

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS DRUG AND ALCOHOL COMMITTEE MEDIA RELEASE



“Indigenous prisoners: solutions for a broken system”

An important paper on Indigenous incarceration and health released today by the National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee of the Australian National Council on Drugs (NIDAC)

Despite the investment by governments to reduce incarceration, Indigenous Australians have continued to fill our correction systems at alarmingly disproportionate rates, making up almost one quarter of Australian’s prison population and over half of Indigenous juveniles in corrective institutions.

The paper calls for action to address this ‘disturbing problem’ revealing Indigenous adults are 13 times more likely to be in prison than other Australians.

The paper also reveals the proportion of adult Indigenous women in prison has increased three fold since the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Associate Professor Ted Wilkes, NIDAC Chair says “It is clear current initiatives simply aren’t enough. It is widely known that there is a strong link between harmful alcohol and drug use, offending rates and poor health. A major re-think is needed and unless we address these issues, a lifecycle of offending can perpetuate and span across generations. NIDAC urges governments to look at other ways Indigenous offending and health can be reduced.”

The paper recommends individual education support funds be launched for every Indigenous young person and the eligibility of current diversion programs be changed to enable Indigenous people greater access to alcohol and drug treatment instead of prison.

The paper was launched today by the Hon. Warren Snowdon, Federal Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Services Delivery and the Hon. Brendon O’Connor, Federal Minister for Home Affairs.

As the leading voice in Indigenous drug and alcohol policy, NIDAC has developed ‘Bridges and Barriers – Addressing Indigenous Incarceration and Health’ paper as a strong argument for change.

When it comes to Indigenous young Australians, the paper points out that although juvenile imprisonment has been dropping, more than 50% of 10-17 year olds in juvenile correction institutions in 2006 were Indigenous.

The paper also mentions that 31% of all adult female prisoners in 2007 were Indigenous with 24% of all adult male prisoners also Indigenous.

The NIDAC paper says substantial money is being invested into the correctional system with ‘no headway being made in reducing Indigenous over-representation in prison’. It’s estimated it is costing taxpayers \$269 per day for each prisoner and points out that the cost of residential rehabilitation in comparison is \$98 a day.

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The paper emphasises that there is a substantial proportion of Indigenous offenders with alcohol and drug problems and says these people should have access to appropriate treatment and rehabilitation.

NIDAC wants to see young Indigenous men and women diverted from harmful alcohol and drug use and crime.

NIDAC's Chair, Associate Professor Ted Wilkes says "Without question Indigenous Australians increasingly fill our country's prisons and juvenile detention centres at alarmingly disproportionate rates. Treatment is simply far more effective in terms of outcomes and costs than imprisoning people. Then there are the social and family costs associated with offending. Treatment provides people with a chance of recovery which could mean less re-offending. Rarely has there been such a compelling argument for reducing the obvious over-representation of Indigenous people in our corrections system."

There are numerous recommendations in the paper. Some of these, summarised, are:

Short term recommendations:

- Provide every Indigenous young person with an individual education support fund to assist and promote their participation and retention within the education system.
- Amend the eligibility criteria of diversion programs to not rule out offenders who have: prior convictions related to AOD, selective multiple charges, and co-existing mental illness or health problems.
- Introduce an increased number of Indigenous-specific diversion programs, with the stipulation that these services establish appropriate links with existing Aboriginal community-controlled health services in their region.
- Develop and implement appropriate Indigenous-specific programs to assist family members with the return and re-integration of offenders into their community.
- Improve the level of health services available to all Indigenous prisoners and juvenile detainees by: providing health screening on reception; encouraging the take up of treatment after health screening; providing a continuum of health care and referral within and beyond the corrections system, and by allowing Indigenous health services access to prisoners and detainees.

Long-term recommendations:

- Fund a network of community-based Indigenous youth wellbeing and activity centres with links to education and health services.
- Develop a national AOD campaign for Indigenous Australians to reduce demand and supply, as well as decrease the incidence of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.
- Establish a 'break the cycle' network of Indigenous-specific residential rehabilitation centres for courts to utilise as a viable alternative to incarceration.
- Develop a national employment strategy to train and establish a specialist Indigenous workforce of psychologists, doctors and nurses which can provide substance misuse, mental health and general health services.

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Associate Professor Ted Wilkes says “Indigenous offenders face many issues that can exacerbate their health while in detention or prison. Separation from family and culture, together with a previous history of an undiagnosed or untreated substance misuse, mental health or physical health problem places an Indigenous offender at great risk, if left unattended.

It is important we are pro active in preventing and reducing the cycle of offending and re-offending”

The paper also highlights that since health, harmful alcohol and drug use and wellbeing issues are closely linked to Indigenous violence, offending and incarceration, interventions to address alcohol and other drug misuse have clear potential to significantly reduce the issue.

The proportion of Indigenous prisoners is variable across States and Territories as at 30th June 2008:¹

- In the Northern Territory, the total prison population was 953 - Indigenous prisoners represented over 83% of this population.
- In Western Australia, the total prison population was 3,766- Indigenous prisoners represented over 41% of this population.
- In Queensland, the total prison population was 5,544 - Indigenous prisoners represented 27% of this population.
- In New South Wales, the total prison population was 10,510 - Indigenous prisoners represented over 20% of this population.
- In South Australia, the total prison population was 1,942 - Indigenous prisoners represented over 20% of this population.
- In Tasmania, the total prison population was 515 - Indigenous prisoners represented nearly 13% of this population.
- In the Australian Capital Territory, the total prison population was 250 - Indigenous prisoners represented over 10% of this population.
- In Victoria, the total prison population was 4,223 - Indigenous prisoners represented almost 6% of this population.

Associate Professor Ted Wilkes adds “Data from the Australian Institute of Criminology Drug Use Monitoring in Australia project (2007) shows over 68% of Indigenous adult police detainees tested positive to a range of drugs with 63.8% self reporting that they had consumed alcohol within the past 48 hours prior to the arrest.”

The paper also draws attention to the participation rate of Indigenous Australians in diversion programs being low and says Indigenous young offenders are much less likely to be diverted into treatment than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The paper says a change in the eligibility criteria would enable more Indigenous people to be in diversion programs and would be an effective way to address the over-representation of Indigenous Australians in the corrections system.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) *Prisoners in Australia*