

# Newman Weekly

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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

## Prisons, Porn and P

Like most New Zealanders I was appalled last weekend to read that the killer of Lillybing had enjoyed a life of P and porn in prison. In a media interview she explained that prison "is not as hard as people make out".

Rachel Namana, sentenced to six years in jail in 2001 for the manslaughter of the 23 months old toddler, said she smoked pure methamphetamine for the first time in jail. She had access to other drugs as well and frequently downloaded porn on her cellphone.

She admitted that she was not rehabilitated while in jail, is now heavily influenced by gang members and has no desire to make contact with her five children who are in CYFS care. She has no job, goes out partying most nights with other ex inmates, and every week deposits money into the accounts of associates in prison so they can buy supplies inside. She is not confident of keeping out of jail.

This story is a real indictment of our criminal justice system. A serious violent criminal, having served her time in prison, feels that she was not punished and nor was she rehabilitated.

New Zealand has over 7,000 people in prison, with new figures showing that by the year 2010 the number will rise to over 9,000, giving us the second highest rate of imprisonment in the Western world. Yet with a recidivism rate of around 75 to 80 percent and the Corrections Department admitting that many of their rehabilitation programmes do not work, surely it is time to question whether the approach we are using is the right one.

A few years ago I remember reading about a controversial American Sheriff who had developed a novel approach to the running of his County jails. I decided to contact Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County Arizona, to find out exactly what he was doing and this morning I spoke with him.

Sheriff Arpaio is the NZCPD guest commentator

this week. Known as "America's Toughest Sheriff," his get-tough-on-criminals approach has made him wildly successful over the years as he has put inmates in tents and pink underwear, sent them to work on chain gangs and punished them with bread-and-water diets. You can read more detail about what the Sheriff does and why he does it on the website ([www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com)). The Sheriff's no nonsense approach is the antithesis of the politically correct mumbo jumbo that we have come to expect from officials these days. It strikes a chord.

He believes that just as children are punished by taking away their privileges, that same philosophy should be used in the running of jails whereby inmates should be held fully accountable for their actions. Further, he passionately believes that life in jail should not be better than life on the outside, and nor should head counts and over-crowding determine when an inmate is released from jail.

Here is New Zealand that is a major issue, with many offenders who should really be in jail given home detention to avoid overcrowding and save money. Not only that, but the Minister of Corrections is now signalling that because of the overcrowding problem alternative to prison may need to be found for up to 30 percent of sentenced offenders!

In fact, it was the overcrowding in the jail system and a lack of funding to build new jails, that prompted Sheriff Arpaio to look at alternative accommodation when he was first elected to the Sheriff's Office in 1992. He figured that if American troops in Desert Storm could live in tents then surely they would be good enough for sentenced inmates. Using surplus military property he constructed a tent city, with each tent having permanent foundations, electricity, and plumbing. These days his tent city houses some 2,000 sentenced inmates who sentences are less than 12 months. Inmates who are on

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remand are housed in proper County jails, and inmates with sentences longer than twelve months are sent off to Federal prisons.

The Sheriff told me this morning that the cost of running these tent city jails – which, incidentally, have staffing levels of one detention officer to around 250 inmates and the cheapest meals of any large jail in the country - is just a few hundred thousand dollars a year. That compares to the tens of millions of dollars it takes to run a standard jail.

Over the years, I have visited prisons up and down the country, including the privately run prison that use to operate in Auckland. I believe there are five things we could do to alleviate New Zealand's prison overcrowding crisis.

Firstly, prisoners with major psychiatric problems – around 10 percent of the prison population - should not be in ordinary jails, but in special forensic prisons where they can get access to proper medication and treatment.

Secondly, low security inmates - approximately 50 to 60 percent of the prison population - do not need to be housed in expensive prisons, but could serve their sentences in surplus government facilities converted to provide cheap accommodation, such as the old Air Force barracks.

Thirdly, with the majority of inmates moved out of prisons into alternative accommodation there would be more than enough prison beds for the 30 percent of prisoners who are serious violent criminals. With plenty of room at their disposal, prison officials could ensure that inmates are kept

segregated and away from those who would be a bad influence. They could also better provide intensive rehabilitation. It is also important however, that the jails are toughened up: I recall discussing the plans for the new Northland prison – which is more like a country club than a jail - with a group of locals only to have one old lady say that she was pleased that it looked so comfy because “it would be a really nice place for her grand children to grow up in!”

Fourthly prisons should focus on readying inmates for the workforce: everyone should be required to work for eight hours a day. That programme should vary from prisoner to prisoner, with some spending their whole week in education and training, while others are in specialist programmes like drug rehab, and the rest in work. Night classes should be freely available to all prisoners in the evening.

Finally, given that criminals are not born, but raised, every effort should go into encouraging parents to provide a stable loving home for their children, where they encourage education and provide good working role models. If a child becomes too difficult for the parents to handle, parenting help should be readily available, but if the young person really goes off the rails, a military training programme for young offenders might just be the thing that saves them... and us.

This weeks poll. This week's poll asks, *Do you think the New Zealand prison system is working?*

*“Low security inmates - approximately 50 to 60 percent of the prison population - do not need to be housed in expensive prisons.”*

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