



post thumbnail

## Australia's Incarceration Crisis Is Worker Shortage Solution

### **Publish Date:**

March 2023

---

“As Australia faces simultaneous incarceration and worker shortage crises, many low-risk non-violent offenders could be gainfully employed in the community right now without risk,” said Professor Mirko Bagaric, Dean of the Swinburne University of Technology Law School.

Today, the Institute of Public Affairs released a new research report, *Let Them Work: How Criminal Justice Reform Can Help Address Australia's Worker Shortage*, which sets out reforms governments nationwide can undertake to address costly over-incarceration through the adoption of an offender employment program.

Under the proposed reforms, incarcerated non-violent low-risk offenders would be eligible to work for willing businesses at awards rates in sectors experiencing labour shortages. The research finds that had these reforms been implemented:

- **In 2021-22, as many as 14,000 young adults could have been added to the workforce, improving the bottom line of governments by \$1.95 billion via reduced incarceration costs and increased income tax revenue.**
- **Between 2016-17 and 2021-22, total budgetary savings would have been in the order of \$10.4 billion in reduced incarceration costs and increased income tax revenue.**

“Rather than being a drain on taxpayers’ funds, low-risk non-violent offenders should be working, paying tax, and helping to reduce the severe, inflation-inducing labour shortage Australia is experiencing,” said Professor Bagaric.

“It costs taxpayers over \$147,000 every year to detain each prisoner. Most non-violent low risk offenders should be given the opportunity to have their prison term substituted for a community-based sanction, the core element of which is full-time employment.”

“Much of the present labour scarcity is in low-skilled industries such as hospitality and retail. This is driving up prices and increasing the cost of living for all Australians. Governments at all levels need to think more intelligently to address both problems with a co-ordinated solution.”

Under the proposal, employers would have full knowledge of all the offender’s criminal history. The program would operate similar to community-based orders, though the offenders would be paid award wages and work full-time instead of performing token work tasks for no pay.

“The community has nothing to fear from non-violent low-risk offenders. It is punishing itself by imprisoning them.”



**Institute Of Public Affairs**  
Visit the IPA online: [ipa.org.au](http://ipa.org.au)

“A proportional sentencing system means reserving prison for people that cause serious harm and remain a threat to the safety of the public,” said Professor Bagaric.

[Download the media release here](#)[Download](#)  
[Download the research report here](#)[Download](#)