

What price mandatory sentencing?

Territorians may stare at the cost of mandatory sentencing in disbelief but it is there in black and white.

On page 29 of the Department of Correctional Services Annual Report 1997-98 it states: "the average daily cost of keeping a prisoner at Darwin Correctional Centre was \$155.26."

So in the absence of other government information, the cost of jailing one 29-year-old homeless man for 365 days for stealing a \$15 towel, costs taxpayers \$56,669.90.

A spokesman for Northern Territory Correctional Services confirmed the above figure includes "all costs including operational, management, training, estimated superannuation costs and costs incurred by other agencies."

What this figure fails to recognise is the capital costs of building a new \$50 million jail.

Also outstanding is the additional court time and legal fees involved in defending minor matters.

It is unlikely that such a figure takes into account the high cost involved in transporting witnesses back to Darwin from overseas to testify.

The Department of Correctional Services has prepared for increased inmate numbers as a result of the mandatory sentencing

regime introduced on 8 March, 1997.

It is understood the effect of the amendments introduced earlier this month is yet to be calculated.

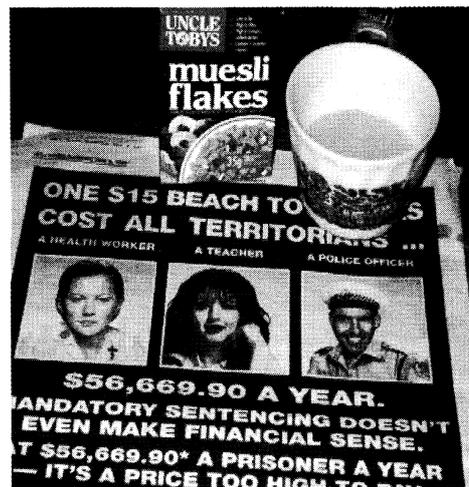
According to the annual report, figures on the costs and other implications of mandatory sentencing have been supplied to the Attorney General's department.

The president of the Law Society, Mr Steve Southwood called on the government to release to taxpayers the real cost of mandatory sentencing.

Mr Southwood rejected the flawed government logic that "the more crims you throw in jail" the cheaper it gets.

"That argument is just a red herring to obscure the real cost to the community," Mr Southwood said.

"The Northern Territory government needs to be honest with taxpayers and tell them the whole story by spelling out the real cost of this experiment in retribution," he said. The Law Council of Australia has unanimously supported the Law Society's opposition to mandatory sentencing by calling on the NT government to abandon the sentencing regime.



Sunday breakfast for Territorians included an advertisement highlighting the costs of mandatory sentencing

President of the Law Council, Mr Fabian Dixon condemned the expansion of the regime to assaults and sexual assaults.

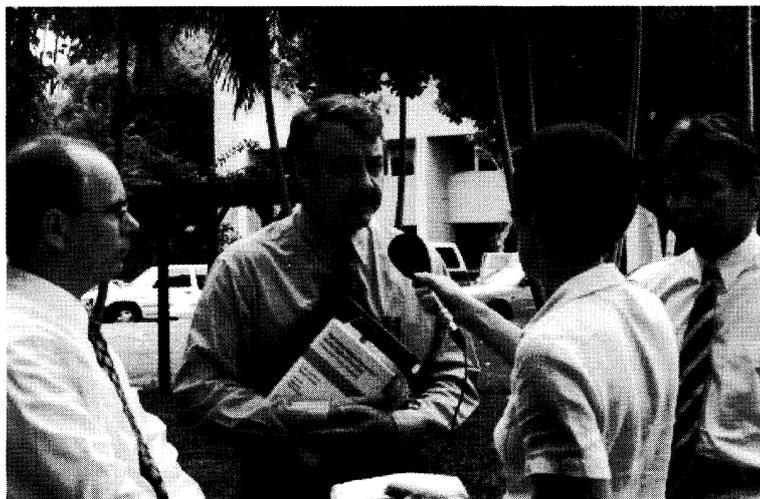
"Overall, the Northern Territory government's revision of its mandatory sentencing regime has resulted in only minimal positive amendments, which have been greatly outweighed by the negative ones," Mr Dixon said.

"Mandatory sentencing is also costing the Northern Territory essential community services such as police officers, teachers and health workers. The heavy cost of imprisoning someone under the regime - approximately \$56,000 for a year - shows how ludicrous the regime is, particularly when the Northern Territory government has admitted that the regime is not being successful in deterring offenders," he said.

The Law Council of Australia, together with the NSW Bar Association, the North Australia Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Victorian Bar Association joined local legal associations, individual practitioners and church groups to fund a full-page advertisement in the Sunday Territorian.

The advertisement highlighted the cost of mandatory sentencing to the community.

Practitioners interested in being part speaking circuit to inform the community about our justice system should contact the Law Society.



ABC Radio in Darwin interviews Colin McDonald while, Steve Southwood, President of the Law Society and President of the NT Criminal Lawyer's Jon Tippett look on.