

20 July 2023

## THE UNSUSTAINABLE COST OF INCARCERATION REVEALED AS PRISONS REACH BREAKING POINT

“With Australia’s prison system at breaking point, we need to shift our focus to crime prevention, ensuring violent offenders are sentenced for longer, and giving non-violent offenders the opportunity to get into work” said Mia Schlicht, Research Analyst at the Institute of Public Affairs.

Today, the Institute of Public Affairs released new research, *The Cost of Prisons in Australia: 2023*, which details the surge in incarceration across the nation, its costs, and what can be done to reduce prison numbers while protecting the community. The research found:

- **State and federal governments are now spending over \$6 billion per year on the construction and operation of prisons. This has increased nationwide by \$2 billion in just five years.**
- **Australian prisons are full. The average prison utilisation rate is at 98% nationwide, meaning new prisons will need to be rapidly built to house the growing number of sentenced offenders.**
- **Each year \$2.3 billion is spent on incarcerating non-violent criminals whose imprisonment poses little discernible benefit to community safety.**
- **The national incarceration rate is now 205 per 100,000 of the adult population, and it costs taxpayers on average \$147,900 per year to house just one prisoner.**

“Our criminal justice system is in dire need of structural reform, which at its core acknowledges the difference between violent offenders who pose a risk to community safety, and non-violent offenders whose incarceration sees little overall safety benefit,” said Ms Schlicht.

“If Australia’s incarceration rate continues to climb, even more prisons will need to be rapidly built at a significant cost to taxpayers.”

The IPA’s research shows that 38 per cent of prisoners in Australia have been incarcerated for non-violent crimes. Many of these offenders can be punished through alternative measures such as home detention, offender-employment programs, fines, and forced restitution.

“At a time of a significant, nation-wide worker shortage the community would benefit if low-risk, non-violent offenders were given the opportunity to work for a willing employer,” said Ms Schlicht.

“Just a one percent reduction to the incarceration of low-risk, nonviolent offenders would save taxpayers more than \$23 million per year, which can be reinvested into more police, schools, roads, and hospitals.”

The report identifies that violent offenders are short-sighted in their decision to commit crime and are more likely to be deterred from offending by an increased likelihood of being caught.

“Evidence shows the most effective deterrent to violent crime is the fear of being caught and facing any form of punishment. Putting more police on the beat with the savings made bolsters this,” said Ms Schlicht.

“Conservative jurisdictions in the United States, such as Texas and Georgia, have shown reducing incarceration of non-violent offenders does not compromise community safety and delivers savings to taxpayers. Australia should look to similar reforms.”

To download the IPA’s research [click here](#).

**For media and comment: Andrew Hudgson, Director of Communications, on 0404 020 896, or at [ahudgson@ipa.org.au](mailto:ahudgson@ipa.org.au)**