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NSW prison population hits record high forcing police to 'babysit' inmates

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The NSW prisoner population is at a historic high of 11,100, with inmates having to be detained overnight at police stations and courthouses because there are not enough jail beds to meet the current demand.

And the number of inmates is only expected to increase, with Corrective Services reporting the unprecedented surge in numbers began in December, a month before the NSW government's tougher bail laws came into effect.

A department spokesman said the prison population had been rising for two years and was now "the highest it has ever been" and close to capacity.

But the prison officer's union, the Public Service Association, said NSW could only accommodate 10,800 prisoners. PSA general secretary Anne Gardiner said NSW's prison system was in crisis, and called for Grafton jail, closed in July 2012, to be immediately reopened.

The NSW Police Association said it was concerned that police officers now had the additional responsibility of caring for inmates.

"Police officers are now becoming babysitters for crooks when we should be out there actually locking them up," NSW Police Association president Scott Weber said.

NSW Attorney-General Brad Hazzard said he was concerned that police cells were being used to hold inmates for "longer than what would be normal".

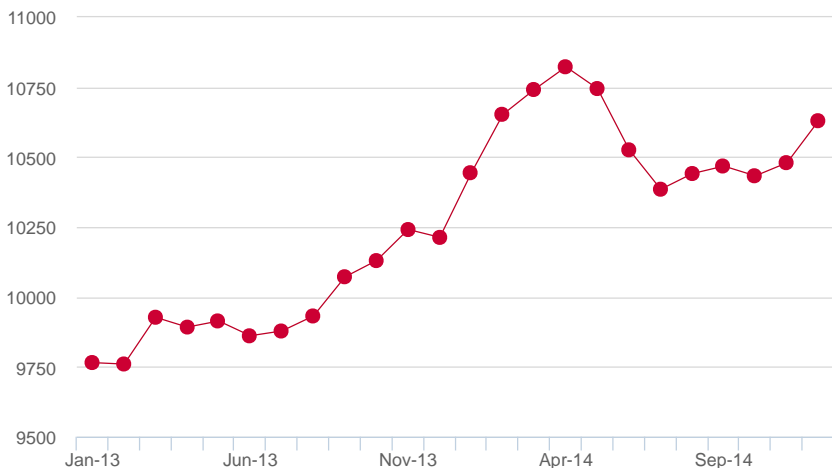
He said the government was looking at a range of options to address the spike in the prison population and would not rule out the possibility of re-opening jails, including Grafton.

"We're looking at whether or not it is necessary to re-open facilities," he said. "Everything is on the table."

Crowded prisons

ALL PRISONERS ON REMAND

In NSW, the number of adults in custody has been climbing since July.



Graphic: Fairfax Media | Source: BOCSAR, 2015

Mr Hazzard said additional capacity was already being created by the construction of modular, or demountable, cells inside existing jails.

A Corrective Services spokesman said that in the interim the department would be using "spare areas" and be placing inmates in already occupied cells..

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research estimates the prison population in NSW will be 12,500 by March.

Bureau director Don Weatherburn said the state was suffering from the "double whammy" of a steadily increasing number of sentenced prisoners and a temporary spike in the remand population.

The number of prisoners refused bail while awaiting court dates usually spikes over Christmas, when courts close. However, short-term spikes are becoming unmanageable because the overall prison population has been creeping up for two years.

"There is less and less room to move when one of those spikes occurs," he said.

The sentenced prisoner population has been rising for two years because more people are being sent to prison for offences, particularly serious assault, stalking and breaches of justice orders such as AVOs and bonds.

However, the rate of such offences, and most crimes across the state, has been going down.

"What seems to be happening is police are cracking down on these offences. Serious assault is coming down, but more people are being arrested," he said.

He said the spike in the remand population, which may come from magistrates refusing bail more often, is not the real problem.

"The underlying problem is the sentenced prisoner population which has been growing over the course of two years," he said.

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