

Soaring prison populations highlight social crisis in Australia

Robert Campion
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Recent reports have revealed an accelerating increase in imprisonment rates in Australia, a damning indicator of social distress and the repressive responses of consecutive Labor and Liberal-National governments, federal and state.

Nearly 40,000 people are now in prison around the country, compared to a total in 1975 of 8,900 prisoners. Historically, the national imprisonment rate between 1945 and 1985 remained relatively stable, averaging 65 prisoners per 100,000 adults. This figure has more than trebled since the 1980s to 208 prisoners per 100,000 adults in 2016.

There has been virtually no media coverage of this spiralling trend, because it raises serious questions about the connection with the rising level of social inequality over the same decades.

In its latest *Prisoners in Australia* report, released this month, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) says the number of prisoners in adult corrective services custody increased by 8 percent in the past year—from 36,134 prisoners at June 30, 2015 to 38,845 at June 30, 2016. The imprisonment rate rose by 6 percent from 196 prisoners per 100,000 adult population in 2015.

The ABS report highlights a stark rise in the number of unsentenced adult prisoners—that is, prisoners who are still waiting trial or sentencing but who have been denied bail. It states that this number increased by 22 percent, from 9,898 in mid-2015 to 12,111 in mid-2016, following a similar 21 percent increase from 2014 to 2015.

Some of the reasons behind this growth in imprisonment were studied by the Jesuit Social Services (JSS) in a report, *States of Justice*, also published this month. It showed that the imprisonment rate jumped by 25 percent during the past five years, despite the rate of offences remaining relatively steady.

States of Justice points to the social and economic roots of the trend. It found that 25 percent of prisoners are homeless when they enter prisons and 43 percent are homeless when they leave. Half are unemployed upon entering, and find it even more difficult to find work upon leaving, with 79 percent having to rely on welfare payments. The JSS report concludes: “In many cases prison does not prevent crime—it may well nurture it.”

Equally disturbing is the fact that almost half of the male prisoners and over 60 percent of the females have a reported history of mental illness. There is also a high chance that they have used illicit drugs, with related offences increasing by 40 percent from 2008–09, and most of the rise occurring between 2013 and 2015.

Just as revealing is the fact that the typical prisoner is highly unlikely to have finished secondary education. Only 16 percent of prisoners completed Year 12, and only a third finished Year 10.

There was also a disturbing rise in disadvantaged children being held in detention in the state of Victoria between 2010 and 2015. The proportion of detained children with prior or current involvement with Child Protection authorities increased from 51 percent to 64 percent.

As a result of all these factors, the recidivism rate is growing. Five years ago, 39.9 percent of prisoners returned to prison less than two years after their release. Now, the figure is 44 percent.

There are no rising crime rates to explain these results; in fact, the crime rate is either steady or dropping. The number of people committing crimes has risen only 1 percent since 2010, and the number of victims of crime has fallen by approximately 3 percent.

What has occurred are reactionary “law and order” campaigns with successive Labor and Coalition seeking

to outdo each other in incarcerating people. The measures included ever-more draconian legislation, severe sentencing laws, restrictions on bail and jailing for non-payment of fines.

This has been accompanied by relentless media sensationalism about the supposedly soaring levels of violent crimes and the fraudulent “war on terror”—a catchcry seized upon by governments around the world to bolster the state apparatus and attack democratic rights.

This offensive is having a serious impact on the most disadvantaged members of society, further exacerbating social inequality.

The Jesuit report mentions the promise of the Hawke Labor government to “do better” 25 years ago, upon receiving the report of its Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in custody. Since that time, however, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people in custody has doubled.

Other figures show that the incarceration rate for indigenous people, who are the most oppressed section of the working class, has skyrocketed by 75 percent over the past decade, compared to a 33 percent increase for non-indigenous prisoners. According to the Jesuit report, the ATSI imprisonment rate stands 13 times higher than the rate for non-ATSI prisoners.

The Jesuit report recommends putting public spending to “much better use” by expanding investment into “prevention, early intervention (especially early childhood services) and diversion.” It calls for the “reform of the justice system” by introducing “recidivism targets” and “more intensive transition support,” and a more “combined effort” to collect data on the social crisis.

These calls are falling on deaf ears in the corporate and political establishment because Australia, like other countries, is embroiled in a pro-business assault upon working conditions, social services and basic democratic rights. Far from an exception, in terms of incarceration, Australia is, in fact, ahead of countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany.

Amid a worsening global economic crisis and mounting social inequality, the entire political establishment, which includes the Greens, has nothing to offer working people and youth except the threat of repression and imprisonment. Above all, the erection of an ever-greater police and prison apparatus reveals a

fear of growing class tensions and an attempt to intimidate and suppress the development of popular unrest.



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