AN END TO PRISONS

IMPRISONMENT IN VICTORIA

As of June 2012, there were on average 4,884 people in prison in the Australian state of Victoria on any given day.[1] **The majority of people in prison are from structurally disadvantaged communities, and prisons can worsen the conditions of poor mental and physical health, drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness, violence, and poverty that lead to criminalisation.** These are systemic issues that require change at a broad level in the community. Prisons are also expensive, diverting resources from necessary social services and impacting not just those who are imprisoned, but their families and the wider community. Furthermore, almost half of those imprisoned in Victoria have been in prison before,[2] and research shows that rather than deterring crime or providing rehabilitation, prisons may increase the chances of a person committing an offence after they are released.[3]

WHAT IS DECARCERATION?

Decarceration refers to reducing the numbers of people going to and returning to prison. This means investing in both communities and individuals to ensure that everyone has equal access to housing, healthcare, education, employment, and support. Decarceration strategies also require government policy and legislative change, including an end to prison expansion and ensuring alternative sentencing options like community-based orders and suspended sentences. Community organisations have a vital role to play in building the movement for decarceration and advocating for progressive social change.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DECARCERATION

The overall rate of imprisonment in Victoria has risen by almost 43% since 1999,[4] with the rate of women's imprisonment growing faster than that of men.[5] According to the Victorian Ombudsman and the Sentencing Advisory Council, these alarming numbers can be attributed to changes in sentencing practice and a generally more punitive approach to law and order.[6] **Imprisonment disproportionately affects communities that** experience systemic racism, as reflected by overrepresentation in prisons. In Australia, Indigenous people are 14.8 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be in prison.[7] In Victoria, women born in Vietnam represent 12.8% of the women prisoner population,[8] though only 1.2% of the total female population in Victoria were born in Vietnam.[9] As rates of imprisonment continue to rise, we must recognise that a punitive approach to law and order is doing little to make our communities safer.

PRISONS ARE A COST TO THE COMMUNITY

Imprisonment is harmful and disruptive for those imprisoned, their families, and their communities. Even short sentences mean separation from family and community, loss of income, inability to meet caring responsibilities and potential loss of housing. This has a far reaching, intergenerational impact on children. At any one time there are at least 3000 kids in Victoria who have a primary caregiver in prison,[10] causing immense anxiety for imprisoned parents, and often impacting children's housing, education, health and supports in the community.

In the coming years there are plans for Victoria's prison beds to grow by the hundreds, at a huge expense. Annual state spending on Victorian prisons has increased by 186% over the past decade to $640 million in 2010/2011.[11] It costs, on average, $240.66 per day to hold someone in prison; while the average amount spent per day on a Community Corrections order is only $18.50."[12] **The money currently spent on keeping people in prison could go a lot further towards creating community safety if it were diverted to community-based programs and initiatives that challenge structural disadvantage. This would begin to address the causes of crime and curb prison expansion.**

THE VIOLENCE OF PRISONS

Prisons themselves cause harm to those imprisoned, including exacerbating mental health issues, and inadequately treating issues of trauma or drug and alcohol addiction. Human rights advocates have documented the abuses people in prison are subject to. For example, the overwhelming majority of women in prison have previously experienced sexual, physical or emotional abuse. Despite the ubiquity of such trauma, women face regular strip searches in prison, as do men, though negligible contraband is ever found.[13] Far from being a harmless security measure, these searches have been described by women and their advocates as a form of violent assault.[14]

Prisons also contribute to poor physical health. At least 41% of people in prison test positive for Hepatitis C, compared with 1% of the general population,[15] yet men and women in prison are denied access to Medicare as well as harm-reduction facilities including Needle and Syringe Programs. There continues to be a high rate of deaths in custody, particularly Indigenous deaths, even 20 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Research shows that people who have been in prison in Australia have a much higher chance of dying from unnatural causes than people who have never been to prison.[16]

PRISONS DON'T CREATE COMMUNITY SAFETY

Real community safety (everyone having access to housing, food, employment, education and freedom from violence) is not created by increasing prison numbers. We need to consider transformative changes, and investing resources in communities, not prisons. There is no evidence that prisons reduce violent behaviour; in fact the violent prison environment actively works against any efforts to end violence in the community.

Prison normalises violence rather than challenging it. Additionally, people who have been in prison can find that the systemic issues they faced before criminalisation are exacerbated post-release, and be compounded by new issues such as criminal record discrimination. Community organisations are often overstretched and underfunded, and there are increasing numbers of people going in and out of prison that urgently need support from a wide range of services.

There is a growing movement against prison expansion in Victoria. We can all help to build communities based on gender, racial, and economic justice and work towards decarceration and the long-term abolition of prisons.

DECARCERATION STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

· **Actively work towards decarceration in your organisation by prioritising resources to support and advocate for people at risk of going to prison, who are inside prison, or who risk returning to prison;**

· **Work alongside people who have been imprisoned, valuing the knowledge and expertise that people with the lived experience of imprisonment or criminalisation bring to your organisation;**

· **Focus on supporting people in prison, not on strengthening or expanding the prison system, with a goal of building long-term alternatives to prisons;**

· **Recognise the interconnectedness of social issues such as housing, mental health care, and drug and alcohol support, and the negative impact imprisonment can have. This includes ensuring prisons are not positioned as a solution to complex social problems;**

· **Ensure your organisation (and/or organisations you work with and make referrals to) do not pose any barriers or discrimination to people who have been imprisoned, or people who are at risk of imprisonment;**

· **Use your organisational voice, knowledge and resources to educate and advocate for decarceration and social change. Community organisations can publicly challenge proposals for prison expansion and raise awareness about the harmful effects of punitive law and order policies.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Centre for the Human Rights of Imprisoned People: www.flatout.org.au/chrip

Flat Out: www.flatout.org.au

Sisters Inside: www.sistersinside.com.au

Smart Justice: www.smartjustice.org.au

Human Rights Commission: www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/prisoners/index.html

Community Legal Centres Victoria: www.communitylaw.org.au

3CR Done by Law, Beyond the Bars NAIDOC broadcasts and Doin' Time show: www.donebylaw.org

IMARA Advocacy: www.imarayouth.org

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service: www.vals.org.au

Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service: www.fvpls.org

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service: www.vahs.org.au

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5. Corrections Victoria (2010) Statistical Profile of the Victorian Prison System 2005/2006-2009/2010, Department of Justice Victoria, p.11
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FLAT OUT

CENTRE FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF IMPRISONED PEOPLE