

Three charts on: Australia's booming prison population

Written by Sophie Russell, Research Associate, UNSW



The prison system is tasked with several purposes: punishment, deterrence, protection and rehabilitation. AAP/Paul Miller

The prison population in Australia is at its highest-ever recorded level. Over the past decade, the number and rate of people imprisoned across all Australian states and territories has risen rapidly.

[Data released](#) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) last week show there were, on average, 40,577 people in prisons in Australia during the first quarter of 2017. This is up from 25,968 [ten years ago](#) . The largest increases have been in remand, Indigenous, and women prisoners.

More people in prison are on remand

Prisoners held on remand are those who have been charged, not granted bail, but not yet found guilty. They are held in prison custody awaiting their court appearance or trial.

According to the latest data from the ABS, across Australia 33% of the total prison population (13,182) is on remand.

It is important to point out that the numbers the ABS presents are the average daily prisoner numbers. These numbers do not show the more dramatic picture of how many people flow in and out of prison over a year.

Prisoners on remand form a large proportion of this churning flow prisoner population. While we don't know the exact number, it is estimated that the flow population is close to double the census number.

As can be seen above, the remand population increased more steeply when compared with the

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sentenced population. From 2012 to 2017, the remand population grew by 87%.

This higher increase in remandees compared with the numbers of persons sentenced is one reason for the increasing number and rate of prisoners. Reasons for this may be that [more people are being refused bail](#), and that there are [backlogs of cases in courts](#) – meaning it is taking longer for remandees to get to trial.

Increases in Indigenous imprisonment rates

The imprisonment rate of Indigenous Australians has also increased over the past decade. Indigenous Australians represent 28% of the prisoner population according to the latest figures.

As can be seen from this graph, the Indigenous prisoner rate has increased at a greater rate than the overall Australian prisoner rate over the past decade. This has helped account for the overall increase in Australian prisoner numbers and rates.

The increasing rate of Indigenous prisoners [is associated with](#) higher rates of arrest resulting in conviction, a greater likelihood of imprisonment, and a higher rate of bail refusal.

Indigenous Australians' [experiences of](#) removal, dispossession, exclusion from education and employment, and structural disadvantage also play major roles in Indigenous offending rates and over-representation in prison.

Other research has found that contributing factors include over-policing of Indigenous people with [mental and cognitive disability](#), as well as [institutional discrimination](#) and greater severity [by the criminal justice system](#) in its treatment of Indigenous offenders.

The number of women in prison is on the rise

The third group of prisoners that is growing rapidly is women.

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Over the last decade, the total number of women in prison in Australia has increased by 77%.

Although women are still a very small proportion, their percentage of the prisoner population has grown significantly over the past decade. As evident below, the increase in Indigenous women prisoners accounts for most of that growth.

The increase in Indigenous women prisoners [has been attributed to](#) a higher number of Indigenous women entering prison who have been in prison previously, as well as [increased policing](#) and [tougher sentencing regimes](#).

Why is the growth in prisoners significant?

The prison system is tasked with several purposes: punishment, deterrence, protection and rehabilitation. Rising prisoner numbers and the associated costs raise important questions about the legitimacy and viability of these purposes for the majority of those in prison.

As seen in the graphs, of concern are the number of people on remand – around half of whom are released [without having to serve further time in prison](#) because they are found not guilty, given a community order, or deemed to have served their time.

Of equal concern are the increased rates of Indigenous prisoners and Indigenous women prisoners – most of whom are on remand or on short sentences. The [majority of those](#) sent to prison re-offend and return to prison.

Prisons are expensive; expenditure on prisons in Australia in 2014-15 [was A\\$2.9 billion](#). So, it is important to ask whether this rapid increase in remand, Indigenous and women prisoner numbers and rates is justified.

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