

Why we should look to Texas to tackle crime



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Service in the counter terrorist squadron of the SAS Regiment and two operational deployments to Iraq as a navy diver etched in my brain for ever the need to plan for success. The alternative invariably meant casualties or loss of life.

So when I look at what we as a community are doing in the field of corrective services, I can't help but ask: why do we keep planning to fail?

Politicians from both sides of WA politics have for over a decade claimed they are the "toughest" on crime. The result, according to Chief Justice Wayne Martin, has been a long and steady growth in the number of people in our prisons — a 49 per cent increase from June 2001 to November 2009. Alarming, that steady growth has exploded in recent times.

Since the Liberal-Nationals Government took office 18 months ago, the size of the prison muster has soared 23 per cent. Inspector of Custodial Services Professor Neil Morgan puts the cost of each additional prisoner at \$100,000 a year. This means the extra 953 prisoners who have entered the system in the last 18 months increased the cost of prisons by more than \$95 million a year. If nothing changes, the Government will direct close to a billion dollars of taxpayers' money each year to corrective services by the next State election in 2013.

That's about the same as we now spend on police. It's three times what we give to child protection and five times what mental health gets each year.

Most reasonable people are inclined to say it is money well spent. After all, dangerous criminals should be punished and kept away from the rest of us. I agree, but our justice net seems to catch many who aren't dangerous.

The Chief Justice says: "If there are any general characteristics of the recent prison intake in WA, they include psychiatric



Concerned: Chief Justice Wayne Martin

disability, economic disadvantage (evidenced through an inability to pay fines), Aboriginality and offending at the lower end of the spectrum."

Any prison officer will tell you our prisons hold plenty of minor offenders who were victims of child abuse and/or neglect. Many also suffer from some level of mental illness. Robbing portfolios that might prevent people committing crime, so that we can fund building prisons to warehouse those same people after they offend, challenges my military sense of logic. Is incarcerating these people the best use of taxpayers' money?

Elsewhere in the world, authorities are asking the same question. A British House of Commons justice committee report in January stated: "Our evidence suggests that prison is a relatively ineffective way of reducing crime for other than serious offenders who need to be physically contained for the protection of the public."

The US locks up more of its population than most other nations but many of the toughest States have changed their approach in recent years.

A New York Times editorial on May 11 last year discussed evidence given to Congress about new prison sentencing. Some of the reasons for change have an eerily familiar ring. "State officials said that after studying the problem (massive increases in muster) they found their prison populations were being driven up, not by crime, but mainly by breakdowns in their parole and probation systems. Simply put, they were sending too many people back to



jail. Many were drug-addicted or mentally ill offenders who could be safely dealt with in community programs.”

When it comes to tough on crime, Texas has long prided itself on being as tough as it gets. According to the US Council of State Governments Justice Centre, Texas was confronted with an impending prison overcrowding crisis in 2007. Politicians had to decide whether spending \$523 million to build and operate additional prisons was the best way to increase public safety and reduce reoffending. In the end, they decided there was a better way.

They chose Justice Reinvestment, a four-step process that resulted in big net savings to the State. Firstly, they got specialists to provide geographic analyses of the prison population which identified communities contributing the most offenders to prison. Then, in each hotspot they sought options to generate savings and increase public safety, such as beefed-up parole supervision, more supervised accommodation for parolees and intensive in-prison substance abuse treatment.

The third step quantified savings and then

reinvested some of that money into select high-stakes communities. In effect, they shifted money from the back end and put it into the communities where prison costs were being generated. The last step was measuring the impact.

The most electrifying thing about Justice Reinvestment is the savings achieved. Over 2008-09, the State saved \$210.5 million on its prison budget. It's got the attention of the British Parliament. The House of Commons Justice Committee's report decided "Justice Reinvestment approaches — which channel resources on a geographically targeted basis to reduce the crimes which bring people into the criminal justice system and into prison in particular — offer potential solutions..."

Justice Reinvestment may hold the solution for WA. Reducing crime, fixing broken communities and diverting non-threatening people from prison seems worth considering. It can't possibly be worse than planning for more guaranteed failure.

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