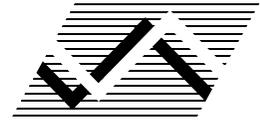


NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

NSW Attorney General's Department



DR. DON WEATHERBURN
DIRECTOR

In reply please quote:

27 February 2008

Media Release

Does the lack of alternatives increase the risk of a prison sentence?

New research by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and research shows that, contrary to concerns expressed by the NSW Standing Committee on Law and Justice,¹ the higher imprisonment rate in rural and remote areas of NSW is not the result of a shortage of alternatives to custody in those areas.

In 2005, 12 per cent of convicted offenders in the very remote areas of NSW received a prison sentence, compared with 6 per cent of inner-metropolitan offenders. The Bureau points out, however, that this discrepancy might be the result of differences in the profile of offenders coming before urban and rural courts.

The Bureau matched groups of offenders on a wide range of factors (e.g. principal offence, number of concurrent offences, legal representation, prior convictions, age, gender, Indigenous status) and then compared the percentage imprisoned across various regions in NSW.

The Bureau found that, contrary to popular wisdom, offenders in the inner, outer, remote and very remote regional areas of NSW², were less likely to receive a prison sentence than offenders in the inner metropolitan regions. In the average case, the percentages imprisoned were:

- Inner metropolitan: 3.42 per cent
- Inner regional: 2.52 per cent
- Outer regional: 2.47 per cent
- Remote or very remote: 2.23 per cent.

The Bureau report suggests one likely reason for the lower rate of imprisonment of offenders in remote and regional areas is that magistrates are conscious of the shortage of community-based sentencing options and react to the shortage by being more sparing in their use of imprisonment.

Commenting on the findings, the Director of the Bureau said that, although the findings are reassuring, they do not detract from the need to improve the range of alternatives to custody in rural and remote NSW.

Further enquiries: Dr Don Weatherburn: 9231-9190 or 0419-494-408

¹ In the Standing Committee's 2006 report: Community based sentencing options for rural and remote areas and disadvantaged populations, NSW Parliament Sydney.

² In NSW, for example, Gosford would be defined as inner regional, Lismore as outer regional, Murrumbidgee as remote and Cobar as very remote. Inner metropolitan would include Sydney and Newcastle.