

## *Letters*

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17 August 1992

Volume 4(1) of *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* included an article by Alex Wodak, "Controlling HIV Infection Behind Bars ...". This included a statement: "In many western countries, including the State of New South Wales, almost one per cent of the total population at any time is behind bars." (p 29). Fortunately this is not true of New South Wales, where the imprisonment rate is approximately 0.1 per cent of the population. The figure also exaggerates the situation in other countries. In the United States, which imprisons more people than most other countries, the imprisonment rate is 271 per hundred thousand. A further 144 per hundred thousand are housed in jails. So, even in the United States the total imprisonment rate is about 0.4 per cent of the population. (Sources: Australian Institute of Criminology, "Australian Prison Trends" No 190, and US Department of Justice, "Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics" (1990).

Frank Morgan  
Director  
South Australian Office of Crime Statistics

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I apologise for inadvertently providing an incorrect estimate of the prevalence of imprisonment in Australia. As the average duration of imprisonment in Australia is approximately four months, prevalence of imprisonment is a poor guide to the annual through-put and thus potential public health impact of Australian prisons. Also, there is far more mixture of injecting drug users from geographically diverse origins in prisons than occurs without imprisonment. In terms of future spread of HIV infection, the high annual turnover, the fact that prisons bring drug users from very different geographical origins together and the fact that over half of the prisoners convicted of drug-related offences will inject and share during incarceration indicates that prisons have a public health importance far in excess of that suggested by the number of persons in prison at any one time. Thus, although I provided an incorrect estimate of the prevalence of prisoners in the population, there are many reasons why prisons should still be regarded as critical institutions for the control of HIV infection among injecting drug users and the general population.

Dr A Wodak  
Director, Alcohol & Drug Service  
St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney

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