

MEDIA RELEASE

Jailing is failing: Time to fix our incarceration nation

More than 100 of our eminent Australians, crossing party political lines, have joined their voice to the cause of ending Australia's dangerously high reliance on jails – under the banner the *Justice Reform Initiative* which is being launched today.

With the prison population swelling to its highest level since 1900, the group will raise awareness about the negative impact this has, including on community safety, and convince governments and the justice system to re-focus on evidence-based, more effective alternatives to incarceration.

The Chair of the new Justice Reform Initiative Robert Tickner said “jailing is failing our nation on every front – it leads to more offenders committing more crimes upon release, more disadvantage and more cost to the taxpayer.”

“Our prison population has swollen to more than 43,000 – up from under 30,000 only eight years ago and this comes with a \$3.6 billion price tag to the Australian taxpayer every year.

“We’ve had our head in the sand on this issue for too long. The evidence is clear – when you put offenders who are not a threat to the community in jail, you increase the likelihood they will commit more serious crimes in the future.

“Despite the evidence pointing to the harm done to the individual and the community by incarceration, we still put people in jail for relatively trivial offences.

“This approach just doesn’t make sense and fails the victims of crime who would benefit from a modern and innovative justice response which also makes the offender more accountable.

The Justice Reform Initiative is backed by eminent patrons including former Governors-General Dame Quentin Bryce AD CVO and Sir William Deane AC KBE as patrons-in-chief.

The list includes former justices of the High Court, a former state Chief Justice and judges from other courts; respected Aboriginal leaders; a former Federal Police Commissioner, Director of Public Prosecutions, former Australians of the year and numerous former Federal and state Ministers from both sides of politics. A list is available here:

<https://www.justicereforminitiative.org.au/ourpatrons>

The first action taken by the group is an *Open Briefing on the Incarceration Nation* addressed to every politician in the land, which outlines the evidence base for change, including:

- We imprison more people than at any time since 1900, in number and per capita, and our incarceration rate in Australia is above the countries of Western Europe and that of Canada.
- Australia’s net operating expenditure on prisons and community corrections in 2018-19 was more than \$3.6 billion,ⁱ compared with \$2.5 billion on public health activities and services.ⁱⁱ
- The incarceration rate has more than tripled since 1984 and it has increased by nearly 50% since 2000.
- Recidivism continues to rise with 55% of prisoners released during 2016–17 in Australia returned to corrective services in the two years to 2018–19ⁱⁱⁱ; up from less than 50% in 2012–13.^{iv}

- Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and remand prisoners have experienced the highest rates of increase in imprisonment.
- The average recurrent annual expenditure per prisoner in Australia is around \$110,000,^v compared with, average recurrent annual expenditure per school student of \$15,000.^{vi}
- In 2018, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples accounted for 3% of the total population, but 28% of the adult prison population.^{vii}
- Although only 6% of 10–17 year olds are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 58% of young people in detention are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.^{viii}

“We are locking up people who pose no serious threat without the justification of enhancing community safety.

“The revolving prison door is bad for families and communities and entrenches disadvantage. It wastes human potential and is scandalously wasteful of public money that could be spent on enhancing the wellbeing and productivity of communities.”

Mr Tickner said the group will support and work with other organisations seeking to build a more effective justice system that truly supports safer and stronger communities.

“There is some amazing work often led by communities who are over-represented in the criminal justice system and we plan to work in close collaboration with these groups.

“We intend to take this issue to every person in the country who has their hand on the lever of change across the political and criminal justice system and help others build the groundswell of public support.”

The Justice Reform Initiative deeply appreciates the support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

The Initiative respectfully acknowledges and supports the current and longstanding efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to reduce the numbers of Indigenous people incarcerated in Australia and, importantly, the leadership role which Indigenous-led organisations such as Change the Record continue to play on this issue. We also acknowledge the work of many other individuals and organisations seeking change, such as those focused on the rate of imprisonment for women, people with mental health issues, people with disability and others.

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ⁱ Productivity Commission. 2019. *Report on Government Services 2017-2018*, Chapter 8: Justice. Table 8A.17. This excludes depreciation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2019). *Health expenditure Australia 2017–18*. Health and welfare expenditure series no.65. Cat. no. HWE 77. Canberra: AIHW. Table A1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sentencing Advisory Council *Released Prisoners Returning to Prison*
<https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/statistics/sentencing-trends/released-prisoners-returning-to-prison>

^{iv} Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2018*; cited in QPC Issues Paper on Imprisonment and recidivism <https://qpc.blob.core.windows.net/wordpress/2018/09/Issues-Paper-Imprisonment-and-Recidivism.pdf>

^v Productivity Commission. 2019. *Report on Government Services 2017-2018*, Chapter 8: Justice. Table 8A.17.

^{vi} Productivity Commission. 2019. *Report on Government Services 2017-2018*: Chapter 4: Education. Table 4A.14. This figure includes user cost of capital for government schools and is reported in 2016-2017 dollars.

^{vii} Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) '4512.0 - Corrective Services, Australia, September Quarter 2019 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4512.0>.

^{viii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare HW (2019) *Youth Justice in Australia: 2017-18*, Cat. no. JUV 129. Canberra.