

Prison Inmates Will Be Released Early Amidst Coronavirus Fears

The management and process forward for many cases is now under review as the Local Court adapts to health policy recommendations to help stop the spread of coronavirus.

While aiming to strike a balance between sensible policy while also ensuring access to Justice, the Local Court has decided to review a number of operational issues, including how to manage its case load during Coronavirus.

These new rules supersede announcements [made earlier this month](#), as the Local Court adapts to evolving decisions being made by the State and Federal Governments. [The full list of new adjustments can be found here](#).

Under the new stipulations many matters as possible will be dealt with by Audio Visual Links, with unprecedented measures being taken to avoid the need for defendants to have to appear in court, with new rules which enable their legal representative to appear on their behalf, via email.

Like all other sectors of Australian Society right now, the courts are scrambling to respond to the potential threat of the spread of Coronavirus by ensuring that people don't mix together unless absolutely necessary.

New focus and reliance on technology

And it's a test in many ways for the Justice system, which is so people-oriented, and one that could potentially change it forever, bringing about a re-think of how much can be done using technology that allows people and lawyers and court staff remote access, while still getting the job done.

Some inmates will be released

In recent days The New South Wales Government has [granted newpowers to the corrections minister to release or parole inmates](#) nearing the end of their non-parole periods, or considered on a case-by-case basis whether inmates should be released earlier on in their sentences, as fears mount that already overcrowded prisons would struggle to contain a coronavirus outbreak, given that Australian prisons are currently operating at well over 100% of their design capacity:

The move comes on the back of a letter signed by more than 370 academics, lawyers, barristers and former magistrates warning governments that prisons face “an uncontrollable outbreak ... because COVID-19 spreads quickly in closed spaces ... and prisons are commonly epicentres for infectious diseases.”

Corrections NSW will not have the power to release inmates sentenced for serious crimes like [murder](#), terrorism or sexual offences, and in all cases must “consider the risks to community safety, the protection of domestic violence victims, and the impact on any victim before releasing an inmate.”

To abate public concerns about those who might be released posing a threat to the public, it’s important to remember that there are sensible guidelines around release and that in fact, large numbers of the people already in prison shouldn’t necessarily be there anyway: 77% of people entering and 33% of people in prison are on remand and 30% are on sentences of less than 12 months.

Being ‘on remand’ means a person is detained in a prison until a later date when a trial or sentencing hearing will take place. Many prisoners on remand have not been convicted of a criminal offence and are awaiting trial following a not guilty plea.

The Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) welcomed the move, because

Indigenous inmates are most at-risk. Indigenous people make up 27 percent of the prison population and in many cases, already suffer chronic illnesses or disabilities. Of course many Indigenous people behind bars are also there for [relatively minor offences](#), including unpaid fines, assault, public nuisance, and break and enter.

There are also calls to release [frail and elderly and juvenile offenders](#) who are currently behind bars

Globally, governments are considering or already implementing early release to contain the virus, Ireland is planning to release prisoners with less than 12 months to serve, as were some US and UK jurisdictions. In some US jurisdictions, charges for minor offences have also been dropped to avoid court cases altogether at this point in time.

Every state and territory in Australia has already banned prison visits in an effort to reduce the spread of Covid-19.