

No. 130

# Imprisonment in Australia: Trends in Prison Populations & Imprisonment Rates 1982–1998

Carlos Carcach & Anna Grant

*This paper examines changes in Australia's rates of imprisonment over the past 17 years. In that time the number of prisoners has grown from 9826 in 1982 to 19,906 in 1998—an increase of 102 per cent. The rate per 100,000 of imprisonable age has increased more slowly—by 55 per cent.*

*Queensland has the highest rate of imprisonment in the country—23 per cent above the national average, while Victoria has the lowest—43 per cent below the national average. If Queensland, with a smaller population than Victoria, had the same number of prisoners as Victoria, it would save in the order of \$80 million per year. If it had the same rate of imprisonment as Victoria it would save in the order of \$110 million per year.*

*This paper maps trends in imprisonment over two decades, points out significant differences between the States, and demonstrates the value of long data sets to map changes and trends to better inform public policy.*

Adam Graycar  
Director

**A**s in many countries around the world, Australia's rate of imprisonment is rising, partially in response to an increased fear of crime in the community. Tougher approaches toward crime are resulting in more severe punishment for offenders, which leads to increases in the size of prison populations.

An immediate consequence of a growing prison population is the unparalleled growth in the costs associated with its maintenance. In Australia, the total prison population increased by an average 4.2 per cent a year during the period 1982–98. This is two and a half times the average growth of the population of imprisonable age. Official estimates indicate that, during 1997–98, the cost of imprisonment was \$52,049 per prisoner-year (Productivity Commission 1999).

The corresponding benefits derived from increased use of incarceration are difficult to quantify and many would argue that they are substantially less than perceived by the community and that imprisonment is not socially efficient. There is no evidence that greater imprisonment acts as a major deterrent to potential criminals, given the small detection rates for most crimes. It is often argued that imprisonment does not always succeed in rehabilitating criminals. It might be that protection, as much as any desire for revenge, is the reason why some sectors of society generally favour "getting tough". In this respect, deterrence, rehabilitation and

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retribution seem to be less important than incapacitation as reasons for incarceration. The appropriate rate of imprisonment to meet the social goals of crime control, deterrence and community protection continues to be a critical social policy issue (Von Hirsch 1985).

Irrespective of whether imprisonment is more expensive or less effective than alternative forms of punishment, the fact is that, in most Australian jurisdictions, it continues to grow at relatively steady rates. Understanding the factors associated with this growth and the general dynamics of prison populations is a first step towards developing sound public policy in the field—not an easy task for a country with no single criminal justice system.

The Commonwealth of Australia is comprised of six States, two Territories and a federal jurisdiction, each with its own legislative body with the powers to make its own laws and its own institutions for the administration of criminal justice. The features of the criminal justice systems in these nine jurisdictions are quite similar. Thus, the best characterisation of the Australian criminal justice system would be that of a heterogeneous, complex system with many similarities among its constituent parts. Given this heterogeneity, the comparison between jurisdictions is particularly important when analysing the institutions of criminal justice in Australia.

This paper examines trends in prison populations and imprisonment rates in Australia and its jurisdictions, during the 17 years from 1982 to 1998. The analysis aims to identify major trends in imprisonment during the period, as well as the factors underlying these trends. It is the first in a series of papers examining Australian correctional issues. The analysis in this series will rely predominantly upon data extracted from the Australian Prison Census (AIC 1982–93; ABS 1994–98).

## Australian Prison Census

The National Prison Census (NPC), later known as National Prisoner Census, provides a snapshot of the prison population at 30 June each year. It was first conducted in 1982 by the Australian Institute of Criminology and responsibility for its administration was transferred to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1994. Prisoner censuses are counts of the stock of prisoners on a single day, so the characteristics of this stock may differ significantly from those of the flow of prisoners through the correctional systems. Census data are biased towards prisoners serving relatively long sentences, while those serving short sentences dominate the flow of prisoners.

The NPC collects data on the prison populations of the States and Territories on variables relating to:

- demographic and social characteristics of the prisoner population;
- place of incarceration;
- most serious offence;
- history of previous imprisonment;
- legal status of prisoners;
- place of the court of sentence or more recent remand in custody;
- length and type of sentence; and

- breach of parole and/or escape and recapture.

Prison data are valuable in assessing issues such as sentencing policies in the jurisdictions, at least for serious offenders. They have proved useful in analysing the extent of, and possible causes for, the recent increases in the remand population. Data can also be useful in studying issues such as recidivism and in supporting decisions regarding planning of correctional centre construction and management.

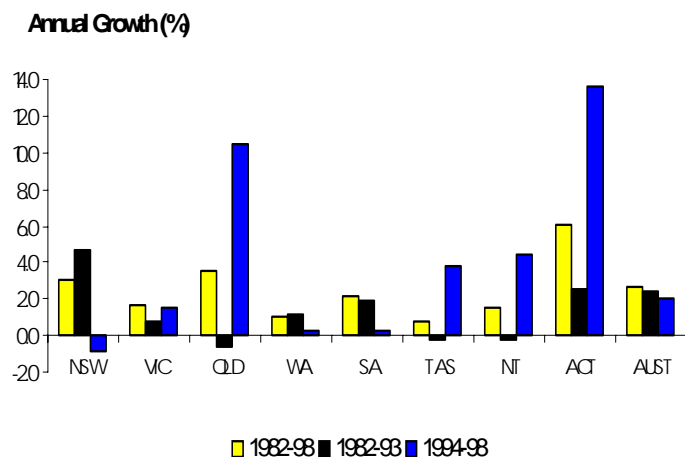
## Imprisonment in Australia

### Prison Populations

Prison populations in the Australian States and Territories have grown at different rates over the period under study. Table 1 shows the number of prisoners and imprisonment rates per 100,000 population aged 18 years and over for all Australian jurisdictions during 1982 to 1998.

The data in Table 1 suggest differing trends in the numbers of prisoners and rates of imprisonment. Among the States, the largest relative increase in the size of the prison population was observed for Queensland, where the number of prisoners has grown by an average 6.1 per cent a year. The total number of prisoners in Queensland increased from 1638 in 1982 to 4466 in 1998. New South Wales

**Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, STATES & TERRITORIES, 1982–98**  
Average Annual Growth in Imprisonment Rates



**Table 1: AUSTRALIA, STATES & TERRITORIES, 1982–98, Numbers of Prisoners and Imprisonment Rates per 100,000 Population Aged 18 Years and Over**

	NSW <sup>1</sup>	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	NT	ACT <sup>2</sup>	AUS
Number of Prisoners									
1982	3,719	1,753	1,638	1,350	812	237	312	5 <sup>3</sup>	9,826
1983	3,740	1,996	1,709	1,503	764	209	260	15 <sup>3</sup>	10,196
1984	3,311	1,845	1,881	1,543	564	241	249	60	9,694
1985	4,052	1,879	1,999	1,495	783	228	334	74	10,844
1986	4,166	1,955	2,185	1,612	810	258	429	82	11,497
1987	4,480	1,956	2,343	1,627	875	280	467	85	12,113
1988	4,636	2,071	2,374	1,649	844	297	381	69	12,321
1989	5,204	2,256	2,390	1,568	871	245	351	80	12,965
1990	6,276	2,316	2,296	1,720	931	237	415	114	14,305
1991	7,014	2,310	2,094	1,726	1,042	265	465	105	15,021
1992	7,407	2,277	2,017	1,893	1,152	269	447	97	15,559
1993	7,542	2,272	2,068	2,029	1,163	265	422	105	15,866
1994	7,632	2,522	2,491	2,137	1,348	258	455	101	16,944
1995	7,667	2,467	2,870	2,205	1,401	244	471	103	17,428
1996	7,604	2,440	3,528	2,254	1,475	285	482	125	18,193
1997	7,847	2,643	3,839	2,245	1,492	263	606	147	19,082
1998	7,697	2,858	4,466	2,352	1,385	314	635	199	19,906
Rate per 100,000 Population of Imprisonable Age									
1982	96.3	60.8	95.4	142.3	83.1	77.7	369.3	3.2 <sup>3</sup>	89.8
1983	95.6	68.1	96.9	154.2	77.0	67.7	292.9	9.2 <sup>3</sup>	91.6
1984	83.6	62.0	104.4	155.0	56.0	76.9	266.3	35.4	85.6
1985	100.8	62.1	108.4	146.5	76.7	71.6	339.0	42.2	94.1
1986	101.7	63.5	115.0	152.3	78.1	79.7	412.4	44.0	97.6
1987	107.2	62.4	120.3	149.2	83.4	85.6	435.5	43.6	100.8
1988	108.8	65.0	118.4	147.0	79.4	90.0	352.7	35.5	100.4
1989	120.3	69.6	115.0	135.6	80.9	73.3	319.2	40.3	103.5
1990	143.1	70.3	107.4	145.2	85.4	69.7	369.9	56.0	112.2
1991	157.8	69.2	95.6	143.3	94.4	77.0	407.9	50.0	116.0
1992	164.5	67.5	89.5	154.4	103.3	77.4	386.9	45.0	118.3
1993	166.1	67.0	89.0	163.0	103.7	75.7	360.5	47.6	119.2
1994	166.1	73.9	104.0	168.6	118.7	73.4	383.4	45.0	125.5
1995	164.8	71.8	116.6	170.4	123.1	69.1	389.8	45.1	127.3
1996	161.2	70.2	139.6	170.4	129.4	80.4	391.1	53.6	130.9
1997	163.4	74.6	149.2	165.4	130.1	74.2	454.8	62.8	134.9
1998	158.7	79.7	171.3	170.4	120.2	88.3	474.9	85.1	139.2

(1) Excludes prisoners sentenced by ACT courts, except for 1982 and 1983.

(2) From 1984 onwards, the ACT count includes prisoners sentenced by ACT courts but held in NSW prisons. Likewise, the NSW count excludes these prisoners.

(3) Remanded prisoners only.

**Source:** 1982–93, Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Prisoners, Unit Record Files

1994–98, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Prisoners in Australia, Unit Record Files

recorded the second highest growth in prison population—from 3719 in 1982 to 7697 in 1997 (4.4% a year). The lowest growth was observed for Tasmania, where the number of prisoners increased from 237 in 1982 to 314 in 1997 (1.7% a year).

Both Territories have experienced a relatively high growth in prison population during the 17-year period. The total number of prisoners in the

ACT increased from 60 in 1984 to 199 in 1998, an average of 8.3 per cent a year (including ACT-sentenced prisoners held at New South Wales prisons). The prison population of the Northern Territory has increased from 312 in 1982 to 635 in 1998 (4.3% a year).

Figure 1 shows the average annual growth in the rate of imprisonment for each jurisdiction and Australia for each of three

periods: the 17-year period from 1982 to 1998, the period from 1982 to 1993 and the most recent period from 1994 to 1998.

As shown by Figure 1, growth in imprisonment rates is not uniform across jurisdictions, nor is it over time. Considering the whole 17-year period, the ACT has recorded the largest growth in imprisonment rate, followed by Queensland and New South Wales. This is, however, the result of differential trends during the pre-1994 and post-1994 periods. Note that during the period from 1982 to 1993, New South Wales recorded the largest growth in imprisonment rates (4.6% per year), but this trend reversed during the five years beginning in 1994, when the rate declined by an average 0.9 per cent a year.

Imprisonment rates in Queensland declined by an average 0.6 per cent a year during the period 1982 to 1993, but starting from 1994 they have grown by an average 10.5 per cent a year. In the ACT, the rate of imprisonment grew by an average 2.5 per cent from 1984 to 1993. However, during the last five years, it has increased by an annual 13.5 per cent.

Tasmania and the Northern Territory experienced declines in their rates of imprisonment during 1982–93. This trend has reversed from 1994 to 1998, with the rates growing by 3.8 per cent and 4.4 per cent respectively. Rates for Victoria show a similar trend—after growing by 0.8 per cent a year during 1982–93, they grew by an annual 1.5 per cent during 1994–98.

South Australia and Western Australia show a trend toward a deceleration in their imprisonment rates. In South Australia, the rate increased by 1.9 per cent a year during 1982–93, but has declined to 0.3 per cent a year from 1994 to 1998. In Western Australia, the average annual growth during the last 5 years has been 0.2 per cent, rather than the 1.1 per cent annual growth observed during 1982–93.

### *Rate of Imprisonment*

Imprisonment is more commonly measured by expressing the number of prisoners per 100,000 population of imprisonable age. Figure 2 shows the imprisonment rates for each jurisdiction over the years from 1982 to 1998, together with the national rate. Note that the scale of the graph for the Northern Territory is different to that of the graphs for the other jurisdictions.

In general, imprisonment rates have increased over the period under study. The only exceptions to this general trend are Tasmania and Victoria, where rates of imprisonment have remained relatively stable.

New South Wales, Western Australia and the Northern Territory have had imprisonment rates consistently above the national average, whereas the rates for Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT have always been below the national average. The ACT is the jurisdiction with highest annual growth in the imprisonment rate during the period under study (see Figure 1) and, as shown in Figure 2, its imprisonment rates are tending to approach the national average. Given current trends, it would take 15 years for the ACT prisoner population to double, compared to 38 years nationally.

The imprisonment rate for Queensland declined during the period from 1987 to 1993, when it recorded values below the national average. However, in 1994 it began to increase and in 1996 it surpassed the national average.

The Northern Territory has the highest rate of imprisonment (3.4 times the national average) and this has grown by an average 1.5 per cent a year from 1982 to 1998 (see Figure 1).

Overall, for Australia, the imprisoned population has increased by an average 4.2 per cent a year from 1982 to 1998. The population of imprisonable age (i.e. aged 18 years and over) has, however, only increased by an average 1.6 per cent a year during

the same period. The annual growth rate of the prison population in Australia is twice that recorded in England and Wales, but it is only half that of the United States over the 1981–97 period (Home Office 1997; Maguire & Pastore 1998).

### **Factors Affecting Imprisonment Rates**

Trends in imprisonment rates depend, among other things, on the relationship between the growth of prison populations and the growth of the population of imprisonable age. Keeping other factors constant, a prison population growing faster than the population at risk of imprisonment will continue to yield an upward trend in the imprisonment rates; otherwise imprisonment will tend to decline. Any comparison between the Australian States and Territories could be misleading due to differences between the growth in prison populations and the population used as the basis for the rates.

The results in Table 1 indicate that the States and Territories differ in terms of the growth of their prison populations. The crude analyses presented here suggest that, besides demographic differences among the jurisdictions, other factors affect the observed levels in numbers of prisoners and imprisonment rates, such as:

- policies favouring imprisonment for offences that could otherwise be sanctioned with less severe forms of punishment. This would increase the rates at which sentenced prisoners are admitted;
- policies that impose tougher sanctions on convicted criminals, such as longer terms of imprisonment;
- prisoners spending longer portions of their sentences in prison due to reduced use by executive authorities of parole and other early release mechanisms;

- an augmented flow of individuals being processed by police due to legislative changes that create new offences or increase the seriousness of unlawful behaviours already defined as offences. This may in turn increase the proportion of prisoners on remand, causing temporary increases in the size of prison populations; or
- variations in crime rates, which may have an impact on the size of prison populations. This relationship is mediated by a number of factors, one of which is the demographic structure of the general population (Blumstein et al. 1980).

Other issues of relevance to public policy in corrections are:

#### **Legal status of prisoners**

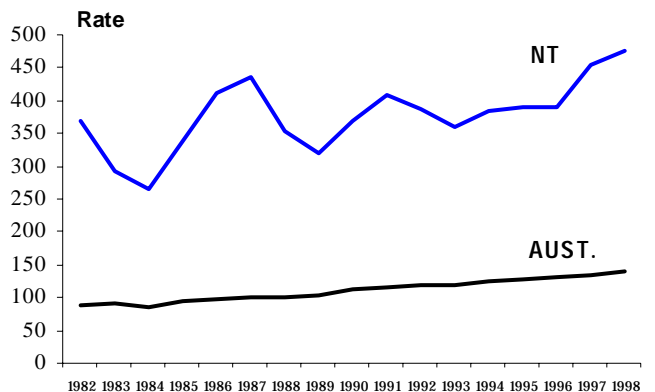
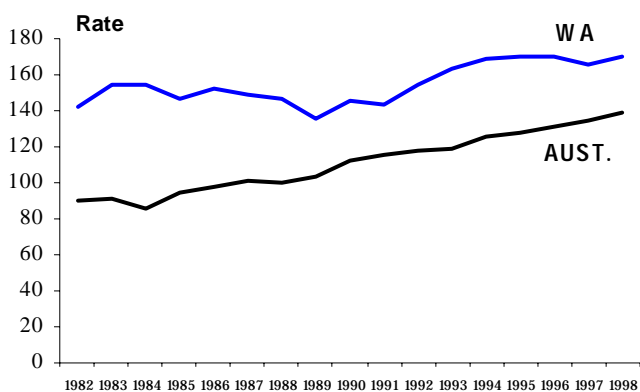
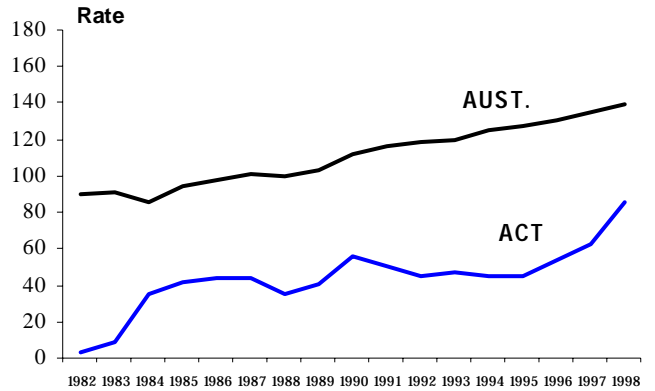
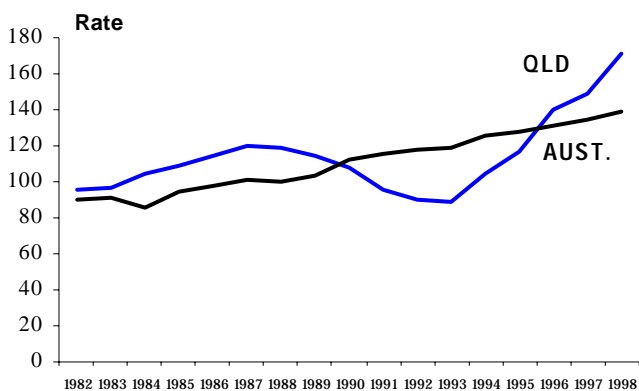
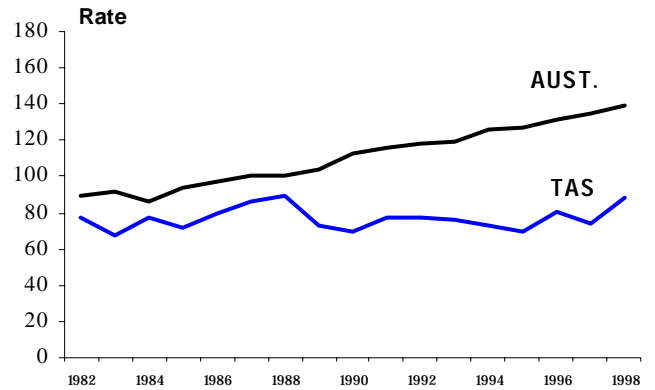
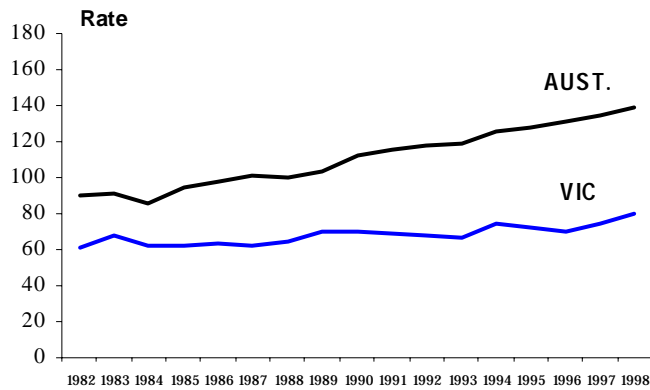
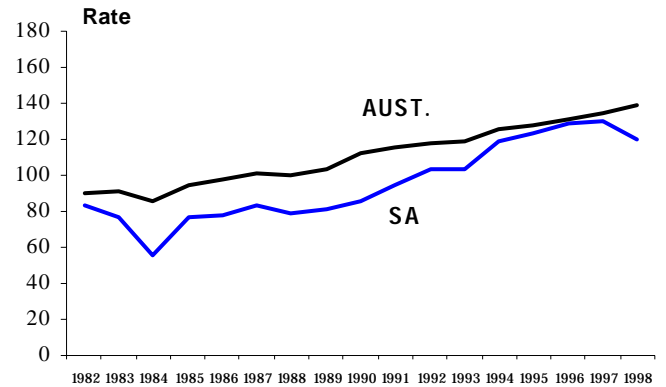
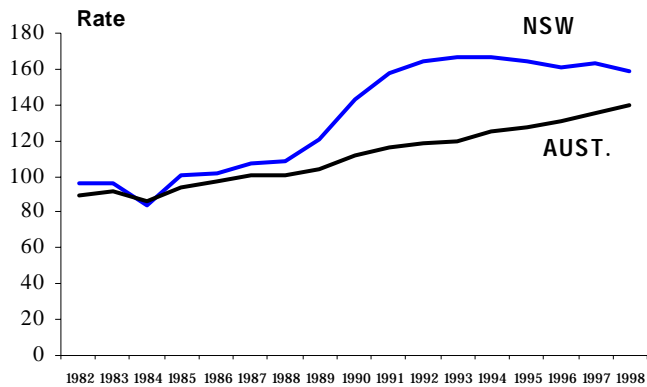
Prison populations at any time are made up of two groups according to the legal status of inmates: remand prisoners and sentenced prisoners. The size of prison populations is a function of the rate at which individuals are admitted to prison and the time they spend there. The rate of admission is determined by the rate at which courts sentence people to terms of imprisonment and by practices regarding the use of remand. For sentenced prisoners, the length of time spent/served in prison has the greatest effect on prison population size.

**Length of sentence/stay in prison population** The time spent in prison depends on the length of sentences passed by courts, provisions by courts regarding parole and early release, and executive decisions about the effective time a person has to spend in prison. All of these factors are in turn affected by political decisions in the law and order area.

**Demographic composition of prisons** The impact of age structure in prison admissions and population has been the subject of debate. One line of research suggests that prison admissions and population grow when large cohorts reach the age of high risk of offending (Blumstein et al. 1980;



**Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, STATES & TERRITORIES, 1982-98**  
*Imprisonment Rate per 100,000 Population of Imprisonable Age*



Blumstein 1988). Researchers such as Zimring and Hawkins (1994) argue that factors such as sentence length and release decisions explain changes in prison populations.

Prison census data show that the median age of the Australian prison population has increased by three years over the 1984–98 period, both due to longer sentences and because inmates enter prison at a later age (Grant 1999).

Important policy questions arise from an analysis of the demographic composition of prison populations. Is the age at which adult offenders are coming into contact with the Australian criminal justice system increasing? Is this ageing process driven by changes to the age structure of offending and/or changes in sentencing policies and practices? Is there a relationship between the use of imprisonment and the age of persons appearing in Australian courts?

**The imprisonment of Indigenous Australians** It has been well documented that Indigenous imprisonment rates are substantially higher than national averages and that Indigenous people continue to be over-represented in the criminal justice system (RCIADIC 1991). Indigenous adults represent less than 2 per cent of the Australian adult (imprisonable age) population but comprise approximately 19 per cent of the total Australian prison population (ABS 1998).

## Conclusion

This paper has examined trends in Australian imprisonment during the 17 years from 1982 to 1997 using data from the National Prison Census. Imprisonment has increased, measured both by the number of persons held in prison and by imprisonment rates. Moreover, the data indicate that prison populations continue to grow in all the jurisdictions.

The more detailed analysis shows that growth in imprison-

ment varies across jurisdictions and over time. The increase in imprisonment rates observed during recent years is the result of relatively large increases in the rates for Queensland and the minor jurisdictions (Tasmania and the two Territories). Note that in recent years the rate of imprisonment in New South Wales has declined, while in South Australia and Western Australia the rate of increase has slowed. In Victoria, in the last five years, the imprisonment rate has grown at twice the speed observed during previous periods. These results highlight the need for studies on jurisdictional differences in imprisonment.

The use of imprisonment as compared to other types of penalty has been criticised by some sectors of the community on the grounds that it is costly yet not fully effective at reducing crime. Others maintain that a rigorous cost-benefit analysis of prisons has yet to be conducted in Australia. Research into the issue of cost-effectiveness of imprisonment and other options is needed in order to answer questions such as: How effective is imprisonment in enhancing the security of citizens by incapacitating frequent offenders? How effective is imprisonment at deterring crime? How effective is imprisonment in rehabilitating offenders? What is the relative weight that society places on retribution as opposed to incapacitation, deterrence or rehabilitation? Can some dollars spent on imprisonment be diverted toward more effective and efficient crime prevention and control measures?

Other policy issues requiring research have already been noted. Changes to the demographic composition of prison populations, the imprisonment of Aboriginal persons and the use of parole and other early release mechanisms are among the many pressing issues requiring research. These and other important topics will be examined in a series of forthcoming papers.

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