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Media Release

Western Australian Government Combating High Indigenous Imprisonment Rate

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In 1991, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that the over-representation of Indigenous people in custody was of major concern. It recommended that Indigenous people be arrested and imprisoned only as a last resort.

Despite these recommendations, Indigenous people have come into increasing contact with the criminal justice system. Ten years ago, Indigenous people represented 14% of all prisoners. This figure has now increased to 20%.

In the last year, the Indigenous imprisonment rate continued its upward trend in all states except South Australia and Western Australia.

Although Western Australia has the second highest rate of imprisonment in the country, the State government has recently been taking steps to reduce its prison population. Increased juvenile bail accommodation facilities, shorter sentences for minor offences, administrative changes, and greater use of suspended sentences and community orders are some of the factors which have led to the 18% fall in Indigenous imprisonment rate over the last year.

In an effort to further reduce imprisonment levels, the Western Australian government is currently introducing legislation which will see community orders and other alternatives used in place of sentences under 6 months. As proportionally more Aboriginal people are locked up for minor offences than the non-Indigenous population, this legislation is a positive development for Indigenous people.

Many criticisms can still be levelled at Western Australia's imprisonment policies; the continuation of Mandatory Sentencing, for example, is deplorable. The Western Australian government should be commended, however, for bucking the Australian wide trend of locking up more people for longer.

At an average cost of \$52,000 per annum per prisoner, putting more people in prison is an expensive exercise. Considering that the Aboriginal recidivism rate is currently 82%, it is also a futile exercise.

Research has continually demonstrated that punitive punishments do not act as a deterrent. Deterrence only works when people feel they have something to lose. Most offenders, especially Aboriginal offenders, have already lost everything.