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MEDIA RELEASE

Contact with the NSW court & prison systems: The influence of age, Indigenous status & gender

In 2001 more than forty percent of the Aboriginal male population aged 20-24 in NSW appeared before a NSW court charged with a criminal offence. One in ten Aboriginal males in NSW aged 20-24 received a prison sentence.

Among Aboriginal people who appeared in court in 2001, only a minority (17% of Aboriginal males, 27% of Aboriginal females) had *no* previous court appearances in the five years before their 2001 court appearance.

The imprisonment rate of Aboriginal people was 16 times higher than the overall rate of contact between NSW citizens and the prison system.

These disturbing findings emerged from a study into the rates of contact between NSW residents and the NSW criminal justice system by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

Although the study found much lower rates of contact between the NSW criminal justice system and the general NSW population, the general levels of contact were still surprisingly high.

Over a five year period, about 6.5 per cent of the NSW population aged 10 years and over (i.e. 352,000 people, or about one in 15 residents over the age of criminal responsibility) appeared in court charged with a criminal offence.

Over a one year period, the proportion appearing in a NSW court charged with a criminal offence was just under two per cent (i.e. about 103,000 people or 1 in 53 NSW residents).

Naturally rates of contact with the prison system were much lower than rates of contact with the court system. About 1 in 216 NSW adults was imprisoned at least once over the five years between 1997 and 2001.

Rates of court appearance and imprisonment, however, were much higher for males than females.

In 2001, males were more than four times more likely to have appeared in court on criminal charges than females. They were more than ten times more likely to have been given a custodial penalty in that year.

The peak age at which people are most likely to appear in court on criminal charges and end up in prison is 20-24 (for both males and females).

According to the Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, the high rate of Aboriginal contact with the court and prison systems reflects the high rate of Aboriginal involvement in serious crime, rather than any bias in the way Aboriginal people are treated by police, magistrates and judges.

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‘If we want to bring down rates of Aboriginal contact with the criminal justice system’, he said, we have to bring down rates of Aboriginal involvement in crime’.

‘The best way to do this is to develop programs that tackle the underlying causes of Aboriginal involvement in crime, such as substance abuse, child neglect, poor school performance and unemployment’.

Further enquiries:

Dr Don Weatherburn: 02 9231 9190 (wk), 0419 494 408 (mob)