gun is our last resort". It is about time that we adopted a similar catchphrase for crime: "a prison is our last resort". Otherwise we face the prospect of following the US, which is home to 25 per cent of all the prisoners in the world even though the country only accounts for 5 per cent of the world's population. With more than 2 million prisoners, US prisons are bursting at the seams, becoming an incredible financial and social burden.

This is not to devalue the work done in prisons under trying and stressful conditions, but to acknowledge that an environment characterised by violence, sexual assault, boredom and intimidation is far from the most conducive to rehabilitation.

Recently federal, state and territory ministers published the first National Corrections Drug Strategy - a truly remarkable achievement of co-operation.

The strategy acknowledges the need to balance strategies and programs that reduce the supply of drugs in

correctional settings, reduce the demand for drugs by prisoners, detainees and parolees through treatment and education and reduce the harm that drug use can cause, particularly the transmission of HIV and hepatitis C. It has been rightly welcomed by many and the commitment of the governments to implement this strategy is a real step forward.

However, an important component of wider law enforcement and correctional strategies needs to be the provision of alternatives to prison and detention centres. Prison is no place for a majority of people, despite how quick we are to lock them up.

That is why so many wealthy individuals spend vast sums of their money avoiding prison sentences and why groups like the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission know that prison sentences send a shiver down the business community's collective spine when they are given - far more than any financial penalty could achieve.

Of course, it's just bad luck for the majority of people for whom access to such resources to fight prison sentences in court is as remote as regular holidays cruising the Caribbean.

If we can divert people from committing crime as a result of their drug and alcohol dependence or mental health problems into treatment and rehabilitation centres, it will not only save the community a lot of money. It is also far more likely to lead to fewer people committing crime in the future.

Treating the causes of crime is always going to be far more beneficial to the community than picking up the pieces afterwards, but it requires a rethink on our almost instinctual response for a prison sentence whenever a crime is committed. It's time we stopped quickly sacrificing so many innocent children.

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