

6 June 2024

INCARCERATION SPIKE REINFORCES URGENT NEED FOR REFORM

“Australia's incarceration rate has spiked to its highest level since 2021 as political leaders continue to ignore the cost of poorly targeted incarceration and the need for reform,” said Mia Schlicht, Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs.

Corrective services data released today by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveals the number of prisoners across Australia has increased from 41,833 to 43,305 over the last 12 months, with the incarceration rate now at 205.7 prisoners per 100,000 adults. This is an increase from 202.5 prisoners per 100,000 just three months ago.

The increase in the number of prisoners has been driven by Western Australia, Tasmania, and Queensland. Over the past twelve months incarceration rates have increased in:

- **Western Australia from 293 to 322 prisoners per 100,000 adults – an increase of ten per cent.**
- **Tasmania from 153 to 165 prisoners per 100,000 adults – an increase of eight per cent.**
- **Queensland from 243 to 250 prisoners per 100,000 adults – and increase of three per cent.**

“Australia's incarceration rate has increased by 12 per cent over the last decade. We are putting the wrong people in prison. The current policy settings have simply not deterred violent crime, which is continuing to increase,” said Ms Schlicht.

“Prisons should be reserved for dangerous and violent criminals who pose a threat to community safety. Incarcerating non-violent offenders, who pose a minimal safety threat to the community, means that scarce prison beds are being occupied by the wrong type of offenders and often leads to recidivism.”

Today's ABS data follows research published by the IPA, which found that on average it costs taxpayers \$153,895 to incarcerate a single prisoner for one year, with almost 16,000 prisoners in Australia having been incarcerated for a non-violent crime.

“Across Australia, 23 per cent of prisoners have been convicted for a non-violent offence and fifteen per cent have been convicted for a non-violent property offence. Taxpayers are therefore spending up to \$2.4 billion each year on imprisoning non-violent offenders,” said Ms Schlicht.

“Those who break the law should be punished, no matter if the offence is non-violent or not. However, there are punitive punishments available that make offenders less expensive for taxpayers compared to imprisonment.”

IPA analysis of criminal justice reform in the United States has found that removing low-risk, non-violent offenders from prison and putting them into employment programmes not only reduces taxpayer spending on prisons, but also improves community safety by creating more space for violent criminals to be incarcerated for longer periods.

“Rather than being a burden on taxpayers, non-violent offenders should be working, and making restitution to their victims in willing businesses struggling with worker shortages,” said Ms Schlicht.

“We need to be tough on crime, but also smart on crime. Sentencing reform must include a targeted response that prioritises locking away dangerous and violent criminals for longer, whilst ensuring non-violent offenders are made to pay back the damage their offending has caused.”

To download the IPA's criminal justice reform research [click here](#).

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