

WORKERS' COMPENSATION TRENDS IN WA PRISONS

WORKING IN A CUSTODIAL ENVIRONMENT PRESENTS UNAVOIDABLE RISKS, BUT HARM CAN BE MINIMISED

The high rate of workers' compensation claims in the Department of Justice – Corrective Services has been a pressing issue for several years and prompted this Review. There is no dispute custodial work is inherently high-risk, exposing staff to physical, psychological, and operational hazards. While these risks may be unavoidable, unreasonably high rates of injury are not. Added to this are recent reforms to Western Australia's workplace health and safety legislation which enhanced employers' obligations to provide a safe workplace, with increased emphasis on psychosocial injury. Therefore, having an efficient and effective workers' compensation and injury management framework is critical for Corrective Services.

This Review examined the escalating number of claims, particularly the incidence of psychological injury – which has more than doubled since 2019, and now comprises 1 in 4 claims, and the impact these have on the operation of custodial facilities.

Over recent years one of the most common issues we have seen in our inspection and review work has been the issue of staffing shortages in prisons and detention centres. Absences due to workers' compensation claims are a major contributor to this issue. To varying degrees, staff shortages impact every aspect of custodial operations leading to daily roster shortages, increased lockdowns, and restricted prisoner services. These consequences feed into a cycle of repetition, with increased stress and pressure on staff generating further workers' compensation claims, leading to further shortages. Overlaid on this is the fact that psychological injury claims are often more serious, costlier, and harder to resolve than physical injury claims. This cycle needs to be disrupted and the single recommendation in this report is directed to this outcome.

Western Australia is not the only jurisdiction facing high rates of workers' compensation claims by custodial staff. The phenomenon is seen in most other correctional jurisdictions with most seeing higher rates of claims compared to first responders, with the exception being Victoria which has a noticeably lower rate of claims by prison officers compared to first responders and the general population (see Table 1, page 3 of this report).

The Department is not, and has not, been unresponsive to the issue of high workers' compensation claims and the impact this has on the operation of custodial facilities. There have been several reviews into the issue, including a significant funding injection in 2021, and the development of a new strategy aimed at addressing the issue. As outlined in Chapter 3, ultimately, these reforms did not result in significant improvement. For present purposes, it is probably more productive to focus on what happens next, rather than what happened in the past.

In response to a draft of this report, the Department supported Recommendation 1 and advised that in June 2025 they had engaged a consultant to review the effectiveness and efficiency of their workers' compensation and injury management systems and practices. The response also outlined other operational initiatives to address this issue, particularly in Banksia Hill Detention Centre and Hakea Prison.

This renewed focus on workers' compensation is consistent with the Department's *'Corrective Services Strategic Plan 2025-2030'*, which articulates an emphasis on three principles of People, Partnerships, and Performance. The Plan has four priority areas, with Priority 1 – *'Build a strong culture of safety, respect and trust'* - directly impacting staff health and wellbeing. The first listed action item is to *'Optimise the Work Health and Safety Framework to ensure it is fit for purpose and embeds a 'Safety Leadership Culture' prioritising physical, psychosocial, and cultural safety'*. There can be no clearer commitment to taking action to address the issue of improving the safety, health, and welfare of staff and people in custody.

We acknowledge the commitment the Department has made in the Strategic Plan for 2025-2030. This recognises the imperative to address high rates of workers' compensation which has become a critical workforce and financial challenge. Planned improvements and increased resources should go a long way to restoring trust, reducing harm, and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of both staff and people in custody.

Given the broad challenges facing the Department, this is a critical area of reform and one that we will monitor closely.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the support and cooperation received throughout the review from key personnel at the Department of Justice.

I acknowledge the contribution and hard work of the team in our office who were involved in undertaking this review. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Anna Morris for her work in leading this review and as principal analyst and drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan

Inspector of Custodial Services

13 October 2025