

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON ON THURSDAY 18 APRIL 2019

Strip searching practices in Western Australian prisons

The Inspector of Custodial Services has released a report on strip searching practices in the State's prisons. The Inspector, Neil Morgan said:

The Department of Justice is heavily reliant on strip searching in tackling the problem of contraband in prisons. It conducted more than 900,000 strip searches on prisoners between 2014 and 2018, and found only 571 items. That is less than one hit for every 1,500 prisoners strip searched. This is not good enough, particularly as most of the items found were not drug or weapon related.

People coming into a prison, including staff, can also be strip searched. More than 2,000 visitors were strip searched during the last five years, including 374 children. No contraband was found on any child during those searches.

Significantly, we also found that the decision to minimise strip searches at selected facilities had not led to an increase in contraband at any of those sites.

The report found that almost all strip searches were based on policy and procedure rather than intelligence or suspicion of contraband. Mr Morgan said:

Only three per cent of strip searches were intelligence-led. The other 97 per cent were 'routine'. In other words, they were performed for no reason other than procedural compliance. This is most unlikely to lead to contraband finds.

Strip searching is also potentially harmful. Many people in custody – probably the majority - have experienced trauma from physical, emotional, and sexual victimisation and abuse. The humiliation and degradation of a strip search can cause further harm. The Department recognises the harm to women, but has not given equal attention to the harm to men.

Mr Morgan welcomed the fact that the Department is reviewing its searching policies to comply with international standards and to improve effectiveness. He said he hoped this would lead to routine strip searching being phased out, and to better contraband detection. However, he was surprised that the Department did not support a recommendation to trial new technologies.

This recommendation is in line with recent recommendations from the Auditor General and the Crime and Corruption Commission. And many jurisdictions in Australia, and across the world, have already turned to technology to improve contraband detection and reduce the harm caused by strip searches.

It is odd that metal detectors and body scanners are now routine screening requirements at airports, courts and many government buildings, but not in our prisons.

We all want to stem the flow of contraband but strip searching is not effective. Alternatives need to be found, and the government should adequately resource the Department to do so.

Neil Morgan
Inspector

For Further Media Information

The Inspector, Mr Neil Morgan, will be available for comment from 12 noon on 18 April 2019 and can be contacted on 0427 426 471.

The full report will be available on the Inspector's website (www.oics.wa.gov.au).