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The Secretariat
Legislative Council
Legal and Social Issues Committee
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I wish to address to first two points of the term of reference to this inquiry. That being (1) an analysis of factors influencing Victoria's growing remand and prison populations; and (2) strategies to reduce rates of criminal recidivism.

Every time a released prisoner re-offends it means that more crimes have been committed and more crimes mean more victims. We all want the crimes rate to decrease as less crimes means less victims, and a safer community.

For the last 100 years or more, Victoria's answer to an increasing crime rate, is to increase the punishment for offences, this has led to an increase in the prison population. We are now at a point where we are told that 'good governments build more prisons'. I have the opposite view! I believe that bad governments build prisons! If we have good governments, we would not require more prisons but less.

Every time someone reoffends it is not only a failure of the offender, but also a failure of our government and the community. The offender has failed to learn from their past mistakes, the government failed them by not addressing the educational and social welfare issues they face. While the community has failed in reintegrate them into a healthy society.

We need to change the way we do things, and if we look at Finland we might find some answers. Finland success came from a combination of; working with criminology experts, agreements between political parties, help from the media and wider crime control strategies. It's these crime control strategies that I wish I briefly focus on in this submission.

I believe that there are close ties between our current criminal recidivism rate and the social issues that these offenders face. If we address some of these social issues we will address the recidivism rate and as a result the crime rate.

When a person goes to prison it is a very visible punishment for a crime, and sometimes this is a just punishment. But there are also a number of unseen punishments to prison. There is the obvious loss of freedom; there is also the loss of connection to a partner, to children and to friends and often these connections can never be re-established. There is also the loss of employment, loss of money and often a loss of a home to return home to.

There should be a punishment when someone breaks the law. But the answer is not always to impose tough sentencing.

In 1950 Finland had 185 prisoners per 100,000 people of its population; through focusing on sentencing reform they now have a rate of 66 prisoners per 100,000. This is compared to Victoria's current rate of approximately 106 per 100,000. Finland recidivism rate is 33% as compared to Victoria's 42%.

So what is Finland doing differently? For a start they see criminal reform as a community issues, and one that the whole community can contribute to. We have all heard the old saying that 'it takes a village to raise a child' but can we also say 'it takes a village to reform an offender'

We can start this by removing the stigma of having a prison sentences or criminal history. We can also reduce criminal prison sentences and place offenders in a community where they can not only see the effects crime has on a community, but it also enables and encourages them to be a part of a healthy community. A healthy community is a place where they can be accepted for who they are now and not judged on who they were.

Education is another area in need of improvement. The average prisoner in the Victorian prison has a year ten education level. Low education levels can make it difficult for anyone to get a fulfilling employment. A fulfilling job leads to a positive sense of self-worth. This has the added bonus of decent pay, which leads to real chance in life. When you add a criminal history to that low education level, obtaining fulfilling employment is almost impossible.

We need to give ex-offenders real education chances and real job training. Training in areas like traffic control or barrister training is a good start but more is needed. Educational opportunities are also needed in areas like IT, engineering, mining, hospitality and trades as well as warehouse and business management.

Once their education level is increased the focus then needs to turn to future employment. This is where employers need to step up to the plate. We need to give people with a criminal history a second chance! The government can take a lead role in this. Currently government employment opportunities are one of the hardest job markets to break into for ex-offenders. Most new government positions require criminal history checks, and once they see a criminal history the job opportunity falls through.

The stigma of having a criminal history needs to be removed. For most a person's criminal history is a dark chapter in their life and one that few can understand. It would be true to say that someone has to experience it to truly understand it.

To remove this stigma, Social attitudes need to change, and we all need to be more understanding and accepting of people's history.

When we imprison people all aspects of their lives are controlled. They are told when to sleep, when to eat, when to work and when to exercise. They are told who they can and cannot communicate with from the outside world, and are told who they can get visits from. They are given very little practical education opportunities and are reminded every day of the mistakes they made.

When they are released they are still made to feel like an offender, because of an unforgiving corrections system that still reminds they of their past. Society expects these people to be fully reformed and feel that they should just get back into society, as if it is as easy as just dusting yourself off and getting back on a bike. However when they have been isolated from family and friend for so long it is difficult to reintegrate, this is made more difficult when many are not welcome back into their old healthy social groups.

They also find it difficult to find employment and housing because of their history and this makes them feel like second class. This all leads to then feeling isolated in our community. This isolation can then lead to unhealthy choices in the life of the ex-offender and these unhealthy choices can lead to reoffending this then leads to the revolving door criminal system.

In conclusion I would like to quote Albert Einstein who said "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

Thanks you for your time and for reading and considering this submission.

Regards

Gary Jenkins

