



Australia's ageing prisoner population: the social, economic consequences

A RESEARCH BRIEF BY THE UNSW AGEING FUTURES INSTITUTE

In the absence of a coordinated policy response, including interventions, modeling suggests that costs will continue to increase, particularly as this population continues to age more rapidly than the general population.

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT ISSUE

The Australian prisoner population has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of older prisoners over the past decade, consistent with the greying of the prisoner population observed worldwide. Reviews suggest the need for further evidence and practice outside of the USA. Health costs of prisoners in Australia could increase by anywhere between 17% and 90% depending on whether the increase of older prisoners continues as it has in the past decade. These trends are likely to continue over the next decade and will result in higher health costs. Modelling by authors' suggest that a steep gradient of costs, with those 65 years old and over attracting a dramatic increase in health costs.



SUMMARY OF CURRENT RESEARCH

Criminal justice reform needs a strategy for mitigating the factors that are contributing to the continued rise in the older prisoner population including, but not limited to, whether eligible older prisoners ought to serve their remand period before sentencing in home detention (particularly in an era of COVID-19 pandemics) and whether they are cognitively fit for the jail environment. Each stage of contact with the criminal justice system requires targeted planning and a cost evaluation to start managing this crisis.

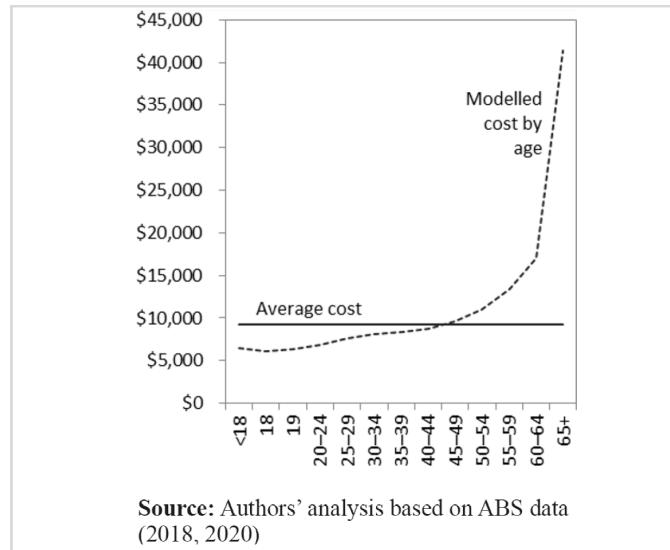
Figure 3. (Right) Modeled health cost per prisoner per year

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Preventative interventions are needed to decrease the incidence of both disease and disability.

A multi-faceted approach, combining comprehensive costing of current trends in prisoner demography and health costs, appraisal of the likely outcomes of alternative interventions including judicial, social, and financial analysis is needed.

Develop effective & systematic, technologically-driven screening measures to pick up cognitive impairment.



Source: Authors' analysis based on ABS data (2018, 2020)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Natasha Ginnivan is a research fellow with the UNSW school of psychology and an associate investigator with the UNSW Ageing Futures Institute and the UNSW Australian Human Rights Institute. Her research focus is on age expectations, ageism, age stereotypes and self-perceptions of ageing. Her research includes the lived experience of ageing, dementia, and ageing in marginalised populations, including prisoners. She is co-investigator on the NHMRC-funded ASCAPE [Audio app-delivered Screening for Cognition and Age-related health in PrisonErs] project.

REFERENCES

- 1) Ginnivan, N.A., Chomik, R., Hwang, Y.I.(J.), Piggott, J., Butler, T. and Withall, A. (2021), "The ageing prisoner population: demographic shifts in Australia and implications for the economic and social costs of health care", International Journal of Prisoner <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPH-09-2020-0062> | Acknowledgement: ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research (CEPAR; CE170100005)