



Health and Community Services Union
Submission to Inquiry into Tasmanian Adult Imprisonment
and Youth Detention Matters

March 2023

The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) is the largest union in Tasmania, representing 10,000 members across a range of sectors.

Approximately 3500 our members are employed in public health, primarily for the Tasmanian Health Service and Ambulance Tasmania. We have approximately another 2000 members across Tasmania employed in community services that are focused on psychosocial accessibility and safety.

We have hundreds of members who work in youth justice, community justice and child safety services.

The issues laid out in this submission are either known or have been reported to HACSU by members working in the relevant areas in health and community services, or are known to us through our ongoing involvement in representing health and community services workers and liaising with health and community services administrators for over 100 years.

We are a strong and rapidly growing union that remains committed to working with stakeholders to ensure the best health outcomes and that the health and other community systems, including criminal justice, are properly supported to meet the needs of the Tasmanian community, now and into the future.

For further information please contact:

Lucas Digney
Assistant State Secretary
Health and Community Services Union
[REDACTED]

Factors influencing increases in Tasmania's prisoner population and associated costs

There are several factors that have contributed to the increase in Tasmania's prisoner population and associated costs, including:

Tougher sentencing laws

Tasmania, like many other jurisdictions, has implemented tougher sentencing laws over the years, leading to longer prison sentences for offenders. This has resulted in an increase in the number of prisoners in Tasmania's correctional facilities.

Increased law enforcement efforts

The Tasmanian government has also invested heavily in law enforcement efforts in recent years, leading to an increase in the number of people being arrested and sentenced to prison.

Changes in bail laws

Changes to bail laws in Tasmania have also contributed to an increase in the number of prisoners in the state's correctional facilities. Under the new laws, it has become more difficult for people to be granted bail, which has resulted in more people being held in custody prior to trial.

Changes to parole laws

Changes to parole laws have made it more difficult for prisoners to be released on parole, which has resulted in longer periods of incarceration.

Drug-related offences

A significant proportion of Tasmania's prisoner population is made up of people convicted of drug-related offences. The increase in drug-related offences has contributed to the overall increase in the number of prisoners in the state's correctional facilities.

Ageing facilities

Tasmania's correctional facilities are ageing and require significant maintenance and upgrades, leading to increased costs.

Staffing costs

As the prisoner population has increased, so has the need for additional staff, leading to increased staffing costs for the government.

These factors have contributed to an increase in Tasmania's prisoner population and associated costs. Addressing these issues will require a multi-faceted approach, including a focus on prevention and rehabilitation programs, as well as ongoing investment in infrastructure and staffing.

Use of evidence-based strategies to reduce contact with the justice system and recidivism

Evidence-based strategies can be highly effective in reducing contact with the justice system and recidivism amongst individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system. These strategies are based on research and data which have been shown to be effective in addressing the underlying causes of criminal behaviour and reducing the risk of reoffending.

Employment and education programs are paramount in effectively reducing recidivism. Programs that provide vocational training, job readiness skills, and educational opportunities can help individuals build a stable and productive life outside of the criminal justice system.

Mental health treatment is also a vital component of reducing recidivism. Many individuals who come into contact with the justice system have underlying mental health issues that contribute to their criminal behaviour. Treatment can help individuals manage their mental health and reduce the risk of future criminal behaviour.

One evidence-based strategy that has been proven to be effective is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This approach aims to change an individual's thinking patterns and behaviours by addressing underlying issues that may be contributing to criminal behaviour. CBT has been shown to reduce recidivism rates among individuals who have completed treatment.

Another evidence-based strategy is substance abuse treatment, which can help individuals overcome addiction and reduce the risk of criminal behaviour related to substance abuse. Treatment may include individual or group therapy, medication-assisted treatment, and other interventions.

Overall, evidence-based strategies can be highly effective in reducing contact with the justice system and recidivism among individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system. These strategies address underlying issues that contribute to criminal behaviour and help individuals build a stable and productive life outside of the criminal justice system.

Provision of, and participation in, services for people in prison and leaving prison (health, housing and legal services)

The provision of services for people in prison and leaving prison is critical to ensuring that they can successfully reintegrate into society upon release. These services include healthcare, housing assistance, and legal services.

Healthcare services are particularly important for people in prison, as they may have pre-existing medical conditions or may develop new health problems while incarcerated. Access to quality healthcare can help to prevent or manage chronic conditions, mental health issues, and infectious diseases. Additionally, access to substance abuse treatment programs can help to address addiction issues, which can often be a factor in criminal behaviour.

Housing assistance is also essential for people leaving prison, as many individuals may not have a place to go upon their release. Without access to stable housing, former inmates may struggle to find employment or meet their basic needs, which can lead to homelessness and recidivism.

Legal services are also important for people in prison and leaving prison, as they may need assistance with navigating the criminal justice system or addressing legal issues that arise upon their release. Access to legal services can help to ensure that individuals are treated fairly and have their rights protected.

The provision of services for people in prison and leaving prison is critical to promoting successful re-entry and reducing recidivism rates. It is important that these services are accessible and of high quality to ensure that individuals have the support they need to successfully reintegrate into society.

Training and support initiatives for corrective services staff related to increasing individual wellbeing, professionalism, resilience and reduced absenteeism

Training and support initiatives for corrective service staff can be very effective in increasing individual wellbeing, professionalism and resilience and in reducing absenteeism. The following are some potential initiatives that could be implemented:

Wellbeing training

Providing training on stress management, self-care, and mental health can help staff manage the challenges of working in a correctional setting. This can also include education on healthy lifestyle choices, such as nutrition and exercise.

Professionalism training

Professionalism can be enhanced through training on effective communication, conflict resolution, and leadership. This can help staff build positive relationships with colleagues and inmates, and enhance their ability to work as a team.

Resilience training

Resilience can be developed through training on coping mechanisms, problem-solving skills, and emotional regulation. This can help staff bounce back from challenging situations and maintain a positive attitude.

Absenteeism reduction initiatives

These initiatives can include providing resources and support for employees who are struggling with mental health issues, providing flexible work arrangements, and creating a positive work culture. These efforts can help reduce the number of sick days taken by staff and increase their job satisfaction.

Overall, implementing these types of training and support initiatives can help improve the wellbeing, professionalism, and resilience of correctional staff, as well as reduce absenteeism rates.

Innovations and improvements to management and delivery of corrective services, including to future prison/detention centre design

There are several innovations and improvements that can be applied to the management and delivery of corrective services in Tasmania. Some of these include:

Rehabilitation programs

One of the most effective ways to reduce recidivism rates is through rehabilitation programs. These programs can help offenders address the underlying issues that led to their criminal behaviour, such as substance abuse, mental health problems, or lack of education or job skills. Tasmania could invest in evidence-based rehabilitation programs and ensure that they are tailored to meet the individual needs of each offender.

Technology-enabled monitoring

Technology can play a critical role in improving the management and delivery of corrective services. Tasmania could implement electronic monitoring systems to track the whereabouts of offenders, particularly those who have been released on parole or probation. This can help to prevent offenders from reoffending and ensure that they are complying with the conditions of their release.

Restorative justice programs

Restorative justice programs can be an effective way to address the harm caused by crime and help offenders take responsibility for their actions. Tasmania could invest in restorative justice programs that involve victims, offenders, and the community in the process of repairing harm and rebuilding relationships.

Better staff training

Corrective services staff play a critical role in managing and delivering correctional services. Tasmania could invest in better training for staff, particularly in areas such as conflict resolution, mental health, and cultural awareness.

Future prison/detention centre design

The design of prisons and detention centres can have a significant impact on the management and delivery of corrective services. Tasmania could consider incorporating innovative design features such as natural light, green spaces, and better access to educational and vocational programs. Additionally, Tasmania could consider implementing small-scale, community-based facilities that are designed to be more rehabilitative and less punitive.

There are many innovative approaches that Tasmania could take to improve the management and delivery of corrective services. By investing in evidence-based rehabilitation programs, technology-enabled monitoring, restorative justice programs, staff training, and better prison/detention centre design, Tasmania could work towards reducing recidivism rates and improving outcomes for offenders, victims, and the community.

Other incidental matters

It is unfortunate that successive governments, and the community more broadly, have been reluctant to acknowledge the prevalence and impact of trauma and abuse on mental health, substance abuse, incarceration and medical care.

While there is a significant body of scientific research that supports the association between childhood trauma and adverse outcomes, society's willingness to accept this knowledge is limited by various factors including stigma, shame and denial.

It is essential to recognise that acknowledging and addressing trauma and abuse is a crucial step in promoting healing and recovery. By ignoring or dismissing this issue, we perpetuate cycles of suffering and perpetuate a system that fails to provide adequate support and care to those who need it most.

As a society, we must be willing to confront the unsettling truth about trauma and abuse and commit to creating a more compassionate and just system of complete person-centred care. This includes providing accessible and culturally responsive services, addressing systemic inequalities, and working to prevent future trauma and abuse through education, advocacy, and policy change.