

# The Canberra Times

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## Research Rehabilitation gap Aboriginal jail rates up by 50pc

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Research Rehabilitation gap Aboriginal jail rates up by 50pc Bianca Hall The imprisonment rate for Aboriginal Australians has increased by an alarming 52 per cent over a decade. But Indigenous people are missing out on rehabilitation programs that could help them avoid returning to jail because they are not being locked up for long enough to qualify, or cannot access culturally- appropriate services.

New research suggests this pattern has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: prisoners who miss out on rehabilitation are more likely to reoffend, and are contributing to Australia's burgeoning national crime rate.

Indigenous prisoners - who comprise almost a third of the Australian prison population - are particularly at risk of re-offending, the research shows.

Worse, the report highlighted research that shows prison rehabilitation programs that "fail to acknowledge language, culture, traditions and current life situations of Indigenous offenders are unlikely to be effective and could also contribute to further offending".

The report, titled Efficacy, accessibility and adequacy of prison rehabilitation programs for Indigenous offenders across Australia and co-authored by Australian National University academics Clarke Jones and Jill Guthrie, will be launched later this week at a national conference in Alice Springs on Indigenous justice.

The conference comes after revelations of abuses committed against Indigenous youths in juvenile justice facilities in Queensland and the Northern Territory, and as the Royal Commission into the Detention of Children in the Northern Territory prepares to hold its first hearings next month.

Dr Jones told Fairfax Media the abuses in juvenile justice facilities against Indigenous young people, such as those highlighted by the ABC's Four Corners program, represented the beginning of a cycle of incarceration and re-offending for many Indigenous prisoners. "The way these youths are being treated at these juvenile justice facilities contributes to the problem," he said.

"We are now seeing the result of that."

Aboriginal prisoners comprised 27 per cent of the prison population last year, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. At the 2011 census, Indigenous people comprised just 3 per cent of the total population.

Dr Jones said authorities had barely changed the way they tackled Indigenous offending in 25 years. "Basically, around Australia we're seeing this steady increase of Indigenous incarceration, so I would argue that very little has

been done since [the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody] to improve the situation."

Dr Jones and Dr Guthrie recommended that more efforts be made by states and territories to divert indigenous offenders from prisons.

"Although measures to reduce the high levels of Indigenous imprisonment do lie outside of the criminal justice system, change within the criminal justice system is also very important. Imprisonment should be a last resort."

They also recommend that prison rehabilitation programs be made available, where possible, to prisoners serving short sentences, and that programs targeting Indigenous prisoners be culturally- sensitive and appropriate.

The pair said they made repeated attempts to secure the support of the Corrective Services Administrators' Council (CSAC) to have authorities across Australia share data about how many prisoners were accessing rehabilitation programs in different states and territories. However, they said these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful.

The research will be presented at the Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration (AIJA) conference on Indigenous justice, in Alice Springs.