

Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation (OARS)

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Introduction

OARS (NT) is an Incorporated Association operating substantially out of Darwin but also serving those offenders in Alice Springs Correctional Centre who are to be released to the Top End. The service has been operating for nearly five years and receives financial support from both Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments. Our mission statement is “The prevention of crime by the successful rehabilitation of offenders and those at risk of becoming offenders and their reintegration back into their communities with prospects of employment and non offending lifestyles.

Justification

Before discussing greater details of the programmes offered and their conceptual derivation I should first provide some background as to why I work in this area and the reasons for the passion for the work that leads me to go the extra mile often beyond the limited funding support. As indicated in the introduction I am a born and bred Territorian and grew up substantially in the remote areas where I believe I developed a good understanding of Indigenous People and their issues. With that understanding and my qualifications as a lawyer I inevitably turned to practise in the Criminal Courts where I dealt almost exclusively with Indigenous clients. Having acted for people who were going to jail, were in jail or who had been released from jail I believed I understood all the issues relating to imprisonment. I was to learn that I had little or no understanding of the issues when I found myself serving a twelve month sentence in Darwin Correctional Centre. I was to learn that there was at that time little understanding within Government or the community at large as to the effects of a prison sentence on the offender and the subsequent even more detrimental effects caused to the community.

There is of course no doubt that people who commit crimes must be punished and the serious offences must warrant imprisonment. The reason that the majority of the Judiciary see imprisonment as the sanction of last resort is that they know that in up to eighty percent of cases they are initiating the inevitable revolving door of re-offending and re-incarceration which in the Northern Territory, with the second highest imprisonment rate in the world, is the highest in all Australian jurisdictions.

Facts and Figures:

NT imprisonment rate of 550 prisoners per 100,000 of the adult population is three times the national average.

NT has one of the highest imprisonment rates in the world.

The NT imprisonment rate per 100,000 exceeds:

- Belarus 532
- Russia 532
- Cuba 487
- South Africa 413

The only country with a higher imprisonment rate is the USA. The USA also has one of the highest crime rates in the world, perhaps a further indication that imprisonment is not necessarily the best crime prevention tool. A comparison with other western nations reveals the disparity between the Northern Territory and other areas:

- England 142
- France 91
- Canada 116
- New Zealand 168

The NT rate has increased by 8% in the last year according to the latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

ABS also reports that on 30th June 2004 83% of the inmates of Northern Territory Correctional Centres had at least one prior imprisonment.

The most Common offence for prisoners held in custody on 30th June 2005 was assault 39% followed by sexual assault 11%¹

Community Cost

At a cost of \$176 per prisoner per day, the economic consequences for the Territory will continue to climb with the imprisonment rate. An average prison population in the NT of 700 prisoners costs the community \$45million per year and is destined to increase by at least 8% per year. This figure does not include the costs of crime to the community and individual victims nor the costs of detection and prosecution of the offender.

As previously stated there is no doubt that serious offending must lead to imprisonment. It is also a fact that more than 98% of current prisoners will one day sooner or later be released. The average prison sentence served in the NT is less than two years. Given that it appears 80% are not corrected is the name CORRECTIONAL CENTRE a misnomer?. Research reveals that the majority of prisoners enter prison from an excluded, discriminated and disadvantaged position in society. What is worse is that those same prisoners re-enter the community more excluded, discriminated against and disadvantaged. This paper is not in any way a call for sympathy for offenders but points out that what is an important factor in reducing crime is what is done within the prison system and on release to reduce the occurrence of re-offending, if not for the benefit of the offender at least for the benefit of the community.

Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Desistance

There are three basic methods currently in use to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour: Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Desistance. Rehabilitation is usually individual focused and addresses individual character and skill defects. It is usually conducted in short course form and often occurs within a corrections context. Desistance models are growing in popularity as can be seen from the previously stated imprisonment rates. If all the offenders were locked up for ever there would be a

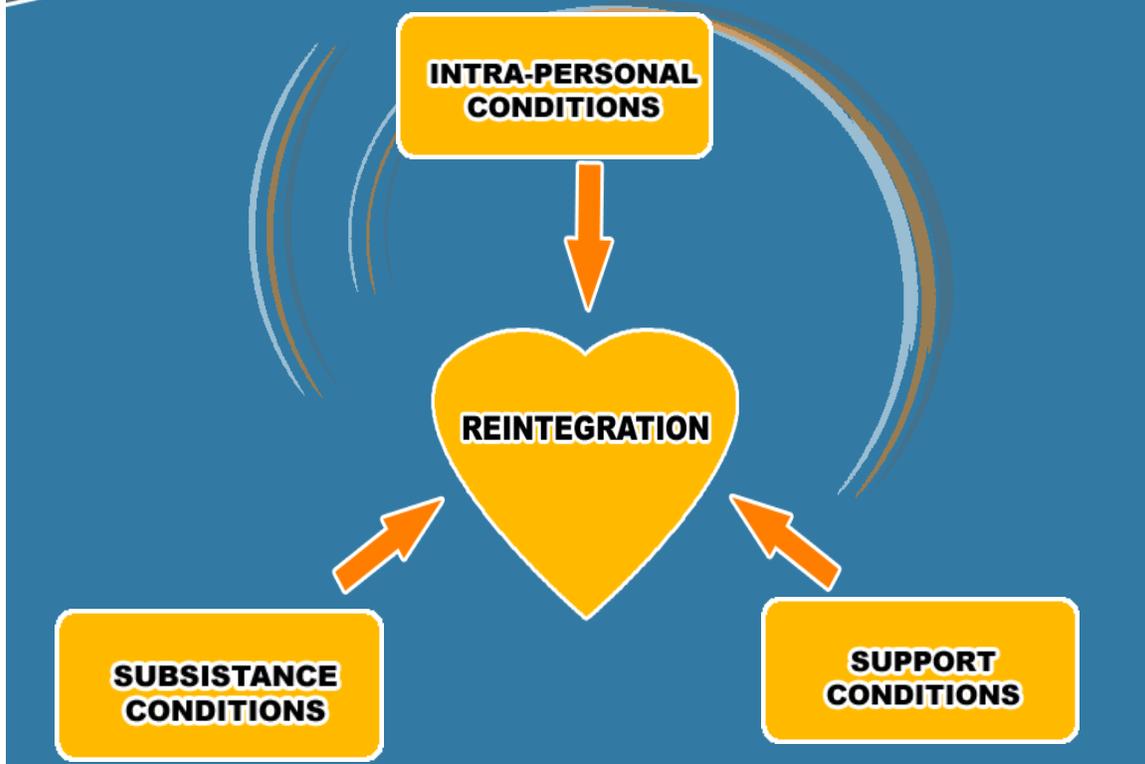
¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics
Northern Territory Department of Justice Quarterly Crime and Justice Statistics

dramatic decrease in crime but aside from the individual rights of the offenders the cost to the community would be prohibitive. Another aspect of the desistance method is increased policing and security which is not only a great expense but fails to address the main issue as to what are the causes of the offending. Harsher penalties are said to be general deterrents to offending. In 25 years of practise as a criminal lawyer I never met an offender who contemplated the length of sentence in deciding whether or not to commit the offence. Most offences, and in particular those of violence, are spur of the moment acts of passion or stupidity many of which are committed under the influence of mind altering substances. All of these factors are totally repugnant to rational thinking. The most attractive solution is no doubt the reintegration back into the community of offenders as law abiding, responsible and productive members of that community. This may well be at times a big ask and there may be some failures who prefer to spend their lives in the revolving door. Desistance methods are only a short term cure, rehabilitation methods have not shown great results and it would appear that reintegration has the greatest potential to reduce crime which in my view gives the greatest advantage to victims and potential victims.

The first programme we set up was Reintegration After Prison Programme (RAPP) without the knowledge of the differing nomenclature of the terms. Had we known as much as we now know we may well have used "Reintegration" as the R in OARS. Reintegration involves dealing with the involvement of the three ecological conditions, Intra-personal conditions, Subsistence conditions and Support conditions. Reintegration is a dynamic process that fluctuates between conditions that promote and constrain success. Reintegration appears to contemplate that at some time there has been a prior period of a degree of integration, which in our experience is not necessarily always the case. It may be that appropriate integration is the correct term. It is difficult to reintegrate someone who has never been integrated in the first place.

Ecological Conditions of Reintegration

A BASIC (SIMPLE) ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF REINTEGRATION

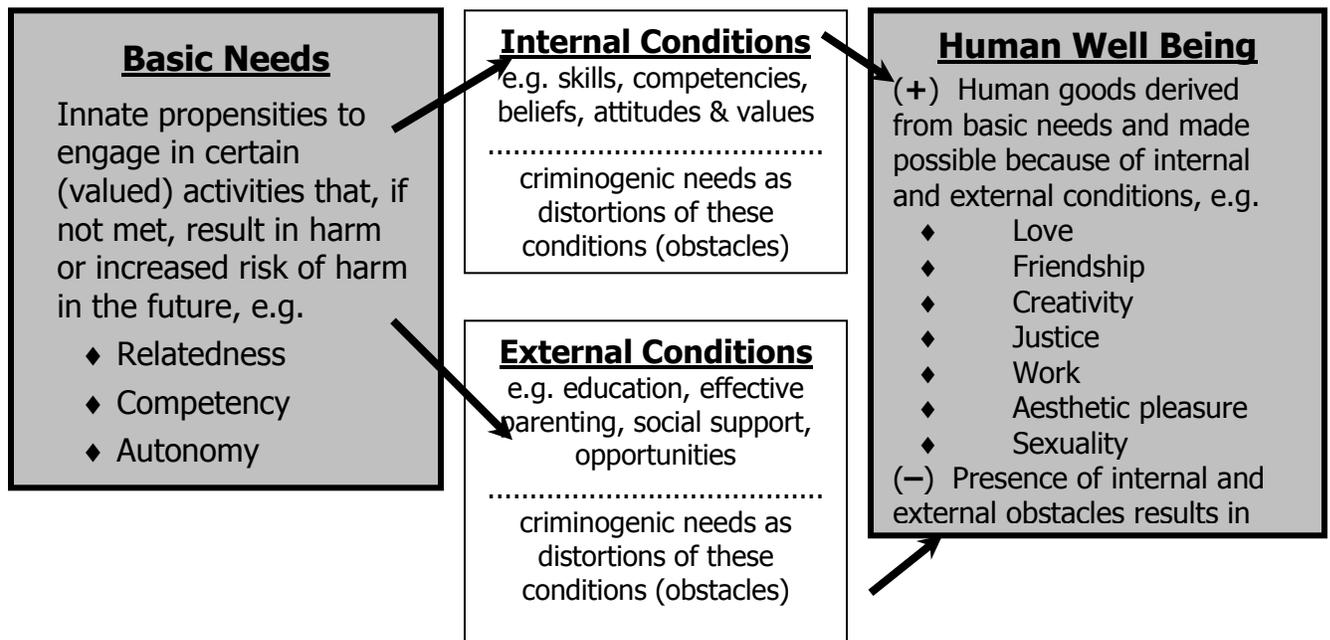


1. Intra-personal conditions;
 - Physical and Mental Health
 - Personality
 - Emotional State
 - Habits/Lifestyle
 - Substance Use
 - Education and Skills
 - “Readiness to change”
2. Subsistence conditions;
 - Income/Financial Status
 - Employment
 - Housing
 - “Creature comforts”
3. Support conditions;
 - Social Support

- Community-based Services
- Criminal Justice Support Services
- Government Policy and Legislation
- Community Attitudes²

Many offenders come from dysfunctional homes and/or communities believing that behaviour considered offensive in other communities is the normal, emphasising the need for the support conditions

Figure 1: A Framework for Needs Based Interventions



3

² Professor Joe Graffam, School of Psychology Deakin University
 “A 3-Part Ecological Model for Lifestyle Change”

³ Professor Tony Ward, University of Wellington New Zealand
 “Narrative Identity and Offender Rehabilitation”

Integration and reintegration is a dynamic process whereby there is a constant ebb and flow of all the conditions. There is no completion level but success depends on the presence of more of those conditions that are considered positive “pro’s and less of the negative “con’s.

OARS (NT) Practical Reintegration Programmes

- Pre-release planning
- Pick up service
- Accommodation, Halfway House, CorbLIMEy orchard
- Work-skills and Life-skills training and counselling
- Referrals to specialist agencies
- Employment assistance
- Encouragement of restorative actions

Irrespective of the length of sentence the most difficult part of imprisonment is observed to be the early days after release usually about 6 months. Institutionalisation effects begin almost immediately in a sentence and all rights of self determination and decision making quickly disappear. There is a reported syndrome “Gate Fever” which is fear of release and in reported cases has led to prisoners actually committing offences just prior to release to avoid facing the real world. This is often exacerbated with prisoners who have previously been released and found coping difficult. OARS (NT) regularly encounters recently released offenders expressing an intention to breach release conditions in order to return to the safety net of prison. One counter to “Gate Fever” is knowing in advance that plans are in place for the basic essentials of life on the outside. Releasees gradually, with assistance regain (or gain for the first time) the confidence and self-esteem to embark on a reintegration (or integration) journey.

It may well be that many offenders are victims of crime in its generic sense as opposed to victims of a specific crime. It is clear that prevention and/or reduction of crime is a whole of community responsibility. Causes of criminal behaviour are many and varied but usually derive from social and emotional dysfunction. It is doubted that many, if any, offenders are born with a criminal or anti-social tendencies. The best possible means is the incorporation of as many of the necessary conditions as possible to bring about the successful reintegration (or integration) of offenders and those at risk of becoming offenders.