

MEDIA RELEASE – JUNE 30, 2017

Record number of Victorian prisoners failing to create safer communities: Jesuit Social Services

With Victoria's prison population having reached a record high of 7,155 this week, Jesuit Social Services says locking up increasing numbers of people will not create safer communities.

"Victoria's prison population has increased by more than 2,000 people in just five years, and this week's figure of 7,155 people would have been unthinkable as recently as two or three years ago," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

"This increase has been largely driven by high numbers of people on remand, and recent reforms to bail and parole systems will only exacerbate the current strain on the system."

Ms Edwards says the increase in numbers comes at an enormous cost to taxpayers, with the cost of Corrections having jumped by 19 per cent (to a total of \$1.30 billion) in the past 12 months.

The increased costs can be largely attributed to the impending opening of Ravenhall Prison, which will provide an additional 1,000 beds. Even accommodating the opening of Ravenhall, a 2015 report by the Victorian Ombudsman predicted that Victoria's prison system will reach capacity by 2019.

"It is clear that many people leave prison worse off than when they entered, demonstrated by Victoria's recidivism rate [the rate at which people who exit prison return within two years] of 42 per cent.

"Our political leaders must query whether locking up more and more people is an effective way to create safer communities or whether taxpayer money would be better spent preventing crime from occurring in the first place by investing in vital community services such as mental health, housing and education."

Ms Edwards says that prison is a crucial part of an effective justice system but should only be used as a last resort, where community safety is threatened.

Ms Edwards and senior colleagues from Jesuit Social Services have recently completed a Justice Solutions study tour of Europe and the USA, exploring innovative and sustainable solutions to adult and youth justice issues.

As part of the tour, Ms Edwards visited Norway's Halden Prison, dubbed 'the world's most humane prison'. The prison has an emphasis on rehabilitation and its design emulates life in the community.

"We were also interested to learn about the minimum two-year paid training undertaken by prison contact officers in Norway, and how entrants are screened for life experience and positive, humanistic attitudes.

"There is much Victoria can learn from international best practice to truly create safe communities."

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