

## **INCARCERATION : UNSUSTAINABLE COSTS AND DIMINISHING BENEFITS**

**Leigh Garrett, CEO OARS SA**

Recent events at Port Augusta Prison have served to highlight significant deficiencies in the policy, planning and implementation of the criminal justice system in South Australia. OARS SA, in association with the SA Council of Social Service, has published a report on the future costs of incarceration in South Australia entitled *Incarceration : unsustainable costs and diminishing benefits*. This report highlights many issues that are currently of great concern to many close to the criminal justice system. The numbers of prisoners that are being incarcerated into an already burgeoning prison system in South Australia is alarming. Current calculations demonstrate that the South Australian criminal justice system costs just over \$1b to operate. OARS SA is of the view that there is a diminishing return on these expenditures, and that we have reached a point where effective treatment and rehabilitation for prisoners can no longer be assured. The end result is that people released from prison are likely to be worse off after their incarceration, and are released into a community where post-release supports are scarce. This often presents in a higher chance of re-offending. In addition, within the current system the increasing numbers of prisoners who will be released into the community with little post release support and rehabilitative processes means that victims are going to be at greater risk. This report about the costs of imprisonment and its long term ineffectiveness to reduce crime is really just the beginning.

While our government has been lauding the current raft of justice system policies, including increasing prisoner numbers, as the instigating force behind our decreasing crime rates, the falling rates are instead due to booming national and international economic conditions and are reflective of a world-wide trend. To seize upon the results of this trend, governments often claim that their "Get Tough" approaches are the primary reason for this reduction. It would be difficult for the government to back up this claim with evidence so it is contestable. In some European countries, more enlightened views that make offenders fully accountable for their actions in less punitive ways, coupled with a greater emphasis on providing more comprehensive and well funded treatment, rehabilitation, and post release supports have enabled even greater reductions in crime. The source of the problems in our prisons in this State cannot be fully sheeted home to the Department for Correctional Services. Corrections must accept people who are sentenced within the Courts to a term of imprisonment. In our view the failure of public policy has been the unwillingness of successive Governments to match increased Police expenditures to those required to enable courts and corrections to function effectively and efficiently. Corrections must have the resources to manage all of the people for whom it has a statutory obligation to care. And we stress the word "CARE". Our Courts are clogged as well, and we have an extremely high remand in custody rate, which is again not a problem of Court management, but a failure of the total system to effectively plan. We would argue that the "Get Tough" policy of Government is ineffective, but having created this policy the Government must match the resources it provides to police at all points of the justice system.

Given the major economic shocks of recent months we should expect crime to increase over the next few years. The Australian Institute of Criminology expects this. The recent announcement about delays in implementing the proposed new Prison Project will only make the overcrowding in

our system worse. When this is combined with the increases in crime due to the anticipated economic downturn, our prisons will be in even worse shape to meet this challenge. The diminishing return that comes from over-use of incarceration as a public policy must be exposed. The report by OARS SA and SACOSS was completed before the Global Financial Crisis, and so its findings and recommendations now have even greater currency. If the Government could guarantee that all prisoners received the treatment and support they need *to reduce re-offending after release*, locking away thousands of people each year might work. Unfortunately history has shown us that this process does not work to effectively reduce crime in the long term, and it will cost South Australians billions to maintain. The financial and social costs that will be wreaked by the criminal justice policies of this government will be felt by generations to come.

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