



**DEADLY CONNECTIONS**  
COMMUNITY AND JUSTICE SERVICES

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## **Call for immediate release of people in prisons due to imminent COVID crisis**

Deadly Connections (DC) has joined with the justice sector and experts to call on the NSW Government and Corrective Services to immediately release people from prisons.

The latest Delta outbreaks in Bathurst and Silverwater prisons demonstrate the risk that COVID-19 presents to people in prisons. COVID in prisos can spillover to local communities, many of which are in vulnerable regional areas.

Over-crowded indoor settings in NSW prisons create a grave threat of COVID transmission. Internationally, prisons have proven to be hotbeds for COVID-19. Rates of COVID infections in prisons have surpassed rates in the general population, with some US prisons experiencing infection rates of 65%.

Deadly Connections, an Aboriginal organisation that supports people in prisons, understands that there is widespread fear of COVID-19 in prisons. Jason Fong, a Kamilaroi man and formerly incarcerated man describes the current situation: 'you could cut the tension in prisons with a butter knife'.

Deadly Connections has been told that people are isolated in cells for extended periods without access to support, programs, employment or visitors. Deadly Connections fears that the current situation will precipitate Aboriginal deaths in custody if immediate action is not taken by the NSW Government to release people from prisons.

Vaccination of people in prisons has been limited. Only AstraZeneca has been offered, which is being declined by a large portion of the prison population due to medical concerns. Deadly Connections understands that prisoners fear fatal blood clots due to underlying health conditions and inadequate access to hospitals.

Deadly Connections, justice organisations and academics are calling for immediate:

- release of people from prisons and youth detention centres to remove pressure from overcrowded facilities and prevent the rapid spread of COVID-19
- availability of Pfizer to people in prisons
- three day rapid antigen test for all corrections workers

- grant remissions (reduced prison terms) to prisoners in lockdown
- fund Aboriginal organisations to provide support of people in prisons and upon release.

Carly Stanley, CEO of Deadly Connections, says “Governments must release Aboriginal people from prisons to prevent deaths in custody and the mental deterioration of people inside. Governments should provide resources for adequate support and safe housing for people to be released into the community. Deadly Connections is committed to providing support upon release”.

Keenan Mundine, Co-Founder of Deadly Connections reflects on his time in prison pre-pandemic as “detrimental to his mental health with very limited access to support services while in custody”. Keenan is increasingly concerned about the lockdown impact on the mental health of prisoners in an already highly volatile environment. Keenan notes that in “Bathurst Correctional Centre’s there are no showers in the cells which means any form of hygiene will need to be facilitated by officers which is not possible during a lockdown”.

Associate Professor at Sydney University, public health expert and Wiradjuri woman Megan Williams denounced the approach of holding people “in solitary confinement as an infection control measure”, and instead urges the government to “amend and use legislation to enable the release of prisoners to protect the health of those most at risk, especially First Nations people”. She points to the need to “urgently provide quality mental health care in prisons and more options for contact with supports”.

George Newhouse, National Justice Project CEO and Senior Solicitor, commented, “The COVID virus doesn’t stop at prison walls, in fact it thrives in places where many people are forced to live in confined unhygienic spaces, places like prisons. Before we see a humanitarian crisis unfold in Australia's prisons, the NSW Government must take urgent action to protect people in prisons from the virus.”

Professor of Law Thalia Anthony at the University of Technology Sydney noted that “The NSW Corrective Services Commissioner should use his discretion to release people in prison to reduce the threat of mass COVID outbreaks in over-crowded prisons”.

Brett Collins, Coordinator of Justice Action, has urged NSW Corrections to “grant remissions to prisoners in NSW so they receive shorter sentences to reflect the heightened oppressiveness of prison conditions under COVID lockdowns”.

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