

**ABC ONLINE:**

## **NT has 'one of world's highest' jail rates**

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The Northern Territory has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world but its main jail "falls well short of the test of decency", according to a 2007 report released this week.

The report, commissioned by the Department of Justice and co-authored by Richard Harding, a former chief of custodial services in Western Australia, found the Territory's incarceration rate in 2005-06 was the fifth highest in the world, with 551 people per 100,000 Territorians in prison.

Figures released last week by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the March quarter show there are now 696 people in custody per 100,000 Territorians.

The average incarceration rate for all of Australia is 166 people per 100,000 people.

The ABS data shows the Indigenous prison population in the Northern Territory has increased by 23 per cent in the last year - the largest jump of any state or territory.

However, the percentage of the Territory's Indigenous people in jail is less than the percentage of Indigenous people in Western Australian, South Australian and New South Wales prisons.

The report says Darwin's main prison at Berrimah is a "forbidding building" that reflects the "repressive values" of the 1970s.

"In terms of cell amenities, climate control, exercise areas, visits space and other shared areas, Berrimah falls well short of the test of 'decency' adopted by the United Kingdom and other autonomous prison inspectorates."

### **'Smiley faces' test**

The report also questions the mental health screening undertaken when people are admitted to prison in the Territory.

"There is, however, a 'smiley faces' test which prisoners are asked to look at so as to explain how they feel upon entering prison."

The report says this is a "ludicrous" method of testing the "at risk" status of prisoners.

The Northern Territory Government is building a new prison for Darwin to cope with the increased prison population.

The report states that despite high levels of alcohol-related violence and sex offences, Territory prisons have inadequate alcohol, drug and sex offender programs.

Last week's budget estimates hearings in the Territory Parliament revealed that 10 per cent of the 1100 prison inmates were offered alcohol programs last year.

Fifteen people in Darwin and nine in the Alice Springs prison underwent sex offender treatment.

Corrections Minister Gerry McCarthy could not detail any improvements since the report.

"That is what I'm working on right now," he said.

He says he has a focus on improving numbers in rehabilitation programs and adds that Darwin's new prison will have improved treatment facilities.

The Territory Opposition says it is unacceptable that the Government has not made significant ground in offering alcohol and sex offender rehabilitation programs since it received the Harding report.

The Country Liberals' John Elferink says the Territory cannot afford to wait until the new prison is built.

"Clearly what happens to prisoners after they enter the prison process needs to be improved and this Government has completely dropped the ball on that," he said.

"To see so few people go through programs after they enter prison just demonstrates the Government puts them into jail and then as far as they're concerned the problem is solved."