

Proposed Prison, Derby.

Questions regarding its place in the rehabilitation of regional Indigenous offenders.

The Toaster: A short analogy.

A middle age couple are looking for a new toaster. Their old one only caters for 2 slices and with grandchildren visiting at times, they wish for a larger model. Throughout all of the years of their partnership they have had problems with toasters; in fact they have found that in general they don't work well. They have burnt many pieces of toast, they have reduced slices to crumbs, jammed muffins against the sides making them impossible to remove and have all managed to spread crumbs all over the kitchen bench. However, despite such poor results, they go into a local store to purchase another failure.

Wonderful facts are provided by helpful staff. This one does this, that one does it even better.

Stainless steel, brushed steel, coloured, black. They are all there.

"Do they work"? asked the couple. "Of course, we sell lots".

"Yes, but do they work well"?

"Yes, no one brings one back".

"But will they not jam, burn, destroy our bread"?

"We can't guarantee that", says the assistant, "But we can say that they are popular".

'Popular' wins the day.

A few weeks later the couple realise that they have wasted their money - as the new one does in fact do exactly the same as the others have all done. Nothing has changed, only the colour and shape, and of course it has a larger capacity. Oh yes, and this one cost more!

The idea

Derby is the proposed site for a new maximum security prison for Indigenous Offenders within the regional area of the North West of Western Australia.

The idea of building a prison in the area has found merit among local businesses and the Shire Council, all of whom can see the financial rewards to be gained by having a major prison operation on their doorstep.

Already there is talk within the Department of Corrective Services (DoCS) that this venture will be culturally appropriate for Indigenous people (Rottnest was also considered appropriate for Indigenous prisons long ago) and that it will reduce their offending in line with the ambitions of the local Aboriginal Justice Agreement and other documents that have raised that subject over the past 15 years or so.

It is being touted as able to have up to 10% local Aboriginal front-line staff, a reality that has failed to come to fruition elsewhere, a dream of management of other prisons considered to be Aboriginal.

The cost of travel to Derby from Perth is almost twice that of travelling Perth to Sydney, whilst accommodation within the area is increasing in line with all other regional centres.

Of further interest

What other WA prisons are experiencing is of interest to this discussion.

The majority of regional prisons have an inability to fully staff the prison service. They are always financially under the microscope and have little funding to do anything in the way of programs.

What programs they do have are not considered to be culturally and gender appropriate.

Program money has not been made available to prisons within the past two financial years as budgets are cut to make way for fencing around minimum security prison farms, consultants' fees and self evaluations.

The vast majority of staff are non-Indigenous in these prisons.

The cost of housing is prohibitive for new-comers to regional prisons.

Transport costs make for an expensive settings whether in Roebourne, Broome or Eastern Goldfields.

Prisons everywhere are failing to make any ground with regard to a reduction in re-offending, and becoming a costly experiment in deterring future crime. As a crime prevention tool they are more likely to delay the next crime rather than reduce its likelihood of occurring.

Just because prison is popular, does it work?

The answer is yes and no.

Prison provides the media with an ability to say to the public that prisoners are out of the way, albeit temporarily.

Prisons enable politicians to claim that they are tough on crime.

Prisons enable politicians to claim that they are doing something about crime.

Prisons generate feelings of safety for victims of crime, unless the victim is a close family member.

Prisons give rise to the assumption that whilst all of the bad people are in prison, those people on the outside must be good.

Prisons are important places to house up to 10% of the current prisoner population who are a danger to themselves and others

Prisons provide jobs for many people and create a need for their own existence

Prisons generate work by not rehabilitating people (that is, the more they fail, the more work they have)

Prisons give governments the ability to do nothing new, they retain the status quo, not placing ministers at risk.

The downside is that

Prisons produce criminals,

Prisons make bad situations worse,

Prisons spread anti-social behaviours

Prisons permanently damage people,

Prisons damage positive social relationships, especially families

Prisons fail to provide alternatives to criminal activity

Prisons fail to encourage compliance to authority and can make it less likely to occur

Prisons are costly to build and even more costly to operate.

Prisons are the least cost effective way of reducing criminal behaviours

Prison budgets take enormous amounts of money away from positive community capacity building alternatives such as housing, education, health and childcare.

Prisons do not stop a reliance on alcohol or drug use, including smoking

Prisons are more likely to produce further crime such as prison rape and serious assaults,

Prisons create dependency for many prisoners, especially long term prisoners

Prisons create trauma and suppressed anger, situational stress and anxiety.

Prisons remove opportunity for pro-social activities such as quality parenting for both men and women.

Prisons remove cultural links, ceremonies and rituals.

Prisons are draining the state budget.

They are like the couple buying the toasters year after year. They are short term popular choices made by people who want to look popular regardless of the fact that they have already experienced failures

They are a very poor investment in the states capacity building initiatives

Prison budgets are totally out of control in a bidding war by government and opposition parties looking to make popular choices, regardless of outcome.

A few facts

WA has the highest rate of Indigenous incarceration of any State. (The process of arrest, the breach rate for offenders, the lack of equitable justice, all have much to do with the figures)

ABS stats for March 2007 indicated that the highest Indigenous imprisonment rate was recorded in WA. 3554 per 100,000 adult Indigenous persons.

This can be broken down into male and female, and as Morgan, N., and Motteram, J., (2006:247), this results in figures of

454 female Indigenous persons per 100,000
5191 male Indigenous persons per 100,000.

We also can say that the rate has been increasing whilst governments claim to be focussed on its reduction.

As Indigenous incarceration rates increase, the use of community sentencing for Indigenous persons is declining. This is often due to multiple charges and the nature of the offence.

Indigenous offenders are more likely to be charged with resist arrest and assault a public officer as well as other charges.

Indigenous people are also less likely to be offered police discretion and a caution.

Prison is the toaster that you buy when you are convinced by others that it is a popular choice.

Prison is the toaster purchased with poor economic and social advice provided by people with an interest in selling toasters

Prison is the toaster with one outcome – more of the same