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MEDIA RELEASE

The effect of arrest on Indigenous employment prospects

The high rate of arrest of Aboriginal people, often for non-violent alcohol-related offences, is one of the major factors behind their low rates of employment, according to a new report released today by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

The report uses national survey data to analyse the effect of arrest on Aboriginal employment, controlling for other factors which might influence such employment.

According to the report between 12 and 17 per cent of the difference in the employment/population ratio for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is attributable the higher rate of arrest of Aboriginal people.

For Aboriginal males, having an arrest record reduces the probability of employment from about 41 per cent to about 23 per cent. For Aboriginal females having an arrest record reduces the probability of employment from about 29 per cent to 16 per cent.

For Aboriginal males, arrest is the third largest influence on their employment prospects, behind education and living in a family which includes non-Aboriginal people.

One of the disturbing findings highlighted in the Bureau report is that, although having an arrest record greatly reduces Aboriginal employment prospects, Aboriginal people are often being arrested for drink-driving and drinking in public rather than theft or violent offences.

More than 20 per cent of Aboriginal males in the survey were last arrested for drink-driving or drinking in a public place. Nearly seven per cent of Aboriginal females in the survey were last arrested for one of these offences.

Only 11 per cent of males and three per cent of females in the survey had been arrested for a property or violent offence.

Commenting on the findings, the authors of the report, Dr Boyd Hunter and Dr Jeff Borland, said they highlighted the vicious circle of arrest, unemployment and crime faced by many Aboriginal communities.

'Aboriginal people are arrested at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal people for public order offences. Once they have an arrest record their employment prospects diminish and this, in turn, probably increases their future risk of involvement in crime.

'The only way out of this vicious circle is to reduce the Aboriginal arrest rate. One way of accomplishing this is to reduce the rate of arrest for alcohol-related offences, such as offensive behaviour and offensive language'.

'In 1998 there were 887 arrests of Aboriginal people for offensive language. This was 30 per cent higher than the arrest rate of Aboriginal people for offensive language during 1997.'

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‘Another way of accomplishing it is to increase the rate at which young Aboriginal people, detained for minor offences, are diverted to Youth Justice Conferences rather than arrested and brought to court’.

‘A third way of reducing the arrest rate of Aboriginal people is to increase funding and facilities for the care and treatment of intoxicated persons. This would reduce the need for police to rely on arrest as a means of dealing with ongoing public order problems.’

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