


## Jail costly way to tackle scourge - 12 February 2013

With nearly \$3 billion spent each year in Australia on building and operating prisons, the daily cost borne by ACT taxpayers is nearly double that of the national average. 

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are grossly over-represented in the cost-ineffective Australian, and ACT, criminal justice system.

Indigenous Australians make up 26 per cent of the adult prison population and only 2.5 per cent of the general population. Indigenous adults are therefore nearly 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than the rest of the population. The indigenous incarceration rate at the Alexander Maconochie Centre is unfortunately consistent with this.

More than 50 per cent of juveniles in detention are indigenous. The ACT's youth indigenous incarceration rate is the third highest in Australia.

This situation is bad enough before we realise that more than 80 per cent of indigenous prisoners in Australia are there for non-violent crimes.

This month, the Australian National Council on Drugs's National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee released the report, An Economic Analysis for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Prisoners: Prison v Residential Treatment, prepared by Deloitte Access Economics, comparing the difference in costs between prison and drug treatment for non-violent indigenous offenders across Australia.

The ANCD was established by prime minister John Howard in 1998 and is the primary advisory body to the government on drug policy. Its members include experts in areas related to drug policy. Its chairman is the Howard government indigenous affairs minister, Dr John Herron.

Alcohol and drug problems contribute to people becoming involved in the criminal justice system so by addressing these underlying problems we may be able to reduce high incarceration rates for non-violent offenders.

The report found that, nationally, the average cost of imprisoning a non-violent indigenous offender was nearly \$115,000 annually compared with a cost of about \$18,000 for residential drug treatment. Alcohol and drug treatment works and more than half of offenders that enter drug treatment will not re-offend.

These figures are astonishing, especially when you consider the overall benefit to the community, including less crime and alcohol and other drug use.

Further it would strengthen the commitment, by all Australian governments, to closing the gap of indigenous life expectancy and providing a better future for indigenous children.

The cost of imprisoning someone at the Alexander Maconochie Centre is \$595 per day, whereas the national average is \$315. As a result, it is likely that the cost saving of diverting non-violent offenders to residential drug treatment instead of prison could result in a far greater saving to the ACT government than the national estimate.

The ACT already has court and police alcohol and drug diversion programs for non-violent offenders, including the newly established Youth Drug and Alcohol Court. In 2012 the ACT government commissioned an evaluation of the system, the release of the report is pending.

A 2002 evaluation of the NSW Drug Court system found the system was effective in improving health, social functioning and reducing drug use. These improvements were sustained over the 12-month follow-up period. The cost per day for participants, adjusting for inflation, was about \$189, or \$406 less per day than incarcerating someone in the Alexander Maconochie Centre.

Retired American judge Peggy Hora visited Canberra at the end of last year to advocate for Australia to adopt the therapeutic jurisprudence approach of drug courts. Her experience included improved cost-effectiveness and outcomes for participants and communities. Texas has adopted policy shifts which have resulted in 10,000 vacant beds in what were overcrowded prisons.

Effectiveness aside, the economic considerations alone raise key questions. Why doesn't the ACT have an adult drug and alcohol court? Why are there plans to expand the adult prison?

Herron has indicated that the ACT could lead the nation in reforms to reduce indigenous incarceration rates and strengthen drug treatment through diversion programs. Corrections and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Minister Shane Rattenbury has agreed to consider the implications of the report's findings.

Taking action is a win/win for everyone. The ACT community saves money, offenders have their alcohol and drug problems addressed, limited resources are focused on more serious and violent offenders, the community is safer, and indigenous communities become stronger and healthier.

With this evidence, and in these tough economic times, the argument to act is compelling.

*Carrie Fowlie is the Executive Officer of the Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT and a member of the Australian National Council on Drugs.*

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