

A Path Too Often Trodden
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I suppose in some ways it's a thankless task: the recidivism rate **is** high. But the two years I have spent as a member of the Adult Parole Board of Victoria have also been enormously rewarding, challenging and eye opening.

I knew in theory when invited to join the Board that illicit drug use had changed the nature of the prison and corrections system. Of the three and a half thousand men and several hundred women imprisoned in Victoria at any one time, even the official statistics indicate that the overwhelming majority (70% give or take some) are in gaol for drug related offences. A few are there because they traded in illegal drugs; very few these days simply because they used them. Most of them are there because they have committed crimes to pay for their habits.

When we see people at the Parole Board, we're given their criminal history. The pattern is unmistakable: minor offences in their early teens, the signs of early polysubstance abuse and social dysfunction followed by drug use convictions and the beginnings of serious property crime by their late teens, ending in chronic dependence, serious criminal activity and a gaol sentence by the time they're in their early twenties.

Mercifully, good sense has prevailed and there's no "three strikes and you're out" rule in Victoria. You almost admire the magistrates' patience as you read the sheet: convictions not recorded (presumably with the appropriate warnings), fines and community-based orders, intensive corrections orders and suspended sentences. But, finally, six to ten appearances down the track, that first gaol sentence.

The prisons themselves try to cope. They are remarkably good at limiting and almost eliminating the supply of illegal drugs these days. "Positives" appear sometimes early in a person's prison term, more often cannabis and prescription drugs wrongly obtained, but later in someone's sentence they are rare. There is medical help available for the "compulsory detox" that accompanies imprisonment and even limited methadone programs for those on them when incarcerated. The custodial task is, however, expensive (\$60,000 odd per year) and so, there are only limited resources available for the drug and alcohol programs and the post-release linkages that might make a difference.

If people remain substantially drug free in prison, and they have reasonable social networks to return to, they almost invariably get parole at their earliest release date for the first couple of offences. My own theory is that it's almost always better to have someone released with a measure of the supervision and support community corrections officers try to offer over a few months than to cast them adrift at the end of their sentence without either.

Far too many breach the conditions of their parole, usually when, jobless and desperate, they return to old social networks and to using to kill the

depression and pain. I admire my colleagues at the Parole Board who try to recognise the difference between people using while still struggling to manage their dependency problem, and those who have returned to using in a way that makes their remaining in the community too much of a risk.

If our community were designing a system from scratch to minimise the harm associated with drug dependency, we wouldn't build the criminal justice system. The new "Drug Courts" may well be the seeds of something better, but at the moment all that's realistically available to us is the possibility of "tweaking" the system to make it work better.

If like me, you believe that drug dependency rests on a complex mixture of physical, emotional and social drivers, you've probably identified where I think any additional or freed-up resources should be spent. We could get substantial "bang for buck" if we invested wisely in the social support needed, especially by the most wounded and vulnerable among those we currently imprison, those with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities, and those who have suffered abuse themselves. \$60,000 a year would go a long way to providing the accommodation, basic necessities, education, counselling and social support that those who currently receive \$11,000 a year in Centrelink payments cannot find for themselves.