



No. 120

# Deaths in Private Prisons 1990–99: A Comparative Study

David Biles & Vicki Dalton

*It is just a decade since the first private prison opened in Australia, and now private prisons house approximately 3000 of Australia's 20,000 prisoners. The Australian Institute of Criminology contributes to the debate generated by this phenomenon by providing factual data and adding value to those data.*

*A number of deaths have raised the issue of whether private prisons are inherently more dangerous for inmates at risk. This paper examines numbers of deaths both in absolute terms and in terms of rates per 1000 prisoners per year.*

*It finds that:*

- *Public and private prisons have similar death rates for all causes of death and for suicide specifically.*
- *Death rates are higher in prisons that house remand and reception prisoners rather than long-term prisoners. Two large private prisons fall into this category.*
- *Examining deaths in the three largest remand and reception prisons (two private, one public) in their first 20 months of operation (the settling-in period) revealed that the death rate was about 3 times the national average for all prisons, while the suicide rate was about 4 times the national average.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

**A**ustralia has a higher proportion of its prisoners in private correctional facilities than any other country in the world. Since the first private prison opened in Queensland in 1990, the proportion of prisoners held in private facilities has grown from just under 2 per cent to approximately 16 per cent of total prisoner numbers in 1999.

In recent years, influenced by hardened public opinion, there has been a marked increase in the number of persons in prison in Australia. As a result, most prison systems have been faced with overcrowding problems and have either undertaken major refurbishment of existing correctional centres or have built additional facilities to house their prisoners. The provision of new correctional facilities has included both a growth in number and an expansion of prison privatisation. This expansion, however, has not been uniform across the States and Territories, with only four of the eight jurisdictions currently operating private prisons.

There has been intense debate around the public policy implications of the privatisation of corrections, especially in Victoria where the increase in the proportion of prisoners in private facilities has been greatest. The first private prison in Victoria opened in 1996, and within two years some 45 per cent of the State's prisoners were held in private facilities. Each of the three private prisons in

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE  
OF CRIMINOLOGY

*trends*  
&  
*issues*

in crime and criminal justice

June 1999

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24114 7



Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9200

Fax: 02 6260 9201

For subscription information together with a complete list of the papers in the Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series, visit the AIC web site at:

<http://www.aic.gov.au>

or call AusInfo toll free on 13 24 47

Victoria is managed by separate private providers of correctional services.

A significant component of the debate has centred around the belief by some people that offenders serving periods of incarceration in private prisons are more likely to die, or be more at risk of self-harm, than those serving their time in public prisons.

Since Port Phillip private prison opened in Victoria in September 1997, the media have accentuated the debate, highlighting reports of attempted and completed suicides, drug overdoses and riots, while criticising management practices and a lack of visible accountability. The media coverage of the problems in private prisons has almost certainly contributed to the public perception that private prisons are more dangerous and more prone to disruption.

This paper attempts to bring together available data on deaths, and separately on suicides, in public and private prisons in order to assess the validity of that perception.

### Australia's Private Prisons

Table 1 shows the growth in the numbers and expansion across Australia of private prisons, together with each facility's rated capacity and the company responsible for its management.

In addition to the prisons listed, a contract has been awarded to CCA for a 750-bed medium-security prison in Western Australia, to be opened in 2000, and further expansions are currently being made to Borallon and Arthur Gorrie in Queensland. Also, a new prison (which may or may not be private), with a capacity of 300 beds, is planned to open in the Australian Capital Territory in 2001.

The three companies that have won contracts to manage private prisons in Australia are: Corrections Corporation of Australia (CCA), Australasian Correctional Management (ACM) and Group 4 Corrections Service.

**Table 1: Private Prison Developments in Australia, 1990–2000**

Year	Prison	Rated Capacity	Cumulative Total	Operator
1990	Borallon (Qld)	240	240	CCA
1992	Arthur Gorrie (Qld)	380	620	ACM
1993	Junee (NSW)	600	1220	ACM
1994	Arthur Gorrie (Qld), Phase 2	198	1418	ACM
1995	Mt. Gambier (SA)	110	1528	Group 4
1995	Borallon (Qld), Phase 2	185	1713	CCA
1996	Arthur Gorrie (Qld), Phase 3	54	1767	ACM
1996	Deer Park (Vic.)	125	1892	CCA
1997	Fulham (Vic.)	600	2492	ACM
1997	Port Phillip (Vic.)	600	3092	Group 4

Source: Adapted from Harding (1998)

They are all wholly-owned subsidiaries of international corporations.

In addition to managing prisons, these three companies each have contracts to provide other services related to custodial corrections. For example, ACM has a contract to manage all immigration detention centres in Australia and also to manage the Melbourne Custody Centre; and CCA has contracts for the transport and escort of prisoners between prisons and the courts. Furthermore, a number of private companies have contracts to provide health care services to prisons, both public and private.

#### Private prison occupancy numbers

Table 2 shows the growth in the actual numbers of prisoners in

each of the seven private prisons since 1990. These are the "prisoner years" served in each institution based on the daily averages for each year except 1999, for which the number applies to the period 1 January to 30 April. These numbers are initially lower than the capacity figures shown in Table 1, as all new prisons are filled in stages over periods of some months.

From this table it can be seen that, between 1990 and 30 April 1999, private prisons have provided a total of 12,613 "prisoner years" and the total private prisoner population has increased from a daily average of 101 in 1990 to 3013 in 1998. Each individual prison's contribution can be found in the "Total" column at the bottom of the table. (It should

**Table 2: Private Prisons in Australia 1990–99, Prisoner Years Served Since Opening**

Year	Borallon Qld	Arthur Gorrie Qld	Junee NSW	Mt Gambier SA	Deer Park Vic.	Fulham Vic.	Port Phillip Vic.	Total Aust.
1990	101							101
1991	244							244
1992	239	75						314
1993	235	345	379					959
1994	307	414	555					1,276
1995	373	549	578	54				1,554
1996	435	572	587	106	35			1,735
1997	404	575	589	106	109	368	233	2,384
1998	472	590	588	104	124	580	555	3,013
1999*	164	201	196	35	48	193	196	1,033
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,974</b>	<b>3,321</b>	<b>3,472</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>1,141</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>12,613</b>

\* first four months only

**Table 3: Daily Average Number of Prisoners in Private and Public Prisons, 1990 to 1999**

Year	Private Prisons	Public Prisons	Total Prisoners	Percentage of Prisoners in Private Prisons
1990	101	13,179	13,280	0.76
1991	244	13,784	14,028	1.74
1992	314	13,927	14,241	2.20
1993	959	13,627	14,586	6.57
1994	1,276	14,091	15,367	8.30
1995	1,554	14,310	15,864	9.80
1996	1,735	14,907	16,642	10.43
1997	2,384	14,928	17,661	13.50
1998	3,013	15,671	18,923	15.92
1999*	1,033	5,634	6,667	15.50
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,613</b>	<b>134,646</b>	<b>147,259</b>	<b>8.6</b>

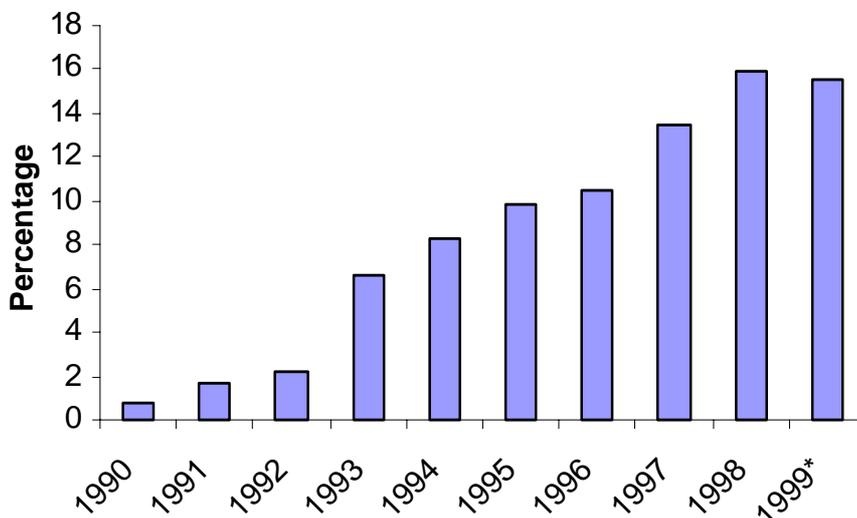
\* to 30 April 1999, estimate based on approximately 20,000 prisoners

be noted that, for 1999, the figures as at 30 April 1999 have been calculated as one-third of the estimated total for the year.)

Over this same period, the total prisoner population for Australia has increased by 51 per cent—from 13,280 in 1990 to approximately 20,000 as at 30 April 1999 (see Table 3). The contribution of public prisons over this period was calculated by subtracting the totals for each year shown in Table 2 from the total daily average prison populations published initially by the Australian Institute of Criminology and later by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999).

The results show that public prisons have provided a total of 134,646 “prisoner years” over the same 9.33-year period.

**Figure 1: Prisoners in Private Prisons as a Percentage of Total Prisoners, 1990–99**



\* to 30 April 1999, estimate based on approximately 20,000 prisoners

### Prison Populations

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the number of prisoners in both public and private prisons during the 9.33-year period. The increase in the overall proportion can be seen in the last column.

The proportion of the total Australian prisoner population in private prisons is shown graphically in Figure 1.

### Prison Deaths

Following a recommendation from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC 1991), the National Deaths in Custody Monitoring

and Research Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology has been responsible for collecting, monitoring and reporting the incidence of all deaths in all forms of custody. The Program’s data show that, between 1 January 1990 and 30 April 1999, there has been a total of 488 deaths in Australia’s prisons (Dalton, forthcoming). Of these, 230 are reported to have resulted from suicide.

The details are shown in Table 4 and graphically in Figure 2. It can be seen from the table that 7.6 per cent of all deaths have occurred in private prisons. In relation to suicide deaths specifically, 8.3 per cent have occurred in private prisons.

### Rates of Death and Suicide

From the data presented, it is possible to calculate the number and rate of deaths and suicides in both public and private prisons over the period 1990 to 1999. The results are shown in Table 5.

From this table it can be seen that the rate of death from all causes in private prisons is 2.93 per 1000 prisoners per year (CI 1.99–3.88) compared with 3.35 per 1000 prisoners per year (CI 3.04–3.66) in public prisons. While this difference may seem large, it is not statistically significant and therefore one cannot be claimed to be higher or lower than the other.

The difference between private and public prisons in relation to suicide is apparently not so great, however, with the rate for private prisons being 1.51 per 1000 prisoners per year (CI 0.83–2.18), compared with 1.57 per 1000 prisoners per year (CI 1.36–1.78) for public prisons. These two rates are clearly very close and their difference not significant. (CI is the 95 per cent confidence interval for the rates given. In other words, the range within which the true rate is expected to fall 95 per cent of the time.)

**Table 4: Number of Deaths and Suicides in Private and Public Prisons 1990–99**

Year	All Deaths				Suicide Only			
	Private Prisons	Public Prisons	Total	Percentage of Deaths in Private Prisons	Private Prisons	Public Prisons	Total	Percentage of Suicides in Private Prisons
1990	0	33	33	0.00	0	18	18	0.0
1991	0	39	39	0.00	0	17	17	0.0
1992	1	35	36	2.78	1	19	20	5.0
1993	5	44	49	10.20	3	20	23	13.0
1994	2	51	53	3.77	1	21	22	4.5
1995	4	55	59	6.78	4	24	28	14.3
1996	3	49	52	5.77	1	22	23	4.3
1997	9	66	75	12.00	3	31	34	8.8
1998	11	57	68	16.18	5	29	34	14.7
1999*	2	22	24	8.33	1	10	11	9.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>451</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>8.3</b>
Yearly average	4.0	48.3	52.3	6.6	2.0	22.6	24.7	7.9

\* to 30 April 1999

*Rates for each private prison*

**Figure 2: Deaths and Suicides in Prison Custody, 1990–99**

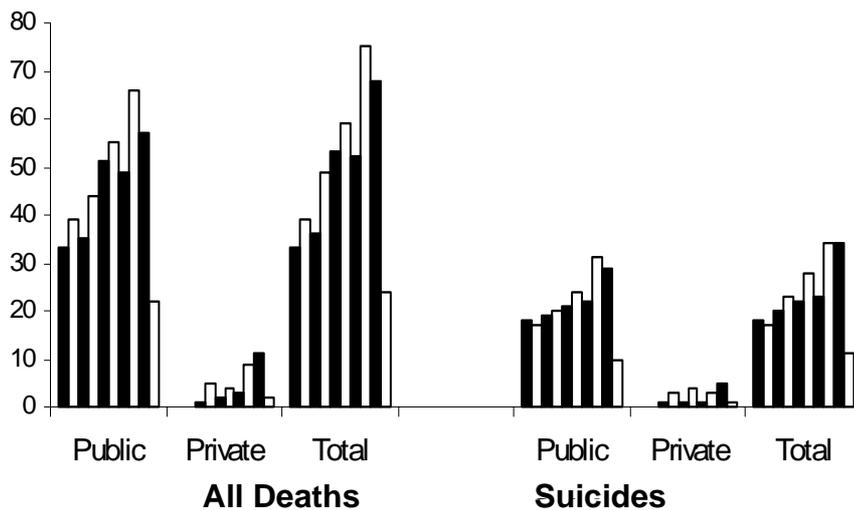


Table 6 provides comparative information on the numbers and rates of deaths and suicides in all seven private prisons in Australia over the 9.33-year period.

It can be seen from this table that two private prisons—Mt Gambier and Fulham—have experienced no deaths since their openings, whereas three others—Arthur Gorrie, Port Phillip and Junee—have experienced larger numbers. It can also be seen that Port Phillip Prison, Deer Park and Arthur Gorrie all have higher rates for all deaths and for suicides than the Australian average rates shown in the final column, although the Deer Park figures are too small to be meaningful. It is important to note, however, that each of these prisons is required to perform different functions and therefore comparisons between them can only be made with caution. For example, it has been well established that remand prisoners (who constitute substantial numbers at Arthur Gorrie and Port Phillip) are more likely to commit suicide than are prisoners serving sentences (Biles & McDonald 1992; Liebling 1992), and other factors, such as high turnover, seem also to be relevant.

*Rates for each company*

The data shown in Table 6 can be compressed so that comparisons

**Table 5: Distribution of Deaths and Suicides in Prison Custody, 1990–99**

	No. Deaths 1990–99	No. Suicides 1990–99	Deaths per 1000 Prisoners per Year	Suicides per 1000 Prisoners per Year
Private	7	19	2.93	1.51
Public	451	211	3.35	1.57
<b>Total</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>3.31</b>	<b>1.56</b>

**Table 6:** Distribution of Deaths and Suicides in Private Prison Custody, 1990–99, by Private Prison Only

	Borallon, Qld	Arthur Gorrie Qld	June, NSW	Mt. Gambier SA	Deer Park Vic.	Fulham Vic.	Port Phillip Vic.	Total Aust.
Prisoner Years	2,974	3,321	3,472	405	316	1,141	984	12,613
Deaths	1	13	9	0	2	0	12	37
Deaths per 1000/yr	0.34	3.91	2.59	0.00	6.33	0.00	12.20	2.93
Suicides	1	10	2	0	1	0	5	19
Suicides per 1000/yr	0.34	3.01	0.58	0.00	3.16	0.00	5.08	1.51

can be made on the performance of the three private prison companies over the same period of 9.33 years. These results are shown in Table 7.

Bearing in mind the need for caution expressed earlier, the relative performance of the three companies suggests that CCA has significantly lower rates for both deaths from all causes and for suicides. It is relevant to note here that CCA is responsible for the custody of only very small numbers of remandees—a small proportion of those in the Deer Park facility for women. A possible explanatory factor relevant to the high rates for Group 4 is the fact that this company has provided correctional services in Australia for only a relatively short time and therefore may still be at the stage of “settling in” as far as routines are concerned.

**Table 7:** Deaths and Suicides in Private Prisons, 1990–99, by Company

Company	Total Deaths	Prisoner Years	Death Rate per 1000 Prisoner Years	Total Suicides	Prisoner Years	Suicide Rate per 1000 Prisoner Years
CCA	3	3,290	0.91	2	3,290	0.61
ACM	22	7,934	2.77	12	7,934	1.51
Group 4	12	1,389	8.64	5	1,389	3.60
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>12,613</b>	<b>2.93</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>12,613</b>	<b>1.51</b>

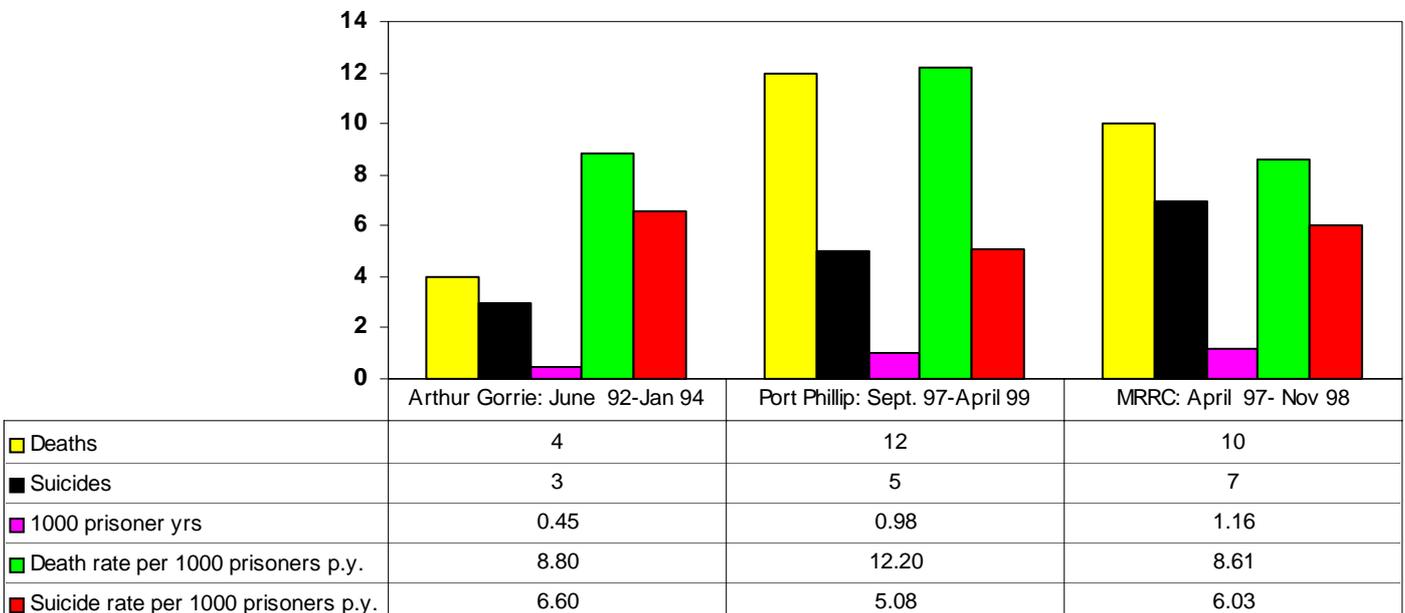
The next section will compare the performance of three new institutions during their establishment period.

### Three New Remand and Reception Prisons

There has been considerable speculation among criminologists and correctional administrators

about the comparative performance of three relatively new correctional facilities, each of which is a remand and reception institution. These three institutions are: Arthur Gorrie in Queensland, Port Phillip in Victoria and the Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre, Silverwater, in New South Wales. The latter institution is managed by the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services and is

**Figure 3:** A Comparison of Usage and Number of Deaths and Suicides: Port Phillip, Vic. (private); MRRC, NSW (public); and Arthur Gorrie, Qld (private)



therefore a public institution.

In order to make a valid comparison between these three institutions, their usage and the number of deaths and suicides were compared for the first 20 months of each facility's operations, even though they opened at different times. (At the time of writing, Port Phillip had only been open for 20 months.) The results of this comparison are shown in Figure 3.

The most notable aspect of the data shown here is the fact that, for all three institutions, the rates of death from all causes and from suicide are significantly higher than the national averages found for all public or all private prisons. It is also of interest to note that, whereas the Port Phillip Prison has the highest rate of deaths from all causes, it has the lowest rate of deaths from suicide.

### Conclusions

This small study has, for the first time, attempted to compare one aspect of the performance of private and public prisons in Australia on the basis of the actual occupancy of the institutions rather than the rated capacity.

The results suggest that, to date, private prisons generally have rates of deaths from all causes which appear to be lower than the rates of public prisons, but the difference is not statistically significant. The rates for suicide alone are almost identical for both private and public prisons.

These results should be viewed with caution, however, as Australia is still at an early stage in the process of privatising correctional services and the pattern of the findings may change over time. It is likely that, within five years, Australia will have about a quarter of its prisoners in private facilities. In due course it will be appropriate to repeat this analysis, and also to expand it to include other measures of correctional performance.

### Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge with thanks the advice of Professor Richard Harding in the development of the methodology used in this study and the statistical advice of David McDonald.

### References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999, *Corrective Services, December Quarter 1998*, ABS Catalogue No. 4512.0.
- Biles, D. & McDonald, D. (eds) 1992, *Deaths in Custody, Australia 1980-1989*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Dalton, V. (forthcoming), *Suicide in Australia's Prisons*, Research and Public Policy series, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Harding, R. 1998, *Private Prisons in Australia: The Second Phase*, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, no. 84, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Liebling, A. 1992, *Suicides in Prison*, Routledge, London.
- Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) 1991, *National Report*, vol. 1 (Commissioner Elliott Johnston), Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Professor David Biles, formerly a Deputy Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, is now a Consultant Criminologist and Professorial Associate of Charles Sturt University.  
Vicki Dalton is a Research Analyst with the Australian Institute of Criminology.

### PUBLIC INTEREST DISCLAIMER

In his capacity as a consultant criminologist, David Biles has occasionally received fees from both private and public suppliers of correctional services.



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:  
Dr Adam Graycar, Director  
Australian Institute of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

**Note:** Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice are refereed papers.