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Don't forget ACT's horrendous Indigenous prison record



A recently-released paper revealed that 90 per cent of Aboriginal detainees held in the AMC had a prior history of incarceration in the ACT. Picture: Shutterstock

It was pleasing to see the opinion piece by Mr Philip Lee, "Indigenous Incarceration: a national disgrace and nobody cares" in the Sunday Canberra Times on April 26.

Clearly Philip cares, as do I - so that makes two of us. In fact I am in despair at the lack of attention the issue attracts in the ACT. The Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner, Ms June Oscar, recently referred to the incarceration of Aboriginal women in Australia as the "greatest human rights issue facing Australia", and she is right.

Mr Lee refers in his article to a report prepared two years ago by Justice Matthew Myers on behalf of the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) titled Pathways to Justice-Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

The ALRC Report understandably focuses on Indigenous incarceration at the national level and the data from the report referred to by Mr Lee reflects that. He writes that the ALRC Report noted that Indigenous men are 14.7 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous men and that Indigenous women are 21.2 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-indigenous women.

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The ALRC report also found that Indigenous incarceration rates increased by 41 per cent between 2006 and 2016, and the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people over the decade widened. Mr Lee also referenced a recent report from the Keeping Women Out of Prison Coalition in NSW in which it reported a 49 per cent increase in the number of Aboriginal women imprisoned in NSW since 2013 compared to a 6 per cent increase in the number of non-Aboriginal women.

The data referenced by Mr Lee is shocking. It is an indelible stain on Australia's reputation and an indictment of our treatment of First Nations peoples. However, what is even more shocking is that the ACT-specific data on Aboriginal incarceration is dramatically worse.

In the Productivity Commission's Reports on Government Services 2020, the ACT is revealed as having the highest age standardised ratio of Aboriginal men and women in prison in Australia and the second highest crude ratio of Aboriginal peoples in prison, with an Aboriginal person in the ACT 18.9 times more likely to be imprisoned than a non-Aboriginal person. The crude rate in Western Australia, the only place in Australia higher than the ACT, is 19, only point 0.1 higher than the ACT.

What is equally if not more concerning is that the ACT also has the highest continuing increase in the prison population in Australia, with the average daily number of Aboriginal people in the AMC increasing from 29 in 2009-10 to 110 in 2018-19. In the last decade, there has been an increase of more than 250 per cent in the Aboriginal prison population in the ACT. The increase in the rest of Australia was about 50 per cent.

Adding to this tale of woe, the Minister for Corrections, Shane Rattenbury, who has presided over the explosion in the imprisonment of Aboriginal peoples in the ACT, recently released a paper about levels of reoffending which revealed that 90 per cent of Aboriginal detainees held in the AMC had a prior history of incarceration in the ACT. This is the highest rate of recidivism in Australia and is stark evidence that whatever it is the ACT government is purportedly doing to address the rate of Aboriginal incarceration in Canberra, it is clearly not working.

While I am, as I said, extremely pleased that Mr Lee has highlighted the totally unacceptable level and rate of Indigenous incarceration in Australia, I am more parochial and would like the people of Canberra to focus specifically on the fact the ACT has by far the worst, and most shameful, record in Australia when it comes to locking up Aboriginal people and for them to demand that the ACT government do something about it.

Julie Tongs is the chief executive officer of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services.

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6743008/dont-forget-acts-horrendous-indigenous-prison-record/>