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OFFENDERS IN COMMUNITY SERVICE SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO PAID WORK AS PART OF THEIR SENTENCES

“Community corrections is growing rapidly, and we need to act now to make it more effective. One way to do this is to get community-based offenders into more meaningful work by permitting businesses to offer community service opportunities,” said Andrew Bushnell, Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs.

The latest report from the IPA’s Criminal Justice Project, *Making Community Corrections Work*, released today, provides a national overview of community corrections and outlines how community service, as the chief component of community corrections, can be made more effective through the involvement of commercial businesses.

“With community service becoming a greater part of our criminal justice system, a reconsideration of how we punish criminals in the community is overdue,” said Mr Bushnell.

The report shows that the national community corrections population has grown by 30 per cent since 2007, with the community corrections rate rising from 329 per 100,000 adults to 361.

Community corrections is increasingly replacing monetary orders and incarceration as the principal punishment for many offenders. Many other offenders are receiving shorter prison sentences in combination with community corrections.

“Prison is an absolutely vital part of criminal justice. Violent and recidivist offenders need to be removed from the community,” said Mr Bushnell.

“However, for nonviolent offenders, community corrections has two main advantages: it is much cheaper than prison, and there is growing evidence that it is more effective than prison in reducing reoffending.”

The report finds that the average cost of one day of community corrections across the country is \$22 per offender, about 10 percent of the cost of one day of prison. It also summarises findings from academic studies that show that community corrections is more strongly correlated with reduced reoffending than prison, even where all relevant aspects of the different populations are taken into account.

But offenders are only serving about half of the community service hours to which they are sentenced.

“The effectiveness of community service as an alternative to prison is being undermined by offenders not being punished to the satisfaction of the community,” said Mr Bushnell. “One major reason for this is a lack of suitable work for offenders to do.”

Noting that community corrections can be more effective than prison in reducing reoffending, that reoffending is also correlated with unemployment, and that the retributive effect of community corrections is being undermined by their being insufficient work opportunities for offenders, the IPA’s report recommends that commercial businesses be allowed to bid for offender labour on a labour hire model.

“Every Australian jurisdiction defines community service as ‘unpaid labour’, and restricts access to offender labour to community groups that are short of volunteers. Instead, governments could also allow businesses to bid for offender labour, with corrections departments then paying offenders for their work,” said Mr Bushnell.

“This is not a radical idea. We already have prison industries and work release programs that pay prisoners the minimum wage for their labour, and many jurisdictions allow fine defaulters to work off their debts at hourly rates higher than the minimum wage.”

“We know that employment is correlated with reduced rates of reoffending, and we know that businesses can provide offenders with the chance to learn the skills and discipline they will need to stay on the straight and narrow.”

“Work is the key to successful community corrections, just as it is the key to a successful life. Community corrections is an opportunity to reinforce the dignity of work while making our streets safer,” said Mr Bushnell.

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