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Record prisoner numbers in the NT require a new response

This week the Northern Territory's male prison population reached a new high of 1,013 people, proving new solutions are needed to prevent crime from occurring and to ease the strain on the prison system, says Jesuit Social Services.

"The Northern Territory's prisoner numbers have reached an all-time high of 1,833 this week and the system is operating above capacity," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

"Makeshift 'solutions' such as double bunking in the Darwin Correctional Centre and rostering on extra custodial staff will not do anything to address the underlying issues behind crime – what we should be focusing on instead is community-based alternatives to prison."

According to information released by the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice, this week's prisoner numbers mean the system is operating at 111.2 per cent of design capacity.

Ms Edwards says that while there is some positive change occurring in the Territory's youth justice system, it is vital that the adult justice system is not neglected.

"The Territory's youth justice system has been in the national spotlight given the recent report and recommendations of the Royal Commission, and the Territory Government has rightfully been commended for its genuine appetite to create positive change.

"However this change must be matched by progress in the adult system. The Territory's ballooning prisoner numbers point to a system that is failing to prevent crime from occurring in the first place, and when people do have contact with prison, failing to provide a facility fit for rehabilitation."

Ms Edwards says the Northern Territory Government should invest in diversion programs based on restorative justice principles in the adult system – and that this approach would reduce crime.

"An example of this approach is the youth justice group conferencing program we operate in Darwin, Palmerston and Katherine, which brings young people who have committed an offence face-to-face with those impacted by their actions including victims, family and police. In other parts of Australia and around the world, models like these have been proven to reduce re-offending compared to prison sentences."

"We should also be looking at establishing an Alcohol and Drug Court, to steer people with substance abuse problems away from the prison system, and repealing mandatory sentencing.

"Additionally, we need Government to partner with the community to develop and implement culturally appropriate responses to address the shocking over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Territory's prison system."

"Instead of applying band-aid fixes on a system that is under severe pressure and operating above capacity, we need to get smarter and look at the evidence of what works in reducing crime and creating safer communities."

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