PROVIDING PHOTO IDENTIFICATION TO PEOPLE LEAVING PRISON:

A Practical Reform to Support Reintegration and Community Safety

INDIGENOUS CONSUMER ASSISTANCE NETWORK POLICY PAPER 2026

Key Points

Providing **funding to ensure all people leave prison with their Birth Certificate and Primary Photo Identification (ID)** is a proven strategy to reduce recidivism and enable successful reintegration. This low-cost, high-impact funding reform addresses a fundamental barrier to community safety and social inclusion.

- **Scale of the problem**: At Lotus Glen Correctional Centre, **70% of people entering custody did not have valid ID**, with a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- **Cause of the problem**: The cost and administrative complexity of obtaining ID are prohibitive for many people leaving prison, creating a persistent structural barrier to access.
- **Impact on reintegration**: Without ID, people face immediate barriers to banking, housing, telecommunications and employment-essential to creating a stable life after release and reducing re-offending.
- **Evidence**: A recent US study found that providing ID to people leaving prison reduced recidivism by 7.7% within 3 years and 8.6% within 5 years.
- **Funding needed & Return on Investment achieved:** For every $1 invested, the return is over $6 with a 3% reduction in recidivism delivering **$13.3M in savings per year** against a less than $2M outlay.

The Problem: A Hidden Barrier to Reintegration

ICAN's audit of people entering Lotus Glen Correctional Centre found that approximately 70% did not have valid photo identification, with the majority identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means a significant proportion of people leaving prison won't have ID. While women in prison are supported to have valid ID upon exit, male prisoners are not.

This is not a minor administrative gap, it is a systemic barrier that undermines reintegration from the moment a person exits custody.

People may not have ID on them at arrest, and documents left behind may be lost or stolen. In many cases, documents have already expired, and for people from remote communities there are longstanding barriers to accessing replacement documents even before custody.

Once in prison, obtaining ID generally depends on the person being able to pay the associated costs, something that is out of reach for most people in custody.

The result is predictable: many people leave prison without the ID needed to reconnect with services, meet basic obligations, and re-establish their lives in the community. This is a practical barrier with serious consequences for safe reintegration.

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The Impact: Cascading Barriers to Successful Reintegration

The absence of ID creates a domino effect. One missing document can delay or prevent access to the services that make lawful, stable living possible after release.

- **Banking**: Without ID, people cannot open bank accounts, receive wages safely, or manage money independently.
- **Housing**: Without ID, people struggle to apply for tenancies or access accommodation support, increasing the risk of homelessness.
- **Telecommunications**: Without ID, people cannot reliably obtain a phone plan or replacement device, making it harder to contact family, employers and support services.
- **Employment**: Without ID, people face delays in starting work, verifying identity, and meeting employer and ATO requirements.
- **Other**: Without ID, **travel is restricted** as ID is required for planes, trains and regional buses; people **can't access Superannuation** for bill payments under hardship; they **can't collect mail** via the post office; and they **can't self-exclude** from gambling venues.

Case Study

ACSO* recently supported a young man released after five years incarceration. He willingly engaged with reintegration supports but despite best efforts by him and ACSO, he exited custody without any form of ID or bank account. As a result he faced immediate, systemic barriers to housing, employment, income support, and financial participation.

He was caught in a "circular ID" system: obtaining ID required supporting documents, while those documents, and access to a bank account, required ID. Administrative delays compounded the challenges he faced, resulting in an estimated six-week gap before he could access financial systems.

Despite these challenges, he actively engaged with case management, progressing applications for ID and attending appointments. Intensive support enabled early steps toward stability, but structural barriers delayed full reintegration.

This case demonstrates that exclusion is driven not by lack of willingness, but by system design. The requirement to produce ID in order to obtain ID creates a cycle of exclusion. Without streamlined ID pathways and pre-release preparation, people leaving custody remain locked out of essential systems, increasing financial instability and social exclusion despite strong motivation to succeed.

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The Evidence: Proven Impact on Recidivism

This matters for Queensland because the evidence is clear: when people leave custody with the documents they need, they are better able to access work, housing and essential services, all of which support public safety. Reducing reoffending is not achieved through enforcement alone, it requires practical supports that remove avoidable barriers at the point of release.

Since March 2025, ICAN's Lotus Glen pilot, funded through a one-off grant, has already supported more than **600 people** to obtain ID through the assistance of QCS and the Australian Community Support Organisation (ACSO), with a pathway to support approximately 1,000 applications.

Through this work, ICAN has undertaken research into the causes and impacts of ID exclusion, identifying **lack of funds as the primary barrier.**

ID is already recognised as essential for women leaving prison, who receive support for funded ID via the Women's Reintegration Service(WRS). Also known as the Mara Project. Men exiting prison need the same access.

Case study: ACSO* recently supported a man in custody to access funded ID prior to his release. With full ID, he transitioned smoothly into the community, securing employment and housing immediately without barriers to essential employment and financial services. His ability to open a bank account, engage with services, and establish financial independence from the outset were all enabled through his pre-release access to ID.

A recent US study demonstrates that **providing ID to people leaving prison reduces recidivism by 7.7% within 3 years and 8.6% within 5 years**

The Solution: A Practical, Scalable Reform

Queensland needs to fund ID for all men leaving prison who require it, matching the support already available to women. This is a straightforward reform that removes a known barrier and gives people a realistic chance to rebuild their lives on release.

- **Closing the Gap:** Supports improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who are disproportionately affected.
- **Evidence-based reform:** Targets a proven enabler of reduced recidivism and stronger community safety.
- **Equity with existing services:** Extends to men the same practical support already provided to women through reintegration services.
- **Digital policy consistency:** Aligns with the Queensland Government's Digital Identity and Verifiable Credential Policy.

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The Investment: Real Value for Money

Cost Item

18+ card (new): **$82.70**
18+ card or licence (renewal): **$37.40**
Birth certificate: **$56.20**

Estimated annual program cost for 7,500 people (50% of those exiting Qld prisons) receiving a new 18+ card and Birth Certificate = **Under $2 million**

Return on Investment:
A 3% reduction in recidivism would generate **estimated savings of $13.3 million per year**

This estimate is conservative and the real-world benefits are higher when improved housing stability, employment participation and reduced service disruption are taken into account.

Recommendation

The Queensland Government should provide immediate funding to ensure every person leaving prison who requires a Birth Certificate and Photo Identification can obtain it before release. This is a practical, cost-effective reform that would strengthen reintegration, reduce avoidable disadvantage, and improve community safety.

Further Information

The following reports referred to in the document can be found here:

- ICAN's ID Project Research Report, *Strengthening Reintegration through Access to Identification*, May 2026
- Steffensmeier, E. *Can I See Some Identification? The Impact of Receiving Identification on Recidivism Upon Release from Prison*, Social Science Quarterly, 2025
- Stace, v and Sibanda, J. *Paying the Price - A report into issues prisoners face around access to banking*, Vic University, Te Herenga Waka / Fincap Research Project, 2023

*ACSO supports reintegration in all Qld male Correctional Centres. For further information please go to: www.acso.org.au

ACSO provided consent for the use of these case studies

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