

# **A PROFILE OF ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER PRISONERS IN NORTH QUEENSLAND**

**Robyn Keast**  
**Senior Community Correctional**  
**Officer—Programs**  
**Queensland Corrective Services Commission**

IN OCTOBER 1989, THE QUEENSLAND CORRECTIVE SERVICES COMMISSION undertook, as part of its philosophy and direction, to contribute to the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inmates being reduced from 20 per cent to 10 per cent of the total prison population. To help achieve this goal, the first step was to undertake a profile of Aboriginal and Islander inmates in North Queensland Correctional Centres.

## **Method**

Data was collected by an examination of prison file records on a nominated day for two consecutive months to determine characteristics of Aboriginal and Islander inmates. The material gathered fell into two main categories—personal and offending characteristics—and was used to construct a detailed profile of Aboriginal/Islander prisoners in North Queensland Correctional Centres.

To ensure accuracy of detail, data was collected from both Correctional Centres on a nominated day for two consecutive months: 12 September 1989 and 10 October 1989. For ease of analysis, noting only a very minor divergence in figures, the former census was decided upon as the principal data base.

## **Study Outcomes**

The number of Aboriginal and Islanders in North Queensland Correctional Centres on 12 September 1989 was 224:

Keeping People out of Prison

Townsville	166
Lotus Glen	<u>58</u>
	224

**Personal Characteristics**

Sex:	
Male	218
Female	<u>6</u>
	224

In the following tables, comparisons will be drawn with the Queensland prison average found in the Australian National Prison Census (30 June 1988).

An analysis of the ages of prisoners in Table 1 shows that the age groups, ranging from 20 to 40 years were the predominant offending population for this region, accounting for 75 per cent. Fewer than 13 per cent of the prisoners were under 20 on each occasion (September to October).

*Table 1*

**Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners by Age**

	North Queensland	%	Queensland Prison Average
	No.	(%)	(%)
17 years under 20 years	29	13	11
20 years under 25 years	59	26	25
25 years under 30 years	61	27	20
30 years under 40 years	49	22	24
40 years plus	20	9	18
Unknown	6	3	0

Table 2 shows that in excess of 75 per cent of prisoners were classified as 'never married' as compared to the Queensland percentage of 60 per cent. This figure is consistent with that found in the Groote Eylandt studies of 1982 and 1983.

The majority of Aboriginal/Islander inmates (71 per cent) have received at least some secondary education (*see* Table 3). This is not much less than the Queensland prison average of 83 per cent. It may be worth investigating the actual standard of education acquired, rather than number of years spent in the education system.

While Table 4 does not note a great difference between the employment/unemployment status of Aboriginal/Islander inmates and the Queensland prison general rate, it is worth noting that a large number of prisoners from remote communities are employed under the CDEP scheme. As a consequence, real employment rates would be much less than indicated.

Table 2

**Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners by Marital Status**

	North Queensland	%	Queensland Prison Average
	No.	(%)	(%)
Never married	171	76	60
Married/defacto	47	21	31
Separated/divorced	3	1	8
Unknown	3	1	1

Table 3

**Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners by Education Level**

	North Queensland	%	Queensland Prison Average
	No.	(%)	(%)
Under 1 year	1	45	1.1
1 year-7 years	62	28	13.4
8 years-10 years	133	59	70.9
10 years	26	12	*12.3
Unknown	2	1	

\* 12.3 includes tertiary, trade and completed secondary education.

Table 4

**Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners by Employment at Time of Arrest**

	North Queensland	%	Queensland Prison Average
	No.	(%)	(%)
Employed	70	31	49
Unemployed	122	55	47
Home duties	N/A	N/A	N/A
Student	N/A	N/A	N/A
Pensioner/other	3	2	2
Unknown	24	11	

N/A Not Available

The average imprisonment rate for remote Aboriginal/Islander communities is 1,758/100,000 compared to the Queensland population rate of 122/100,000 (*see* Table 5). Therefore, Aboriginals and Islanders from remote communities in North Queensland are imprisoned at a rate of at least 14 times that of the general population.

Table 5

**Imprisonment Rate—Remote Communities  
12 September 1989**

Community	*Population	Prisoners	Imprisonment Rate per 100,000 population
Palm Island	942	17	1,804
Yarrabah	822	8	973
Wujul Wujul	176	1	568
Hopevale	379	6	1,583
Lockhart River	227	9	3,964
Bamaga/Thursday Islands			
Other Torres Strait Islands	2,000	11	550
Weipa South	219	5	2,283
Aurukun	467	12	2,569
Edward River	259	8	3,088
Kowanyama	475	12	2,526
Mornington Island	495	9	1,818
Normanton	1,200	1	83
Doomadgee	473	5	1,057

\* This imprisonment rate has been calculated on adult (i.e. 18 and over) population figures for remote communities (1986 Census) and, therefore, may represent a slightly inflated figure

The following tables give a detailed account of the nature of these offences, sentencing periods and recidivism patterns.

As the figures in Table 6 show, the bulk of Aboriginal/Islander offending falls in the two main categories: offences against the person (58 per cent), and offences against property (27 per cent). The latter is a slight decrease as compared to the Queensland average. However, the former category is almost twice the Queensland average rate. An additional area of concern is the high number of secondary offences (of a violent nature) also committed.

Table 7 outlines the most serious offences committed by inmates from remote Aboriginal/Islanders communities. From this data offences against the person represent 66 per cent of most serious offences as compared to the Queensland average of 33 per cent. This figure is twice the Queensland average and represents a major area of concern; particularly as the majority of these offences are committed in the offender's own community. As remote communities comprise 50 per cent of Aboriginal/Islander inmates in North Queensland Correctional Centres, this is a significant imprisonment rating given the comparatively low population figures from these communities.

Table 6

**Types of Offences—Remote Communities**

Offences	Aboriginal/ Islander		Queensland General All Prisoners
	No.	(%)	(%)
Offences against the person:			
Physical	85	38}	18}
Sexual	44	20} 58%	15} 33%
Robbery & extortion	9	4	10
Offences against property	62	27	31
Offences against good order	6	3	3
Drug offences	0	0	9
Traffic offences	12	5	10
Other/unknown	7	3	3
3 remand			

Table 7

**Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners Remote Communities  
Percentage of Prisoners by Most Serious Offences**

	Remote Communities		Queensland Average
	No.	(%)	(%)
Offences against the person	68	66	33
Robbery & extortion	2	2	10
Offences against property	22	21	31
Offences against good order	5	5	3
Drug offences	3	3	10
Traffic offences	3	3	10
Other	3	3	3

Table 8 indicates that the majority of inmates were dealt with in the higher courts, particularly the Supreme Court. This is consistent with the types of offences committed.

The legal status of inmates demonstrates that a very small percentage of inmates were unconvicted at the time of the census (*see* Table 9). Therefore, the provision of remand hostels would have little impact on numbers.

Table 8

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners by Level of Court of Sentence/Remand**

	Remote Communities	Queensland General
	(%)	(%)
Magistrates Court	33	28
District Court	21	32
Supreme Court	44	38
Other/unknown	2	2

Table 9

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islander Inmates by Legal Status**

		Remote Communities	Queensland General
	No.	(%)	(%)
Convicted	*221	97	88
Unconvicted	3	3	8

\* 2 appeals.

An assessment of Table 10 shows the bulk of inmates (44 per cent) are in for sentence periods of between two and ten years with another 11 per cent in for more than ten years and life. While this is consistent with Queensland average figures, it belies the generally held assumption that Aboriginal/Islander people are over represented in the short range sentence categories.

Table 7 gives some additional insight to this as the majority of offences committed by this population group are of a more serious physical and sexual nature and therefore incur longer sentencing options.

Table 11 shows alcohol presents as a significant factor in Aboriginal/Islander offending patterns. It is highly likely that the percentage is much greater than was retrievable from prison and sentencing records. Indeed, conservative estimates rate alcohol as contributing to in excess of 80 per cent of Aboriginal/Islander offences.

An early parole recommendation does not seem to be a feature of Aboriginal/Islander sentencing with only 17 per cent being noted. Of the 38 people paroled or recommended for parole, four were returned to prison for breach of conditions.

Table 13 and 14 show the recidivism rate for these prisoners as 90 per cent with prior convictions and 76 per cent with prior custodial experiences. This is extraordinarily high as compared with 55 per cent of Queensland prisoners having prior custodial experience.

*Table 10*

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners by Aggregate Sentence**

	Aboriginal/ Islander		Queensland General
	No.	(%)	(%)
Under 1 month	5	2	.7
1 month under 3 months	12	5	4.7
3 months under 6 months	23	10	7
6 months to 1 year	28	13	12
1 year to 2 years	32	15	12
2 years to 5 years	49	22	27
5 years to 10 years	49	22	20
10 years and over	14	6	14
Life	12	5	6.4

*Table 11*

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners where Alcohol was a Significant Contributing Factor in Offending**

	Aboriginal/ Islander	Queensland General
	(%)	(%)
Alcohol as contributing factor	47	10.6
Not a contributing factor	7	N/A
Cultural aspect	.89	.1
Unknown	45	N/A

N/A Not Applicable

*Table 12*

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners with Parole Recommendation**

	No.	(%)
Parole recommendation	38	*17
No parole recommendation	141	63
Unknown	45	20

\* 4 breached parole conditions.

*Table 13*

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners with Prior Convictions**

	No.	(%)
Previous convictions	201	90
No previous convictions	17	8
Unknown	6	2

*Table 14*

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islander Prisoners with Prior Custodial Sentences**

	Remote Communities	Queensland Average	
	No.	(%)	(%)
Previous custodial sentence	171	76	55
No previous custodial sentence	40	18	43
Unknown	10	4	0.7
Fine default/watch house	3	1	

Table 15 gives an indication of the number of prisoners with prior community based sentences. From this information it is clear that most prisoners have had exposure to the benefits of community supervision prior to custodial sentencing.

*Table 15*

**Percentage of Aboriginal/Islanders with Previous Community Supervision**

	No.
Probation	*99
Community Service	69
Fine Option	0
Parole	10
Home Detention	3
Other States	4
Unknown	0

\* 21 breached conditions

NB some prisoners have had more than one order.

In summary, the data obtained from the census indicates that Aboriginal/Islander prisoners in North Queensland are likely to be unmarried, unemployed males in the 25 to 40 year age bracket, who are highly likely to have been incarcerated on previous occasions and dealt with in the Supreme Court for offences of a violent nature. These prisoners are likely to be serving sentences of between two and ten years and have a need for educational and counselling programs to enhance poor literacy and numeracy skills and alcohol problems.



## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Given the information gleaned from the profile, rather than concentrate on reducing the Aboriginal and Islander prison population, Queensland Corrective Services Commission resources would, initially, be better spent by releasing all prisoners who fit a set criteria to community supervision and provide maximum programming opportunities for the remaining prisoners. This is supported by Rev. Shane Blackman's (Aboriginal member of Regional Community Corrections Board) comments that most, but particularly Aboriginal and Islander prisoners, have not been exposed to needs-based or culturally relevant counselling or programming during their sentence periods. A natural extension of this notion is a graduated needs-based program starting from the induction and assessment phase and concluding with a bridging course to the community.

A further recommendation is the establishment of graduated release hostels, preferably in the communities most affected by offending behaviour. It is envisaged these hostels would provide a constructive environment in which prisoners could gradually return to community life. Thus far, due partly to economic restraints, and a lack of understanding of the laws and culture of Aboriginal and Islander people, our intervention efforts have been largely restricted to the sponsorship of existing Aboriginal and Islander programs in return for guaranteed accommodation and treatment for our clients.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that the Queensland Corrective Services Commission needs to establish broad interconnecting strategies (based on accurate data) in the development of community-based responses to sentencing options and, in the long run, crime prevention strategies for Aboriginal and Islander people. These linkages should occur at a number of levels across the Commission, for example, at the base—through the Aboriginal Liaison Officers and middle-Area Supervisors—and at the higher policy and decision making levels.

Moreover, since the responsibility for the well-being of Aboriginal and Islander people falls within an increasingly fragmented government and non-government sector, the establishment of integrating committees to discuss the relevance and impact of proposed interventions would seem to be a logical step.

This study, while not conclusive, does provide a profile of Aboriginal and Islander prisoners in North Queensland which will aid future direction setting and resource allocations. It also highlights problem areas which require a more detailed examination of the social and cultural economic and political aspects of offending behaviour in remote communities.