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MEDIA RELEASE

COVID-19: PROS AND CONS OF EARLY PRISONER RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PROPOSALS to release select prisoners into the community early to mitigate their risk of being infected with COVID-19 must be balanced with the risks they would face in a society under stage 3 restrictions and with compromised support services, according to the authors of an article published online today by the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

“Custodial environments are susceptible to a COVID-19 outbreak given the confined conditions and potential for over-crowding,” the authors wrote.

“Moreover, prison populations are often vulnerable, possessing poorer physical and mental health and other social challenges (i.e., substance misuse, homelessness) compared to the general population.

“Any prisoners released under anti-COVID measures will return to a general community enduring stage three shutdown restrictions and a societal-wide economic downfall. Support services that are ordinarily available to released offenders are currently compromised or are experiencing significant delays. Moreover, government social security services (i.e., Centrelink) which are heavily relied upon by individuals post-release, are currently overwhelmed as they service thousands of newly unemployed clients. Mental health services are also strained as they adjust to remote service delivery and contend with a sharp spike in community-wide help-seeking.

“Proposals to immediately release vulnerable prisoners are a laudable objective.

“However it is important to balance the relative safety risks of remaining in custody – wherein Victorian prisons there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 – with early release into a social resource-depleted community in the midst of a ‘state of emergency’ shutdown.

“The potential for a COVID-19 outbreak in custody is a genuine concern, notwithstanding proactive measures employed in Victorian prisons. However, the real prospect of deleterious outcomes for immediately released vulnerable prisoners must also be weighed heavily during this challenging period.”

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