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MEDIA RELEASE

Key Trends in Crime and Justice 1998

Big increases in the number of prisoners held on remand and big falls in the number of fine defaulters are the major changes in the NSW justice system in the period 1996/7 to 1997/8, according to a new report released today by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

The report charts annual trends in the criminal justice system in NSW. (Please note: the crime trends contained in this report were released just before the election in the report entitled 'NSW Recorded Crime Statistics').

In 1997 the number of men and women held on remand hovered around 800. By June 1998, however, this number had risen to more than 1,000.

Against the upward trend in remand prisoners, the number of fine defaulters held in prison has plummeted according to the Bureau report.

In early 1997 the number of fine defaulters held in prison reached a peak of more than 150 persons. By January 1998 there were virtually no male or female fine defaulters in custody.

Other figures contained in the Bureau's report indicate that delays in the District Court improved while those in the Supreme Court deteriorated between July 1996 and June 1998.

The median delay for matters proceeding to trial in the Supreme Court rose from 531 days in 1996/7 to 646 days in 1997/8, an increase of 22 per cent.

In contrast, despite an 8 per cent increase in workload, the median delay between committal and trial finalisation in the NSW District Court fell by 7 per cent, from 342 days in 1996-97 to 318 days in 1997-98.

According to the Director of the Bureau, Dr Weatherburn, although the increase in Supreme Court delay is a matter of concern, it will affect far fewer people than the decrease in District Court delay.

'The Supreme Court only holds about 50 criminal trials a year. Between July 1997 and June 1998 the District Court held over 900 trials', he said.

'Unfortunately, the drop in the number of fine defaulters held in custody does not signal reduced demand on prison accommodation.'

'The growth in the number of remand prisoners is due to an increase in the arrest rate. Since July 1998 many of these remand prisoners have been convicted and this has led to a growth in the sentenced prisoner population'.

'The increase we are seeing in the prison population has continued through the latter half of 1998 and will probably continue through 1999. This is because police are deliberately targeting repeat offenders, a group highly likely to receive a custodial sentence if convicted of a new offence.'

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