

A precipitous increase in Australia's prison population

Cheryl McDermid
1 November 2000

Australia's prison population has risen dramatically over the past two decades, in line with trends in most advanced countries.

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), a government-funded research organisation, recently reported that the number of inmates rose by 102 percent in the 17 years from 1982 to 1998. Its study, "Imprisonment in Australia: Trends in Prison Populations and Imprisonment Rates", found that, on average, the prison population rose by 4.2 percent per year, two-and-a-half times the increase in the imprisonable population (18 years and over).

In 1982 the incarceration rate was 89.9 per 100,000; by 1998 this had climbed to 139.2 per 100,000—a 55 percent increase. The rate is over 30 percent higher than Britain's at 94 per 100,000 and almost seven times higher than Indonesia with 22 per 100,000. The annual growth rate in prison numbers is twice that of England and Wales, although only half that of the United States.

Such figures indicate profound changes in society and demand an analysis. But their publication has been met with virtual silence in the media and official circles. There have been no headlines, no debates. Nor has the AIC attempted to explain the roots of the phenomenon, despite issuing a series of related reports from August 1999 to April 2000.

The perception created by governments, the police, the judiciary and the media is that society is under siege by crime, and everyday life proceeds under a cloud of fear. Yet the figures compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that between 1993 and 1998 there was no statistically significant increase in the main crime categories—household break-ins, attempted break-ins, motor vehicle theft and sexual assault.

Justice Action, a prison reform group, reported similar results in a submission to the New South Wales (NSW) Select Committee on the Increase in Prison Population. It

said that comparisons between crime rates in different states only became possible in 1994, but the more longstanding murder statistics indicated no historical increase. "Murder is perhaps the offence most likely to be reported, least amenable to statistical manipulation and most indicative of the likely level of violent crime in society," Justice Action commented. "The murder rate in NSW remains essentially unchanged since the 1970s and is around the same as it was at the time of Federation [1901]..."

"What the statistics definitely do not show is a rise in any category of crime commensurate with the increase in imprisonment. Since the 1980s most categories of crime have undergone several rises and falls with few currently at levels notably higher than they were two decades ago. Imprisonment has only risen over this period, with NSW now locking up over twice as many of its citizens as it did at the start of the eighties, including increasing proportions of women and young people."

According to the AIC, interrelated factors have contributed to the rising prison population: "policies favouring imprisonment for offences that could otherwise be sanctioned with less severe forms of punishment; policies that impose tougher sanctions on convicted criminals, such as longer terms of imprisonment; prisoners spending longer portions of their sentences in prison due to reduced use by executive authorities of parole and other early release mechanisms; an augmented flow of individuals being processed by police due to legislative changes that create new offences or increase the seriousness of unlawful behaviours already defined as offences."

While these factors undoubtedly contribute to higher levels of incarceration, the AIC neither asks nor answers the question: why have they occurred?

Every state government has enacted legislation to strengthen police powers, allowing an unprecedented

level of police intrusion into people's lives. In NSW alone, the state Labor government has introduced laws over the past three years that specifically violate the democratic rights of youth.

Under amendments to the *Summary Offences Act 1997*, for example, it is a crime to sell or give a knife to someone under 16. It is even a criminal act for parents to give their child a pocketknife—once a common practice. Police can force youth to move from a public place even though no crime has been committed. And under the *Children (Protection and Parental Responsibility) Act 1997*, parents can be criminally liable if their child commits an offence, even if the child was not under their supervision at the time.

In the Northern Territory and Western Australia, mandatory sentencing laws demand automatic jail sentences for repeat property offences, no matter how minor. These laws specifically target the young, the poor and Aborigines. Nationally, Aboriginal adults represent 2 percent of the imprisonable population yet make up 19 percent of prison inmates.

These laws are the product of law-and-order campaigns conducted by governments, both state and federal, Liberal and Labor. Particularly during election campaigns, the major political parties outbid each other in boosting police numbers, enhancing police powers and requiring the judiciary to deliver harsher sentences.

These campaigns serve to divert attention from the relentless cuts to education, health and public services that have left working class people with little or no forms of social support. The resulting despair and destitution is blamed on the individuals who suffer the consequences of official policy.

One disturbing indicator of this process is that while the incidence of serious crimes has not increased, crime rates associated with drug use and poverty have. The NSW Corrections Health Service (CHS) estimates that about 80 percent of inmates are jailed for offences related to legal or illegal drug and alcohol use, or committed whilst under their influence.

In 1998, 38.8 percent of people in rural areas and 33.5 percent in metropolitan areas consumed alcohol at hazardous or harmful levels (four or more standard drinks per day for women and six or more for men). This represented a 12.5 percent increase in both groups from 1995. Of these, 69.6 percent in rural areas and 65.7 percent in urban areas were aged between 14 and 19. In the 15-34 year age group, alcohol was responsible for 62 percent of all drug deaths.

Another indicator pointing to an underlying social malaise is that between 1994 and 1998 the number of NSW women convicted of stealing without violence dropped by 13 percent, but the number convicted of credit card and social security fraud increased by 37 percent. These are offences directly related to economic need. Far fewer women are jailed than men, but the number of female inmates is rising sharply—in NSW it trebled over the same four-year period. The three major crimes were fraud, stealing without violence and drug offences.

Once prisoners are released, the same social problems prevail. While the state of Victoria, for example, spends \$55,000 a year to incarcerate each prisoner, only \$300 is provided for assistance on release. With no job, no accommodation and few prospects, the pressure to revert to drug addiction and petty crime is great.

The 17-year period covered by the AIC report saw the greatest long-term destruction of jobs and economic security in history. A quarter of a million jobs were eliminated in manufacturing alone while 60 percent of all jobs created were casual. Two-thirds of workers no longer have regular hours; many have been forced into low-paid temporary work.

At the other end of the spectrum are those enriched by the rise in the stock market and the increasing profits fuelled by job rationalisation and cost-cutting. In 1997-87 the poorest 20 percent of the population survived on an average weekly income of \$124, while the richest 20 percent took home an average of \$1,590.

The soaring incarceration rate points to a society that has no solutions for growing social inequality or the resulting human problems. The official answer is to demonise, criminalise and punish the victims. At the same time, the erection of an ever-greater police and prison apparatus reveals a fear of growing social tensions and an attempt to intimidate and suppress the inevitable development of popular unrest.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact