



OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR  
OF CUSTODIAL SERVICES

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Report Name: *Thermal conditions of prison cells.*

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The thermal conditions of prison cells and the adequacy of the Department of Corrective Service's measures to mitigate temperature extremes are the subject of a report released today by the Inspector of Custodial Services.

On releasing the report, Inspector Neil Morgan said:

One of the main drivers for this report was Roebourne Regional Prison. Roebourne is located in one of the harshest climatic regions in Australia and the ferocious heat at the prison has been a source of concern to this Office since 2002. The Department itself has recognised that temperatures in the prison can reach 50°C but over the years, it has either failed to action recommendations, or was dismissive of the extent of the problem.

The 2008 heat related death of Aboriginal elder Mr Ward in a prisoner transport vehicle highlighted the safety risks that can arise from extreme temperatures. This shocking event led to an overhaul of prisoner transport in Western Australia and the development of national standards for prisoner transport. Unfortunately, neither the Department's review nor the national initiatives extended to temperature control in prisons.

The report found that some of Western Australia's older prison facilities are ill-equipped to tolerate current climatic conditions, and that the Department's ability to meet its duty of care to provide a safe environment for prisoners was compromised by its failure to conduct systematic research into the problem, and by a lack of policies and standards:

Prisoners cannot take the type of remedial actions to alleviate heat that people in the community can do – such as seeking shade, breeze or an air-conditioned place. In addition, prisoners have a high rate of chronic health conditions and prescribed medication use that increases their susceptibility to temperature extremes. There is no formal identification system for prisoners who are heat sensitive, such as those receiving medications that can increase vulnerability to heat stroke.

In order to ensure independent expertise, the Inspector engaged researchers from Curtin University to chart the thermal conditions at Roebourne and at Karnet Prison Farm in summer, and at Bandyup Women's Prison and Albany Regional Prison in winter. The results were most concerning and corroborated the Inspector's previously reported concerns. At Roebourne, the non-air-conditioned cells rarely recorded temperatures below 30°C and attained temperatures close to 40°C, while at Karnet the prefabricated 'donga' accommodation was up to 6°C hotter than brick constructed cells in the middle of the day and attained temperatures close to 39°C. The temperatures recorded in these cells represented a significant threat to prisoner health.

The cell temperatures during the winter did not present the same acute risk to prisoner health but were undoubtedly uncomfortable, and in some cases resulted in hygiene, safety and security issues.

The Inspector commended the Department of Corrective Services on recent prison projects such as West Kimberley Regional Prison, where the prison's design is appropriate for the climate and where climate control systems ensure the maintenance of acceptable temperatures. Mr Morgan said the stark contrast between newer facilities such as West Kimberley and the new Roebourne Work Camp on the one hand, and older prisons such as Roebourne, has resulted in a two-tiered system of prisoner accommodation, with some locations presenting a higher risk to prisoner health than others due to inadequate temperature mitigation.

Mr Morgan acknowledged that after receipt of the draft report, the Commissioner for Corrective Services committed to implement and monitor immediate measures in Roebourne to improve airflow and ventilation:

This is good – and long overdue – and we will continue to monitor what happens at Roebourne and other prisons. But the point remains that this is not just a matter of prisoners' "comfort" – it is a question of safety, legality and humane treatment. Where remedial methods are not sufficient to alleviate risk to prisoners, air-conditioning should be installed. While air-conditioning is costly, the financial and reputational cost of a heat related death or serious injury would be even higher.

If the State is to meet its duty of care, adequate climate control is a necessity not an option.

The report is available on the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services website at (<http://www.oics.wa.gov.au/publications/review/>).