

The Canberra Times

Indigenous incarceration up 27pc in a year

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Canberra Times
25 April 2016

Indigenous incarceration up 27pc in a year By David Ellery Seeking answers: Shane Rattenbury wants to find out why the rate has risen.

Continued Page 2 The rate of indigenous incarceration in the ACT has jumped dramatically - up 27 per cent in less than a year - prompting calls by the ACT's corrections minister for an investigation into the spike.

The ACT has fared badly in the latest national figures on imprisonment, with an average incarceration rate of 133.8 people per 100,000 adults for the 2015 December quarter, up from 125 per 100,000 for the 2015 August quarter and 130 per 100,000 year-on-year.

There were, on average, 89 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in full-time custody at the Alexander Maconochie Centre during the 2015 December quarter - up 10 per cent from the average of 80 in the 2015 August quarter, and 26 per cent year-on-year. The figures, released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, logged a rise in the rate at which the ACT incarcerated indigenous offenders that exceeded any other jurisdiction in the country.

As of last Tuesday, there were 96 indigenous detainees in custody, 28 on remand and 68 already sentenced. "I, and ACT Corrective Services, are concerned about the increasing indigenous detainee numbers, [but] we do not know categorically what is driving the upward trend," said ACT Corrections Minister Shane Rattenbury.

He has asked Justice and Community Safety to investigate what is driving the increase and to report back to himself and Attorney-General Simon Corbell.

"What seems to have changed? For a long time we went along with our indigenous detainees at about 17 to 19 per cent [of the prison population]," he said. "That has jumped up into [the] 27 per cent [range] in a period of six to eight months.

"Is it that the indigenous community is being particularly affected by the methamphetamine push?"

On average, 406 inmates were in custody at the AMC during the 2015 December quarter. About 386 were male. The male incarceration rate of 258 per 100,000 was the second lowest in the nation.

The ACT's overall indigenous imprisonment rate was 2045 per 100,000. The male indigenous imprisonment rate was 3570 per 100,000. Both figures were below the national rates of 2324 and 4263, respectively.

"It [the jump] raises questions about police practice, court practice and how bail is being judged by the courts," Mr Rattenbury said.

The disappointing result has been slammed by former Labor chief minister Jon Stanhope, a driving force behind the foundation of the AMC.

Mr Stanhope, an adviser to the Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service, said Canberrans paid a premium for a world-class "human Rise in inmates causes concern From Page 1 rights" prison modelled on the best Europe had to offer.

"It has been operating for more than five years now," he said.

"AMC should be measured against prisons in Europe that are similarly committed to a human rights culture [not prisons in Australia].

"If it doesn't measure up, serious questions have to be asked about what management is doing with the very, very generous funds they receive. I wouldn't be looking to change the funding; I'd be looking to change the management."The ACT spends about \$150,000 annually on each AMC detainee, well above the national average of \$110,000, and more than three times the American outlay of \$45,000 per inmate annually.

Mr Rattenbury rejected the suggestion that ACT Corrective Services had lost its way, telling The Canberra Times the commitment to a "human rights" prison was as strong as ever and he had "the utmost confidence" in ACT Corrective Services' management team.

Professor Lorana Bartels, an associate professor in the school of law and justice at the University of Canberra and an advocate for sentencing and prison reform, said AMC was starting to seem like any other jail.

"I can't entirely understand the trends because they have been in the absence of punitive policies," she said.

"The government has taken steps to try to address the rise [in rates of incarceration], but they just don't seem to be working."

In 1984 - the first year accurate imprisonment statistics for the ACT were produced - the average imprisonment rate was 60 people per 100,000 adults. This had blown out to 199 in 1999, but by March 2014, was down to 110 - then the lowest rate in Australia.

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