

Inspector's Overview

WOOROLOO: POSITIVE PROGRESS BUT POPULATION PRESSURE

MINIMUM-SECURITY PRISONS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN OUR PRISON SYSTEM

Wooroloo is one of three minimum-security male prisons in Western Australia. Some regional prisons also have minimum-security units outside the perimeter of a higher security facility.

Minimum-security prisons are an essential element of a well-functioning prison system. Prisoners are only placed there after careful security and safety assessments. From a public safety perspective, minimum-security prisons provide opportunities for prisoner rehabilitation, for reparation to the community through community work, and for preparing people for reintegration to the community. They also require prisoners to exercise more personal responsibility for their lives. They provide a softer environment, but are not a 'soft option'.

From a system management perspective, minimum-security prisons offer a valuable incentive to prisoners in overcrowded higher security prisons. They are generally keen to earn a place in a less restrictive and more positive environment.

Finally, from a cost perspective, minimum-security prisons are generally cheaper, per head, than higher security prisons.

Given these benefits, it is important that minimum-security prisons are an integral part of Departmental planning and that they are adequately resourced and supported.

WOOROLOO'S CULTURE HAS IMPROVED

As we have discussed in earlier reports, Wooroloo went through a difficult period from 2009 to 2014. These years were marked by change and instability in the senior management team, staff divisions, and low staff morale. Prisoner numbers were also increasing but there was no clear vision for the future or sense of direction. What should have been one of the best prisons to work at was divided and unhappy. Not surprisingly, relations between staff and prisoners had also declined.

In 2015, we reported that the new management team had started to drive positive change, and we encouraged the prison and the Department to continue this. I am pleased to report that the positive progress has continued. It has not been an easy journey, but relations between management and staff have become stronger, staff division has declined, and morale has improved. Wooroloo also now has a clear and positive vision: to be 'Australia's leading re-entry prison'.

It is not easy to drive cultural change in a prison, and the Department can draw some positive lessons from Wooroloo. Above all, change takes time and requires continuity and consistency. But it is well worth the investment.

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THE PRISON IS GENERALLY DOING WELL WITH WHAT IT HAS, BUT MOST AREAS ARE UNDER PRESSURE

Overall, Wooroloo is doing well, given the pressures that exist at the prison itself, and across the system as a whole.

Wooroloo debunks the myth that prisons must be designed as prisons. It is one of the best prison facilities in the state, even though it was originally a sanatorium and a local hospital. It became a small, unfenced prison farm in the 1970s before expanding to hold over 400 prisoners behind a fence. The buildings, many of which are heritage listed, are generally in good condition, though maintenance is always a challenge. The site has mature trees, foliage, and open spaces. It is calming, well-maintained, and very well-suited to the prison's role.

Wooroloo's population has doubled over the past decade, and there are plans to add 48 more beds to help alleviate the system's overcrowding crisis. The prison has done well to adapt and to cope with increased numbers, and has a good track record for security and safety. It is also providing a good service to prisoners in many areas. However, some areas are already under pressure, and additional resources will be needed.

Areas that were working well included the following:

- The prison education centre was providing useful short courses to improve the prospects of employment.
- Transition management services were working hard to help prisoners with practical essentials such as documentation and identification, accommodation and employment.
- The peer support team had expanded to 14, and was culturally diverse. They were active across the site, and were involved in the orientation program for new arrivals.
- Inside the Wooroloo compound, prisoners were free to move between accommodation units and most work sites. Men commented on the relaxed, empowered feel of the prison.
- The visits area at Wooroloo provided a relaxed, friendly, and family-focused atmosphere for prisoners to engage with their visitors. Staff were respectful and alert.
- Wooroloo is responsible for the Dowerin Work Camp, which is consistently at its capacity of 20. From Dowerin, suitably assessed men gained paid employment in Wheatbelt towns, and some remained in those jobs and towns after release.

The prison was well-placed to provide preparation for employment. However, almost 15 per cent of the population was not working. We would also have expected more prisoners to be working off site on 'Section 95 activities'.

Case management should be an important element of planning for release. However, as at other prisons, Wooroloo's case management system was suffering from infrequent contact between designated officers and prisoners.

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Both prisoners and the taxpayer are also paying a high price for the Department's failings in relation to prisoner assessments and program provision. Hakea Prison is way behind schedule in completing its assessments of prisoners, and too many prisoners are being assessed as needing programs that are never made available to them. This leaves them facing parole denial, and the taxpayer footing the bill for them to serve their full sentence, even when they have been rated minimum-security.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Wooroloo faces many challenges as resources continue to be tight and the prisoner population continues to grow. It has some strong foundations for the future, in a good site, a strong track record, and a focused and stable management team.

However, it is essential for the government to recognise what Wooroloo achieves and to commit the resources that allow it to reach its goal of being 'Australia's leading re-entry prison'. Currently, too much of the system is simply warehousing prisoners. Wooroloo must not become one of the warehouses: it must be resourced to deliver programs, employment, and other supports to enable prisoners to address their offending behaviour, to access parole, and to return to the community not to prison.

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