

# NT jail rate among world's worst

Natasha Robinson | *June 22, 2009*

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**THE Northern Territory's incarceration rate is now the third-highest in the world, while prison services in the state have been slammed for a lack of alcohol programs and sex offender treatment programs for inmates.**

A report by Western Australia's former head of custodial services, Richard Harding, said there was a lack of mental health screening of prisoners, appalling conditions in Darwin's Berrimah Prison, and a critical lack of drug and alcohol rehabilitation services in the territory.

The report said Berrimah fell short of the standards of "decency" applied to prisons in Britain and other autonomous prison inspectorates.

Details of the report come as figures for the March 2009 quarter, published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, reveal the territory's imprisonment rate has ballooned to 629 prisoners per 100,000 of the adult population.

That places the territory third in prisoner numbers relative to population behind the US, with 760 prisoners per 100,000 people, and the Caribbean nation of Saint Kitts and Nevis.

The imprisonment rate -- which has increased from 551 per head of population in 2005-06 -- is more than 2 1/2 times that of Western Australia, which has the country's second-highest rate of imprisonment at 240 inmates per 100,000 of the adult population.

The report on prison services in the Northern Territory, obtained by The Australian, was commissioned by the Department of Justice in 2007.

In the report, reviewers Professor Harding, Michael Levy and John Podmore described Berrimah as a "forbidding" and "repressive" institution.

"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," they write.

The NT government has plans to build a new prison to replace Berrimah jail.

The report said it was of "great concern" that alcohol programs and sex offender treatment programs in NT prisons were "few in number".

"Given the reported prevalence of sexual offences within the convicted prison population and the recent commonwealth intervention to deal with child abuse, we were disappointed to find that, as with alcohol programs, sex offender treatment programs were few in number, poorly evaluated and not integrated with other health and reducing re-offending agendas."

The report also slammed the lack of mental health screening for prisoners entering jail. The only attempt at analysing a new inmate's mental state was a "smiley faces" test, where prisoners are asked to look at a series of smiling or frowning faces and asked to identify how they feel upon entering prison.

"As an identifier of 'at risk' status, this is ludicrous," the report said.

Senate estimates hearings in Darwin last week revealed that only six prisoners completed a sex offender treatment program in NT prisons in 2008-09. Only 111 prisoners completed an alcohol rehabilitation program.