Australia: Alarming death rate among recently released female prisoners

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The recent deaths of seven female prisoners in the Australian state of Victoria within three months of their release from jail highlights the harsh and uncompromising conditions that exist both within and outside the prison system. Furthermore, evidence compiled by a prisoner advocacy group estimates that the number of women who die soon after leaving jail may well be increasing.

The Victorian Deaths in Custody Watch Committee (VDCWC) recently revealed that the seven women, all of whom had been incarcerated in the Metropolitan Women's Correction Centre in Deer Park, died last year within 10 weeks of their release. Two of the prisoners died within 24 hours and another one died after two days. The advocacy group explained that all but one of the deaths were due to heroin overdoses.

The VDCWC's evidence follows an investigation conducted by two LaTrobe University academics, Dr Sue Davies and Sandy Cook. Their study dealt with 93 women who had died soon after being released from Victorian prisons between 1987 and 1997.

Davies and Cook found that of the 93 women, 12 died within two days of being released while almost a third died within a month. At least half were dead within three months. Over 70 percent of the deaths were due to drugs.

According to the study, at least 80 per cent of prisoners have a prior drug dependency problem, yet the prisons have no proper drug treatment program. As a consequence, the use of illicit drugs, needle sharing and other high-risk activities are commonplace.

The study also found that besides coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds and lacking basic education, the vast majority of the female prisoners suffered from a history of sexual and/or physical abuse.

No adequate counselling, health or psychiatric services exist to treat women in jail. While inside, they are rarely provided with health care at night, have little access to doctors and visits to specialists are even more limited. The treatment for those experiencing drug withdrawal, suicidal tendencies or a psychotic episode is isolation.

The result is an “unusually high” level of suicide and self-mutilation among female prisoners. The LaTrobe study reported that while women make up only six percent of the prison population, 50 percent of self-abuse incidents occur in female prisons.

Another study by the Victorian Auditor-General in late 1998 also pointed to the high number of self-harm incidents within the Women's Correction Centre. Between 1995/96 and 1997/98 an average of 52 incidents was recorded in a prison population of 134 inmates. The report warns, however, that “the statistics are almost certainly understated...”

The case of Paula Richardson, who committed suicide in 1998 at the age of 23, underscores the kind of treatment suffered by female prison inmates.

A coroner's inquest revealed that Richardson—who was forcibly strip searched only two months before her suicide—was the victim of four rapes, had run away from home at 15 and had then become involved in prostitution and drugs. Three officers stripped her naked for refusing to hand over a can of soft drink.

Such searches are by no means rare. Between 1994 and 1995, 13,752 strip searches were carried out on female prisoners within the Victorian prison system, even though the number of prisoners at any time is never more than a few hundred.

Catherine Gow, a spokeswoman for VDCWC spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the high death rate of former prisoners.

“There is nothing for these prisoners once they have

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left jail. You are given your personal belongings, one week of social security payments and sent on your way. Sometimes not even a taxi is called to pick you up from the prison gates."

The Deer Park facility holds up to 160 women and the average stay is between 12 to 18 months. Most inmates are imprisoned for drug or non-violent property offences, such as burglary.

The actual death rate is unknown, Gow said, because no consistent follow-up of former prisoners is carried out.

She stressed that the high number of deaths was compounded by the harrowing experiences inmates were forced to endure within the prison system itself. Jail policy, for example, provides for only 10 children to stay with their mothers at any given time.

"Seventy percent of the women in the jail are mothers and many of these are sole parents. In most cases their children are either left with relatives or placed in foster care. These conditions create intense anxiety amongst the women."

Prison authorities routinely deal with the tense situation—created by, among other factors, the mothers' temporary loss of their children and the lack of recreational and educational facilities—by meting out severe punishments.

"Prison authorities at the Deer Park facility have, since 1996, ordered the use of tear gas on three occasions against the women, something that was unheard of previously."

According to Gow another more common form of restraint is the drugging of prisoners. "Officially the drugs are supposedly used to treat health problems, but in reality they are used as a form of chemical restraint to pacify the inmates. If an inmate refuses to take the medication she can be placed in solitary confinement."

Various lawyers and prison advocates have endorsed Gow's statements. On February 16, the Melbourne *Age* reported: "Teenage girls on remand in the adult prison system are becoming addicted to cocktails of prescription drugs given to them by prison medical staff. Lawyers and prison advocates say the drugs are being used as medication to control the young prisoners rather than treat their psychological problems."

Despite being dependent on medication inside, upon release the women are not referred to a doctor. In general, they are denied basic survival information, such as the location of crisis accommodation facilities and other emergency centres.

"They are left unprepared for life outside the jail," Gow said. "Many of them end up right back where they started."

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