

**INQUIRY INTO ISSUES RELATING TO THE OPERATIONS
AND MANAGEMENT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIVE SERVICES**

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Date Received: 30/01/2006

Subject:

Summary

‘Doing Time’ for the Dollar: A contribution to the examination of the inmate employment programs and remuneration policies in some gaols in NSW

by Vincent Virgona

‘Doing time’ is an apt euphemism for the experience of incarceration, as time, its organization and uses, lies at the core of prison life. For inmates with an established work ethic, regular, rational and reasonably remunerated employment has the potential to become a centrally important factor in both the practical, and also the rehabilitative, use of time during incarceration. For such people, work already understood as a personal and socially positive means of passing time and thus assists them to cope better with incarceration. If the work they do makes sense to them, advances their employable skills and/or has appreciable financial reward, it is more likely to be undertaken with enthusiasm. For those inmates in whom a work ethic is undeveloped, employment in prison has the capacity to be a positive inculcation in the concept and its practice, one that will serve them well for reintegration in the community upon release.

The days of punitive, futile work practices in gaols, such as breaking or moving rocks, are thankfully long gone, but the practice of work as a positive factor in rehabilitation has still some way to go. It is acknowledged that the work done by prisoners is essential for the existence and ongoing effective running of CSI. However, it is suggested here that, in their present form, the employment programs in some NSW gaols have limited effectiveness, and in some cases may have even become counterproductive to inmate rehabilitation. What follows are a number of issues central to the problems in the CSI employment programs and suggested solutions:

The Work Ethic

- Fair reward for meaningful effort is widely recognized as a central tenet of the work ethic within the wider community, yet this construct is not applied to work programs within the prison community. Employed inmates receive such a minimal wage that their work amounts to virtual slave labour, inciting a sense of exploitation that is as likely to incur resentment as any sense of reward. If the work program in gaol is intended to inculcate or encourage the inmate’s work ethic, such underpayment is counterproductive to that end.

Rehabilitation or Recidivism

- It is well known that major factors in recidivism are the difficulties released prisoners face in integrating back into the community, particularly in that initial period. Finding affordable accommodation and/or re-establishing relationships with estranged loved ones often present insurmountable hurdles for people who have been institutionalized for long periods. Currently, many inmates are released from prison with insufficient resources to support themselves until they have settled in and found work. The process of obtaining the various benefits offered through Centrelink can be a degrading experience, even for people with positive working experience and without a criminal record. Also, the Newstart allowance simply does not provide sufficient support for other than those with some existing resources and strong networks in the community. Frustration, humiliation and outrage are obvious incitements to yet more criminal behaviour and a return to the familiar stability and safety of incarceration is known to become an initiative for some.
- It is suggested here that employed inmates be paid a basic award wage, the bulk of which, minus an agreed sum received for weekly in-house expenses, may be either a) dispersed to dependents in the community, both maintaining those emotional and social links more effectively and reducing the expense on the community purse, or b) saved for their release, providing funds to support a successful reintegration into the community that has been achieved through self-sufficiency and so with dignity.
- There have been few other incentives that might elicit a positive effect from employment in CSI programs and, unfortunately, rather than improving over time those practices that did exist appear to have regressed. For instance, throughout the 1980s and early '90s the Parole board viewed an inmate's good CSI work references as an important factor in their considerations. Now an inmate's work reference appears to no longer have any relevance to their parole, removing motivational incentives to earn an exemplary work record. It is suggested here that the inmate's work record during incarceration be restored as a component of their parole conditions.
- Poor financial literacy and practices are often a component in the development of an inmate's criminal path and so, where relevant, financial education is an important factor in the rehabilitation process. It is suggested here that

financial counseling be an integral part of any CSI employment program.

Collateral Economic Impacts

- CSI enterprises compete unfairly with private businesses in the wider community, creating strain by artificially forcing down prices, causing business closure or downsizing and redundancies. This is only possible because of CSI's exceptionally low labour costs, providing an unfair advantage over commercial enterprises, which are legally obliged to provide fair rewards and conditions. For example, currently, the maximum wage a top machinist employed by CSI receives is around \$80pw, an economy unable to be matched by private enterprise. It is argued here that those CSI enterprises competing in the wider commercial community should be subject to exactly the same regulations on conditions, including labour costs.
- In general, it might be seen that, while initially CSI may be able to offer products and services at a reduced cost, the collateral costs to the community purse extrapolate in other ways, such as the loss of rehabilitation potential and the self-support of inmate's families. However, it is more appropriate that CSI be viewed as a *money saving* rather than a money making organization. It is suggested that CSI, being a government run business for Corrective Services purposes, should concentrate its interests primarily on creating food and clothing for the inmates of the States prisons.
- CSI programs might also provide services and products for charities, such as Land Care, Wires, Royal Guide Dog Association and other environmental groups. This sort of work might be an option for trusted inmates that would provide a morally and emotionally positive working experience and also benefit the wider society.
- Currently, much of the work on offer is unskilled. Preferably, CSI work programs should concentrate on education in skills-based work, offering opportunities for apprenticeships, preparation for study and relevant TAFE courses. These factors should be central to the design of work programs, so that the work experience might be associated with some educational effort. Thus the inmate not only gains a sense of achievement through their work but will also re-enter the community with an improved employment potential. This overrides the slim benefit accomplished by unskilled, repetitious work.

Conclusion

From observation during an extended personal experience in the NSW prison environment, illiteracy has emerged as a central problem for a significant proportion of inmates. It is generally recognized now, that many people suffering some form of illiteracy have difficulty finding satisfying work, suffer social alienation and develop antisocial attitudes and behaviours as a defense mechanism, thereby leading into criminal activities. These attitudes and mechanisms can also be quite effective in disguising the root causes of problems in interviews and without such information being volunteered a significant proportion of inmate illiteracy can go undetected. An inmate's literacy and educational needs might be better observed, assessed and serviced within the work context.

With a positive experience of working, an inmate's engagement in a CSI work program has the potential to be a central factor in their rehabilitation and successful reintegration into the community, thus reducing recidivism and cost to the community. Currently, very little of this potential is being realised in the work programs offered by CSI. The points raised above are based upon personal experience and observations during incarceration and the solutions have been developed through lengthy consideration and extensive life experience in business. This contribution is offered in a spirit of hope and trust in the intentions of NSW Corrective Services to produce a system of internal employment that will aid the rehabilitation of their inmates.