

Reoffending rates soar

HALF of all Victoria's prisoners have been in jail before and 35 per cent of all those locked up are back behind bars within two years.

These shocking figures have emerged ahead of the launch this week of a major campaign to reduce crime and change thinking about the administration of justice.

Organisers of the Smart Justice campaign said the system needed an overhaul as reoffending rates climbed.

They called for an independent crime statistics bureau and more rehabilitation programs in prisons.

Backed by 15 major welfare agencies and the Law Institute, the campaign's creator, Hugh de Kretser, said a radical rethink of crime and punishment could help reduce crime, particularly violent crime, and deliver more assistance to victims of crime.

He pointed to the study of 350

LAURIE NOWELL

Victorian and NSW prisoners that found if a person moved house often after release from prison they were far more likely to return.

Despite the importance of stable housing, 58 per cent of the Victorian prisoners were given no information on accommodation or support before to their release.

The University of NSW study also showed the released prisoners who found employment or were in full-time study were far less likely to return to prison.

More than 88 per cent of male prisoners did not finish high school, the research found.

"There seems to be a law-and-order auction going on and crime stats can be used for political mileage on both sides so we would like to see an independent crime statistics bureau," Mr de Kretser said.

"We think that a more evidence-based approach to crime and an increased emphasis on rehabilitation

of prisoners will see reoffending rates drop dramatically.

"This will make Victoria safer and save the state a lot of money."

Former prisoner and crime rehabilitation activist John Walsh said reoffending could be slashed if inmates were taught skills that could lead to jobs and offered accommodation on their release.

"It is not rocket science to work out that if you give someone who is just released from prison no opportunity to make a life for themselves, they will reoffend," said Mr Walsh, who has set up Bridge of Hope Foundation, a charity that will provide housing, training and jobs for newly released prisoners.

"If we can give these people a chance to get employment so they can support themselves and give them somewhere decent to live, it will break the cycle of criminal behaviour."

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