

MEDIA RELEASE - 3 November 2015

Governments urged to change the record, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment gap widens

Today the Change the Record Coalition urged Governments to take critical leadership to address the rising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment crisis.

The call for action has come with the release yesterday of the most recent NSW custody statistics which show a staggering increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in prisons, with an 18 per cent increase since October last year and a 20 per cent increase over the last two years.

Coalition Co-Chair Shane Duffy said the report shows that not only are the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people incarceration at crisis levels, the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians is growing in NSW.

“Right now, we’re going backwards. Unfortunately, NSW is not alone in rising rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment. This is an issue throughout the country,” Mr Duffy said.

Mr Duffy said there are smarter approaches that address the root causes of crime before it occurs, and prevent crime from reoccurring.

“It is incredibly expensive to imprison someone and all the evidence shows that overall it isn’t an effective means of either rehabilitation or deterrence,” he said.

“If we really want our communities to be safer, we need to start investing in prevention and early intervention strategies that are designed and led by local communities.”

This week has also seen the release of the *Indigenous Australians with Mental Health Disorders and Cognitive Disability in the Criminal Justice System* (IAMHDCD) project, which draws on a dataset of 2731 people who have been in prison in NSW. The study tracked this group’s contact with police, courts, legal aid, juvenile justice and adult corrections, government housing, disability, hospitals and community services. The University of NSW report found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners had their first contact with police 3.4 years earlier than non-Indigenous inmates and were 2.4 times more likely to have spent time in juvenile justice custody than non-Indigenous inmates.

Coalition Co-Chair Kirstie Parker said, “This report gives a glimpse into some of the grim realities behind the statistics and shows how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with mental illnesses and cognitive disability are being ‘managed’ by police, courts and prisons due to a dire lack of appropriate community-based services and support.”

“We are very concerned that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with mental illnesses and cognitive impairments experience a criminal, rather than a therapeutic response to their complex needs. In particular, we are concerned that the police and courts are yet to grapple with the appropriate treatment of offenders living with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).”

“Vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people deserve better and, as a society, we will all benefit from focussing on prevention and treatment, rather than prisons. We can and must do better – not only for the vulnerable, but for all of us as communities.”

“The Law, Crime and Community Safety Council (LCCSC) under the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is due to meet later this week. We call on them to make addressing the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment and experiences of violence a national priority” Ms Parker said.

The ‘Change the Record’ Coalition is a group of leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, community and human rights organisations working collaboratively to address the disproportionate rates of incarceration and violence experienced by Indigenous Australians.

The Change the Record Coalition has identified two goals:

- *Close the gap in rates of imprisonment by 2040; and*
- *Cut the disproportionate rates of violence to at least close the gap by 2040 with priority strategies for women and children.*

The Coalition calling for greater investment in early intervention, prevention and diversion strategies. These are smarter solutions that increase safety, address the root causes of violence against women, cut reoffending and imprisonment rates, and build stronger and safer communities.

To find out more about Change the Record please go to: www.changetherecord.org.au

Media Contact:

- Shannon Longhurst - phone: 0409 711 061 / email: shannon.longhurst@atsils.org.au