

1 Inspector's overview

Truth and Fiction

Few events excite public curiosity as much as a prison escape. Natural curiosity is further fuelled by iconic movies in which Hollywood heroes triumph against impossible odds, intolerable conditions, cruel staff, and vicious fellow-prisoners. Movies such as *The Great Escape* (Steve McQueen), *Escape from Alcatraz* (Clint Eastwood), *Papillon* (Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman) involve cunning plans, elaborate preparation and daredevil risk taking.

Reality is far more mundane. There is certainly no room for complacency, but escapes are rare and escapes from maximum and medium security prisons are very rare. When escapes do occur, they are generally nothing like the movies: they tend to be opportunistic, individualistic and short-lived. Good luck plays a greater role than good planning.

Most commonly, escapes involve low risk offenders who have been placed for rehabilitative reasons in work camps and minimum security settings. Escapes are also more likely when people grasp spur of the moment opportunities during escorted movements outside a secure facility.

There is always room to reduce opportunity and risk by improving physical, procedural and relational security. A process of reflection and learning is also required. However, the most significant finding of this report is that *most prisoners do the right thing: they never escape or try to escape, even when they have opportunities to do so*. For example, on any given day, over 1,000 prisoners are located in minimum security prisons or work camps, and a significant number of these prisoners are undertaking work in the community. It is important not to allow a handful of escapes to lead to the system becoming so risk averse that it compromises its own ability to achieve the critical outcome of reducing recidivism by preparing people for release.

The media is unlikely to be interested in the story that so few prisoners abuse the trust that is placed in them, but it is a story that should be told. It is a sign that, overall, the Department and its contractors are identifying and managing escape risks. They have also responded promptly and proactively to the escapes that have occurred.

Numbers, Circumstances and Causes

Broadly speaking, three 'locations' need to be considered with respect to escapes from Department of Correctional Services in Western Australia:

- The higher security custodial facilities (the maximum and medium security prisons and the Banksia Hill Detention Centre);
- The lower security custodial facilities (minimum security prisons and work camps, including community work being undertaken from such facilities); and
- Situations where prisoners are being moved outside the facilities themselves, including transport between court and prison, inter-prison transfers and 'hospital sits'.

The main findings of this report are as follows:

- The number of people who have escaped from any location is low. From January 2008 to August 2014, there were only 70 such escapes despite an average daily prison population of around 5000 people.
- There have been very few escapes from maximum or medium security facilities. The escapes that have occurred from such facilities in recent years have involved both publicly and privately operated facilities. All of these escapes revealed physical, procedural and dynamic security failings. However, it is also notable that most of them occurred at times when the facilities were under abnormal pressure, and also involved offenders who were prepared to take extraordinary risks. Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre (maximum security) experienced two escapes, involving a total of three detainees, in 2010 and 2012. Both of these escapes were assisted by internal construction activities. In January 2014 there was an escape from the medium security section of Roebourne Regional Prison during a cyclone. In mid-2014, towards the end of a massive, high risk building program, there was an escape from the privately-operated Acacia Prison.
- Over 60 per cent of people who escaped or attempted to escape did so while outside the confines of a maximum, medium or minimum security facility. These prisoners were at work camps, at court, on authorised external activities, being transported, or in hospital.
- All escapes are unique, and most are opportunistic with little planning or prior consideration. This makes them difficult to prevent.
- Although Hollywood's most famous escapees have all been male, women escape, or attempt to escape, in rough proportion to their numbers in the system.
- Younger offenders are considerably more likely to escape.
- Good staff-prisoner interactions are vital to reducing opportunities for escape.
- Most offenders were returned to custody either on the day itself or within a day of their escape. More than two thirds of people were returned in three days or less.
- Overall, the Department and its contractors have learned from escapes and have implemented changes that have been largely successful in preventing similar escapes.
- Areas for further improvement include the Department improving its escape alert system and monitoring the impact of its changes to policy and procedure. At least thirteen changes to policy and procedure have been made since 2014 in response to escapes, but the impact of these policy changes has not been sufficiently monitored.

Balancing Risks

Correctional services, at their core, are about people management and risk management. Good people management and good risk management require good intelligence, good security systems, good interaction between prisoners and staff, and appropriately balanced policies.

When Casuarina Prison opened in 1989, some people who should have known better described it as 'escape-proof' because of its robust and sophisticated perimeter security systems. They were wrong of course, and within weeks, a high profile prisoner used the oldest trick in the book to escape: he hid in a vehicle that was exiting the prison. Once again, this escape reflected opportunism, combined with procedural and dynamic security failings, at a time when the prison was not settled.

The good news is that there have been no escapes from Casuarina since then but the point is that there will always be some 'chinks in the armour'. In theory it would be possible to harden prisons

further to try to eliminate all escapes. However, this report has shown that this unnecessary, as most prisoners 'do the right thing'. Undue hardening of regimes and buildings would elevate other risks, such as violence, riots or disorder within the prison. It would also reduce the capacity of the system to achieve its long term goal of improving community safety (and reducing costs) by reducing recidivism.

When a spate of escapes occurred in 2013-2014, mainly involving external escorts and 'hospital sits', it was inevitable that a range of policies and procedures would be tightened. However, blanket policies are problematic. Some of the policies that were developed have created unnecessary costs and operational complexity, and some have created unfairness to prisoners who had shown they did respond to trust. For example, prisoners who have been trusted to leave a prison on a daily basis to undertake work in the community, and have ample opportunity to escape if they wish, have required a two-officer escort, in restraints, if they have needed to go to hospital.

In summary, the spate of escapes in 2013-2014 was very concerning. However, there have been immediate responses to these incidents and, taking a longer term view, both the Department and its contractors deserve credit for having achieved a low number of escapes. The challenge is to ensure policies and procedures are appropriately balanced and to maintain that balance.