

Prison deaths soar in Australia

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The number of people dying in prisons or police custody in Australia is growing at a staggering rate. Two recent reports show that 75 prisoners died in 1997, a 44 percent increase since 1996, and the highest recorded number since 1980. Another 28 died in custody-related police operations.

Among the 103 victims were some as young as 16, and as old as 58. Five women died, including one Aboriginal woman who supposedly died by self-inflicted hanging, extremely rare among women committing suicide.

Compiled by the Australian Institute of Criminology, the reports reflect a sharp increase in the imprisonment rate, and clearly suggest an increasing incidence of police and prison killings.

Since 1980 the number of prison deaths per year has soared by 150 percent. The national prison population has increased by 76 percent, taking the total over 17,000. At the same time the death rate inside the prisons has risen by 42 percent. These results indicate that as unemployment, poverty and social deprivation worsen, state and local governments and the police are responding with increased repression.

Hanging was the most frequently cited cause of death, accounting for 32 (or 31 percent) of all deaths in police custody and 41 percent of all prison deaths. Eighteen people died from head or external/multiple injuries. Six were involved in motor crashes in the course of, or immediately following, a police pursuit; one was run over by a train while being chased by police and one suffered head injuries in a fall.

Death by gunshot accounted for 11 deaths in police custody, with police admitting having shot six of these people. Among the victims was Roni Levi, surrounded and shot by police at point-blank range on Sydney's Bondi Beach.

In the state of Victoria one privately managed prison, the Port Phillip Men's Metropolitan Prison, has

accounted for 70 percent of all of the state's jail deaths since the institution opened last August. Housing only 22 percent of the state's prisoners, the deaths of seven inmates is disproportionately high. Another 11 suicide attempts have been reported.

Victoria has the highest proportion of inmates of private prisons in the world. Half of its inmates are in private institutions, compared to 3 percent in the United States and 7 percent in Britain.

Overall, Aboriginal adults are heavily over-represented in Australia's prisons, making up 17 percent of inmates, but only 1.6 percent of the adult population. Many Aborigines continue to die in custody, but the sharpest increase in deaths during 1997—68 percent—occurred among non-Aboriginal prisoners.

The results confirm the warnings issued by the Socialist Labour League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party) in 1991 when the former Hawke Labor government handed down the report of its Royal Commission on Black Deaths in Custody. That report cleared the police and prison officers for every one of the 100 cell and custody deaths of Aboriginal detainees during the 1980s. *Workers News* stated that this whitewash would pave the way for similar methods to be used against the general prison population as the social crisis deepened: "The final report has given the police and the Labor government a licence to go on killing Aboriginal prisoners and to extend their murderous activities throughout the working class."



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