

Rising indicators of social distress in Australia

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Amid a slowdown of the economy and growing social inequality, indicators of distress and hardship are mounting, belying the claims of media pundits that Australian workers and young people are fortunate to live in the “lucky country.”

A report released by the Community Council for Australia (CCA) late last month showed that suicide rates and incarceration levels have risen starkly, hitting the most oppressed sections of the working class hardest.

The report, titled *The Australia We Want*, underscores the punitive character of the prison system, with imprisonment and lengthy sentences serving as the official reaction to a host of social problems.

Over the past decade, Australia’s prison population has increased by a staggering 42 percent, from 25,400 in 2005 to 36,134 last year.

The report noted that from 2014 to 2015, the number of prisoners increased by 7 percent. The rise takes the national average to 196 prisoners per 100,000 people, up from 186 prisoners per 100,000 in 2014. This is higher than every country in Western Europe, along with Canada, and is more than double the rate in a number of Scandinavian countries.

The Northern Territory has the highest incarceration rate, with 885.1 prisoners per 100,000, or four times the national average. The figure exceeds the rate across the United States—a world leader in mass imprisonment—of 700 prisoners per 100,000. The second highest levels of incarceration are in Western Australia, with 278.2 people imprisoned per 100,000. The number of prisoners has grown in other states, including South Australia, which now has 204.4 people behind bars per 100,000.

According to the report, the number of prisoners who have not been sentenced, but are in custody is almost 10,000, up by 21 percent from 2014. Many prisoners wait months for a sentence to be delivered.

Less than 25 percent of inmates have committed a violent crime—the majority are found guilty of property offences, often a result of poverty. Only 20 percent of imprisoned adults have completed high school education. One third of adult prisoners have a disability or long-term chronic health condition. Among Aboriginal people, the most oppressed section of the working class, the incarceration rate is 2,253 per 100,000.

The rise in incarceration is a direct result of the policies imposed by successive governments. In the late 1990s, state governments in the Northern Territory and Western Australia introduced mandatory sentencing laws for petty property offences, leading to young people being locked-up for stealing bottles of water, packets of biscuits, stationery and alcohol.

The policy was the sharpest expression of a broader turn to “law and order” measures by Labor and Liberal governments at the state and federal level, which has continued unabated. Last year, the Western Australian Liberal government and Labor opposition came together to push through an expansion of mandatory sentencing, including for children aged 16 to 18 involved in burglaries. In 2014, the New South Wales Liberal government and Labor opposition introduced mandatory sentences for assaults associated with alcohol.

The report also draws attention to a high incidence of suicide, which is a leading cause of death, outnumbering fatalities in car accidents. Suicide rates have risen by 20 percent in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

In 2014, approximately 7.8 people committed suicide every day. In 2016, the figure stood at over 8 suicides per day. Incidences are highest in the most poverty-stricken areas, with workers, young people and the unemployed confronting a myriad of social and health issues.

The Northern Territory, which has served as a testing ground for punitive policies targeting welfare and expanding juvenile detention, has the highest rate of suicides—20.8 per 100,000 in 2014, up from 14.3 in 2013. The report notes that the current suicide rate for indigenous youth is four times higher than that of non-indigenous youth.

The official response to the social disaster was underscored by the recent announcement by Lifeline, which provides emergency assistance to people suffering depression and experiencing suicidal crises, that it is ending operations in the Territory. The charity organisation cited a persistent lack of government funding over the past 10 years.

Underlying the growth of social distress is the dramatic increase in social inequality over the past three decades. The report notes that the average income of the wealthiest 20 percent of households is five times that of the poorest 20 percent.

Australia's GINI coefficient, which measures social inequality, has also grown. The higher the coefficient, the greater the wealth inequality. In 2012, Australia's coefficient stood at 32.6, higher than more than half of the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD.) In 2014, it increased to 33.73.

The report notes the rising cost of living, which is compounding the social crisis. It points, in particular to housing costs, and notes that those in the lowest quintile spend the highest proportion of their income on rent and mortgage payments.

House prices across the country have soared. Median house prices in Sydney hit a record \$1.06 million last month and in Melbourne, the figure stands at over \$773,000. These figures have risen by 65 percent and 45 percent respectively, over the past four years. The increases have seen rates of home ownership among young people drop by 50 percent over the past three decades, and have led to widespread financial stress and growing homelessness.

The social divide revealed in the CCA document contrasts sharply with the political complacency of its authors, including Tim Costello, CEO of World Vision Australia, and other charity organisations. The report—written in the form of a note of advice to the very governments responsible for the mounting social crisis—is a warning to the ruling elite that growing

inequality will fuel social opposition and anger. To that end, the report issues a series of pathetic calls for greater “inclusivity,” a “united” community and a more “optimistic,” “kind” and “compassionate” society.

In reality, the corporate elite, and the major parties, including Labor, the Liberals and the Greens, are all committed to imposing the burden of the deepest crisis of the capitalist system since the 1930s, onto the backs of the working class and young people. In September, for instance, Labor and the federal Liberal-National government agreed to impose \$6.3 billion in cuts to social spending, particularly targeting education, healthcare and welfare.



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