

The Inspector's Overview

CASUARINA PRISON: MAXIMUM SECURITY BUT MULTI-PURPOSE

PRESSURE OF NUMBERS

This is the report of an announced inspection of Casuarina Prison which took place in April 2010. At the time, Casuarina held around 694 prisoners. Although this is just under its official 'operational capacity' of 700,ⁱ this should not obscure the true extent of the overcrowding and the pressures this was generating for staff, prisoners and management.

Casuarina's 'design capacity' – the number of people for whom the cells were purpose built just over 20 years ago – is only 397. Until 2009 design capacity provided the key measure of official prison capacity and overcrowding was measured by the extent to which the number of prisoners exceeded design capacity. In mid-2009, when the prison population was rising rapidly, the Department of Corrective Services introduced a new Policy Directive governing prison beds and the term 'operational capacity' came into official use.

The operational capacity includes all bunk beds or other beds that have been installed to accommodate increased numbers (but not the mattresses on floors that are found in some prisons).ⁱⁱ Thus, whilst Casuarina was operating just below its full operational capacity, it was in fact very overcrowded. Around 80 per cent of its prisoners were living in cells at double their design capacity.ⁱⁱⁱ

STAFF, MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

It is a great credit to management and staff that these pressures have been well-managed. Casuarina houses a complex mix of prisoners but the prison appeared both secure and relatively settled. Prisoners were often frustrated at the level of overcrowding but were generally accepting of their situation and understood that staff shared many of their concerns. The Inspectorate was impressed with staff professionalism, passion and pragmatism under pressure. However, staff were frustrated by the fact that investment in other supporting infrastructure had not kept pace with the increased number of beds and at perceived communication issues with management and head office. They were also concerned about the potential impact of two soon to be built accommodation units with a combined capacity of 256 prisoners.

This office has consistently placed on record its objections to double bunking and its concerns that it is becoming a norm across much of the prison system. At the time of our previous inspection in July 2007, double-bunking was already in train at Casuarina. However, that inspection did conclude that Casuarina was better placed to handle an increased population (then projected to be 580–600) than the State's other secure prisons because a stable, experienced and well-resourced management team was in place. Unfortunately, at this inspection the management team was not so stable, with a number

i The operational capacity and the design capacity of every prison in the state can be viewed at <http://www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/prisons/prison-locations>

ii For example, Bandyup Women's Prison has been holding around 265 prisoners. Its design capacity is 183 and its operational capacity is virtually identical (184). The extra 80 women have been sleeping on mattresses on the floor of cells, generally in the more impoverished sections of the prison.

iii In round figures, the design capacity is 400 and the operational capacity is 700. This means that around 300 out of 400 cells are double bunked. Those 300 cells, at full capacity, will house 600 prisoners (85 per cent of an operational capacity of 700).

of senior managers on leave and the majority, including the Superintendent, in acting positions. The inspection also concluded that there was considerable room for improvement in communication between members of the management team, between management and staff at the prison and between head office and the prison.

ADDITIONAL ACCOMMODATION UNITS

Casuarina is one of a number of major prison expansion sites and is to have two new accommodation units. Each unit will consist of 64 double-bunked cells, giving a total of 256 (2 x 128) new beds. At the time of the inspection there seemed to be a very real prospect that Casuarina would grow fairly quickly from 700 prisoners to 900 or more. However, the number of male prisoners in Western Australia has dropped by around 180 since the Casuarina inspection.^{iv} Numbers are projected to rise again in the future but the lower number, coupled with the opening of new accommodation at a number of sites, should afford some breathing space. At Casuarina and other prisons, subject to funding, this should give an opportunity to address some of the existing infrastructure deficits and to ensure there is adequate infrastructure for the new prisoners.

For example, at Casuarina it should be possible for some prisoners to move into the new units, to return some of the existing units to single occupancy, and to address any infrastructure issues in the older cells. One of the priorities should be improving the designs of the double bunks, many of which have poor access and pose a risk of injury.^v However, the small size of the cells – never designed for double bunks – is problematic.

MAXIMUM SECURITY OR MULTI-PURPOSE?

Casuarina Prison is officially described as ‘the main maximum-security prison for male prisoners – particularly long-term prisoners – in Western Australia. Surrounded by a range of state-of-the-art security devices, the prison has a special unit for intensive, high-security supervision of offenders.’^{vi} At first sight, this description, viewed alongside Casuarina’s growing prisoner numbers, may conjure up alarming images of a prison and a prison system bulging at the seams with more and more very high risk prisoners.

The truth is somewhat different. Casuarina obviously does hold a significant number of prisoners who present as an escape risk or a serious management problem. However, at the time of the inspection, only 130 (less than 19 per cent) of its prisoners were actually rated maximum security. It was striking that almost as many (115) were rated minimum security and the balance (around 65 per cent) were medium security. This raises some interesting challenges given that the prison is going through such a large expansion. If Casuarina does expand to around 900 prisoners, it is very likely that the proportion of maximum security

iv The number of female prisoners has been rising at a much faster rate than men for many years. In the period from August 2008, the number of female prisoners has risen from around 280 to over 400 (an increase of over 40 per cent) and the number of male prisoners has increased from around 3575 to 4300 (an increase of 20 per cent). The current expansion plans have focused almost entirely on male prisoners and the women’s prison estate is therefore facing very serious pressures (see also footnote ii).

v This issue was also raised in Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS), *Report of an Announced Inspection of Greenough Regional Prison*, Report No. 66 (June 2010).

vi See <http://www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/prisons/prison-locations/casuarina>

prisoners will drop and that the number of medium and minimum security prisoners will rise. In other words, it will increasingly become a multi-purpose facility.

In addition to Casuarina, the State's two other main maximum security prisons (Hakea and Albany) are also being expanded. There are some obvious attractions in expanding maximum security facilities in that they can house prisoners of all classifications. But there are costs attached to routinely housing prisoners who do not need a maximum security placement in a maximum security facility. These costs are both financial (the costs involved in security and in prisoner management within the prison are likely to be higher) and systemic (prisoners will spend longer in a less positive environment, with less capacity for self-development). With such a high concentration of maximum security places, prisoners will also have less capacity to move to the lower security facilities for which they have been assessed as suitable.

OUT OF COUNTRY, OUT OF PLACE

Casuarina houses a large number of Aboriginal men from remote and regional parts of the State, especially the Kimberley. This has numerous consequences for the men – many of whom are not rated maximum security – and also for the prison. The men are geographically, culturally and socially isolated, and long to be returned to a prison closer to home. For its part, the prison, being so far from the regions, cannot readily access the culturally relevant services and family/community supports that would be more readily available if the men were still 'in country'.

At the time of the 2007 inspection, in recognition of the fact that many Aboriginal prisoners would remain 'out of country' because of the lack of regional beds, Casuarina was developing a model for a Displaced Aboriginal Prisoner program (DAP). The aim was to provide an opportunity for the displaced men to live together, to maintain cultural connections and to undertake culturally relevant education and training. Construction of the new West Kimberley Regional Prison in Derby is due to be completed at the end of 2011. However, even when it is fully operational, there will probably still be a significant number of out of country men at Casuarina. This inspection found scope for the aims, objectives and content of the DAP program – and for services for out of country Aboriginal men generally – to be revisited and reinvigorated.

RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE MONITORING

This report contains 14 recommendations and the Department has expressed support for all of them. In the majority of cases, it has also said that the recommendations reflect 'existing departmental initiatives'. This is a new type of response from the Department, rather different from the traditional responses of 'supported', 'supported in part', 'supported in principle' or 'not supported'.

To date, the Department has provided only limited supporting documentation with respect to the impact of these existing initiatives and no detail about the nature of the initiatives or the timeframes for implementation. However, the fact that the recommendations are not

only supported but are already being pursued will allow this Office to monitor and assess their outcomes closely. Details of the initiatives, the outcomes being sought, the associated policies and time for implementation will be followed up with the Department on a regular basis and assessment against progress tracked.

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