FUTURE SKILLS FORUM

SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

PREPARED FOR

NSW DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIVE SERVICES
INTRODUCTION

Aim of the forum

The Future Skills Forum, held by the NSW Department of Corrective Services (DCS) was designed to stimulate thinking about key trends emerging in the economy, technology, society and in work, and to consider the implications they might have on criminal activity. The aim is to better prepare staff to deal with anticipated changes.

EMERGING THEMES AND POSSIBLE IMPACTS ON CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

Participants identified the following future trends that will impact on their work, and discussed their possible implications for criminal behaviour and the Department.

Evolving work and employment conditions

Australian work and employment conditions have evolved considerably over the past twenty five years. Despite overall improvements in average wages, employment levels and productivity, many employees still experience unsatisfactory work conditions.

While people in upper earning brackets have enjoyed wage increases, the earnings of low and middle income earners have generally reduced or stagnated. And although employment levels have risen, most of the growth has been in casual, part-time and temporary jobs—insecure arrangements for employees. In addition, long-term unemployment remains high. For those with secure full—time work, increases in labour productivity have often come at the cost of longer hours, more responsibilities and higher expectations. This increased work stress then impacts on other areas of life.

In the future, it seems that workers will be looking for a more meaningful work—life balance and will want to be able to control and choose modes and hours of work.

These changes could lead in either of two directions. If they continue unabated:

1. the disparity in wages could continue to polarise the haves and have-nots
2. the income-rich and time-poor will work anti-social hours and be overworked
3. a growing number of workers will be unemployed, underemployed and/or engaged in itinerant work.

On the other hand, if social and economic policies are developed to nurture social cohesion, there could be:
limited social divisions based on market incomes
fairly spread hours based on standards for flexibility
increased portability and pooling arrangements.

Implications for DCS

Depending on whether or not social and economic policies are able to deliver social cohesion despite the fragmenting of the workforce, either the criminal justice system will need to make up for failings in social and economic policy to maintain order, or it will recede in significance as policies deliver social harmony.

Advances in technology

Advances in information technology have transformed the way many of us work, live and communicate, and industry analysts are predicting many more major developments in the future. Possibilities include greater use of sensors and tagging devices to relay information about weather and location conditions, to track people and objects, and to assess the state of our health (e.g. blood pressure, heart rate and temperature).

But not all Australians have access to computers and the internet. A significant percentage—particularly those who are over 55, unemployed or low income earners, living in rural areas and/or with no tertiary education—are not yet computer literate, leading to the ‘digital divide’ and raising issues of equity.

Information technology can also be a ‘double-edged sword’. For example, the personal information we hand over to organisations in return for better service, is at risk of being sold for marketing purposes or of being stealthily removed. It can only ever be as secure as an organisation’s systems. At the moment, there are insufficient safeguards to ensure information is used properly and ethically.

Finally, technology opens up all manner of criminal possibilities. Personal and financial information is potentially accessible for fraudulent purposes, and communication technology allows criminal activity to extend beyond geographical boundaries—even to a global scale.

Implications for DCS

There is scope for the Department to use advances in information technology to its advantage in managing inmates. For example, microchip devices may be used for tracking purposes. This will require staff with information technology skills who keep up-to-date with developments that may improve the way gaols are managed.
Evolving definitions of family and community

The landscape of our family relationships, like so many other areas of life, has changed dramatically over the past few decades. We are marrying less and divorcing more. When we do marry, it is later and we have fewer children. More people are living alone, making them more vulnerable and potential targets of crime.

We tend to be more focused on our individual happiness and success than family. Our relationships are often fluid and transient - more like temporary connections than lifelong commitments. Where families have two parents, both are likely to be working outside the home, introducing the pressure of balancing work and home life.

These changes present challenges for the future. For example, more people are lonely and yearn to belong to some sort of community. Some people are becoming disillusioned with an individualistic and consumer-oriented focus on life and are looking for a 'sea-change'. With less emphasis on our responsibilities to family, some individuals are suffering for lack of family support, increasing the burden on the general community to fill the gap.

Implications for DCS

These changing values will inevitably be reflected in the Department's workforce and provide important context when considering staff expectations and work conditions. Decreased family support will also impact on how inmates are managed and released.

Changes to housing

Many Australians have profited from recent rises in house prices. But those yet to buy a home are now significantly disadvantaged. There is no doubt that escalated real estate prices mean fewer people can afford to buy homes and that more people will be homeless as a result.

House designs are also evolving to reflect changes in society. With an ageing population, more homes are designed to accommodate their particular needs. House designs are also reflecting changes to the nuclear family and our lifestyle habits.

There is also a rising tension between the desire to secure our homes and protect ourselves from criminal activity and terrorist threats (for example, through gated communities), and the desire to live in diverse and accessible communities.

Implications for DCS

Not only will the rising price of houses potentially lead to increased homelessness, higher crime rates and more people in gaols, it could also affect the staffing of prisons. Prisons located in metropolitan areas may find it more difficult to recruit staff who may not be able to afford to live in the area.
Pressures on infrastructure and policy

As demographics, families and our living habits change, so do infrastructure and policy requirements. For example, with more and more people opting to live in or close to major cities, we face the problem of overcrowding. This can lead to more tension and stress as people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities share public spaces, making them potentially unsafe. Infrastructure, such as transport and utilities, also come under stress as they support increases in metropolitan populations. To cover the cost of supporting more users of infrastructure, it is likely that governments will charge for and outsource more services.

Implications for DCS

The inability of infrastructure to support increasing metropolitan communities could lead to an increase in civil disobedience, putting pressure on gaols in metropolitan areas. Cultural diversity in cities can also unsettle the social order, creating an environment where criminal activity is more likely. Gaol inmates will also be from increasingly diverse backgrounds, posing challenges for staff of the Department.

Changing demographics

Perhaps the most striking change in Australian demographics over the past few decades has been the increase in ageing population. This change is bringing with it potential challenges as well as opportunities. Opportunities include the availability of skilled and experienced older people to stay in the workforce for a longer time and to act as mentors to young workers starting their careers. Potential challenges include the challenge of managing ‘ageism’ in the workforce, changes to superannuation requirements and the need for resources to be allocated to servicing the aged.

Implications for DCS

The tensions that exist between generations and diverse cultural groups in the community will also be reflected in gaols, presenting challenges for gaol staff.

Threatened social order

As we experience change in many dimensions of life, social order is challenged. For example, changing gender roles resulting from evolutions in the family, workforce and societal values, can create tension, as can increased stress levels of employees in the workforce. Add the growing multicultural nature of Australian cities and the polarisation of wealth in society, and you have all the ingredients for disturbed social order.
In the context of these changes, it's not hard to imagine that collective violence will increase, crime will become more violent, and public spaces will become more dangerous, with a growing number of 'no-go' areas for the public.

**Implications for DCS**

The Department will not only be impacted by increasing crime rates, it will also have to deal with changing social order within gaols as the changes across society are reflected within them.

**Strategies for DCS**

In the context of the key future trends, participants identified some appropriate strategies for responding to the risks they pose to the Department.

**Equip staff to manage changes**

Changes in the community will be reflected in the gaol community and will require particular physical changes and skills from staff. Strategies to cope with these include:

1. Increase staff training to develop their skills in managing inmates, particularly in managing:
   - diversity in the inmate community, especially in dealing with inmates from minority and marginalised groups
   - increased violence amongst inmates
   - disaffected inmates—for example, staff may need to be skilled in 'detachment' to ensure they are not 'won over' to a cause.

2. Employ staff with the skills and attributes needed to manage inmates.

3. Equip staff to deal with social issues, such as cultural awareness and youth homelessness.

4. Provide special accommodation and services for older inmates and other groups with special needs. In some instances, this may best be done by outsourcing activities requiring specialised skills, such as caring for the aged.

5. Make use of advances in information technology to manage inmates, for example, microchip technology. Train staff to make use of the technology.

**Continue to improve working conditions**

Key future trends in work and employment generally also need to be accommodated within the Department. This may be done by:


7. Making working hours more flexible.
8. Equipping staff to work with each other, given the likelihood that the workforce will become increasingly diverse, with diversity in age and cultures.

**Equip inmates for release**

The Department's role is not only to manage inmates in gaol, but also to equip them to live in a society that is rapidly changing and which may look entirely different to inmates who have served long sentences. The Department will need to:

9. Develop pre-release programs.
10. Increase and develop resettlement programs.

**Broader implications for DCS**

As well as proposing specific strategies for equipping staff and inmates for the future, Forum participants also considered strategies that the Department as a whole might employ to meet the challenges of the future. The following ideas were discussed:

- Market the services of the Department
- Influence community and government attitudes to the Department's services
- Investigate potential risks for the Department and employ a risk management approach
- Increase inter-agency activity and cooperation, particularly with community services
- Increase the sharing of information with the community and also between DCS departments
- Better manage some complexities within the Department by specialising where appropriate
- Streamline services that may be being duplicated, both within DCS and between DCS and outside agencies.

These strategies, if implemented, will require a more proactive, less reactive (and sometimes complacent) culture—and will also help to strengthen such a culture. And in so doing, they will help to take further some of the ideas and strategies that emerged from the Forum.
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