

2025 INSPECTION OF WORK CAMPS

WORK CAMPS OFFER STRUCTURED PATHWAYS TOWARDS RELEASE AND REHABILITATION

Work camps are a vital part of Western Australia's custodial estate. They provide structured, real-world environments where men can build work habits, life skills, and confidence; reconnect with community expectations; and take meaningful steps toward release and reintegration. These functions – rehabilitation, reparation, skills development, and community acceptance – have long been central to the work-camp model and remain evident across the system today.

This inspection is the second to examine the five work camps as distinct facilities, building on this Office's earlier review of prisoner flows through the custodial estate (2012) and the first full inspection of work camps conducted in 2015. Our findings are consistent with previous work: the model offers clear reintegration benefits, yet utilisation has not kept pace with its potential. Encouragingly, the number of prisoners placed in work camps has increased since the inspection period (February), signalling renewed momentum that should be consolidated.

There are five work camps located across the state, each attached to a host prison. Superintendents retain overall responsibility, with on-site operations led by senior officers and prison officers. This governance arrangement matters clarity of roles and support from the host facility directly affect consistency, program delivery and safe access to external activities. Work camps also mirror daily community routines more closely than other custodial settings for adult men, strengthening prisoners' readiness for release.

The model's benefits are tangible. Prisoners consistently told us that work camps help them reconnect with "normal life," build social ties, and prepare for release. Communities benefit from valuable labour – much of it maintaining public spaces that might otherwise be neglected. Notably, four of the five camps operate at lower cost than their host prisons, underscoring the model's potential to be both rehabilitative and cost-effective.

Yet the system remains underutilised and uneven. Since 2020, overall occupancy has never exceeded 75%; some camps (for example, Wyndham and Warburton) have remained below 50% until recently. Contributing factors include remoteness, limited staffing, and complex, duplicative approval processes. Aboriginal men are also substantially under-represented in work camps, in part because of systemic barriers to attaining minimum-security classification (26% of First Nations men versus nearly 74% of non-Aboriginal men). In response to this finding, I note the Department has committed to investigating strategies for improving First Nations representation at work camps, including prioritising eligible First Nations prisoners where possible.

We also observed the effects of staffing shortages on life-skills training and support, and the absence of a clear departmental “champion” to drive consistent practice and remove operational bottlenecks.

Access processes need attention. Placement in a work camp is voluntary, but not all prisoners are fully informed about the opportunities and reintegration benefits on offer – compromising the quality of their decision-making. Lengthy, multi-layered approvals for placement and for external activities delay participation in programs, including the Prisoner Employment Program and home leave, and formal education offerings remain limited at several sites.

Looking ahead, there is a clear opportunity to strengthen how work camps prepare prisoners to live, work and belong in the community. Central to this are robust Section 95 (S95) opportunities – safe, supervised external work and community engagement that let men practise responsibility, contribute locally, and rebuild trust as part of their rehabilitation journey. When delivered consistently, S95 and other reintegration activities help translate the routines of camp life into the realities of life after release.

These findings also speak to broader themes across the custodial estate: equity and transparency in classification pathways; streamlined, proportionate approval processes for external activities; consistent program delivery regardless of geography; and clear accountability for championing the work-camp model. Addressing these system settings will lift utilisation, improve outcomes, and ensure that more men can access the rehabilitative benefits that work camps are designed to deliver.

It is encouraging to note the Department has re-introduced a dedicated Work Camps’ Manager role to centralise oversight and coordination. This position, if appropriately empowered, could address many of the issues identified in this report – providing consistent leadership, streamlining processes, ensuring equity of access (including for Aboriginal prisoners), and acting as a departmental champion for work camps. A centralised manager also creates an opportunity to embed work camps more firmly within the Department’s broader reintegration strategy, aligning S95 activities and other external programs with system-wide priorities for rehabilitation and release preparation.

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Jane Higgins

Acting Inspector of Custodial Services

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