More action needed to stem overcrowding in SA Prisons

It is not surprising that little over a week ago tensions boiled over and inmates were placed in lockdown because of overcrowding concerns raised by unions representing SA prison staff.

By mid-2011 the prison population was increasing at a consistent rate of 8 per cent annually and had reached 96 per cent capacity. Shortly after, our prisons reached full capacity.

In recent years, the prisons have been overflowing, forcing prison staff to use the remand centre and police holding cells for reasons they were not designed.

Overcrowding has become the norm. Why does this matter? What do you expect to happen when you force people who exhibit antisocial behaviour, boredom, idleness, aggression, despair and an absence of personal control to live in overcrowded conditions? Incidents of bullying, violence, self-harm and communicable diseases become commonplace. Importantly, up to a third of these incarcerated people have not yet got to trial and are presumed to be innocent. Some are innocent.

Whilst imprisonment is supposed to have a dual feature of punishment and rehabilitation, no rehabilitation is provided prior to trial. Little and sometimes no rehabilitation is being provided to those in prison post trial.

There are too many cases of people suitable for bail but inappropriately in custody only because, for example, they do not have a fixed home.

Prison overcrowding becomes self-perpetuating. Many prisoners cannot complete mandatory rehabilitation courses because the waiting list is too long. This keeps prisoners in jail for longer and increases overcrowding. Chronic delays in the trial process compounds the problem. Instead of investing in the judicial process, the Government’s flawed idea to deal with this is to take away long established rights of an accused.

Clues to the solution can be found by looking at what has worked and not worked overseas. Firstly, countries like America have shown that simply building more prisons with a view to punishment does not work. You end up building more and more prisons which get filled up with more prisoners. It’s like a virus which spreads in close company and the focus should be treating,
and eventually preventing, the illness. In the 1990s, New York Mayor Giuliani substantially reduced the prison population by implementing a comprehensive rehabilitation program. In 1999 the Singapore Prison Service similarly adopted a strategy that had, at its heart, an intensive focus on rehabilitation. In eight years to 2007 the prison numbers fell from 18,000 to 12,500 and reoffending rates fell from 44 to 24 per cent.

Interestingly, it was not the facilities but rather the hopefulness that prisoners could be rehabilitated and restored to the community, evident in the strategies, programs, attitudes and staff, which were credited with the result.

Instead of being allocated inane tasks the prisoners focussed on vocational training. There have been similar experiences in Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

A continuing lack of resources, funding and action in this area will likely result in more conflict within our prison system and ongoing poor outcomes including even more overcrowding.

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