

Prison overcrowding and other matters report

The *Prison overcrowding and other matters report* is a response to a reference to this Office by the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee of the Queensland Parliament. The report is required by section 53 of the *Ombudsman Act 2001*.

The referral covered various matters about Queensland's corrective services system. Among the issues that were within our jurisdiction, the most significant was the impact of prison overcrowding.

Prison overcrowding

We investigated the overcrowding of Queensland prisons generally and specifically at Maryborough Correctional Centre (MCC). Queensland's prisons have been overcrowded since 2014-15, with resultant impacts on officers, prisoners and prison infrastructure. Considered together, these impacts present a fundamental challenge to Queensland Corrective Services (QCS) in achieving its statutory objective of humane containment.

The responses to overcrowding include increased staffing levels, increased number of prison cells, fitting cells with bunk beds, and workplace health and safety initiatives. While these responses have addressed some of the impacts of overcrowding, this report outlines recommendations to further address the ongoing significant risks to officers and prisoners.

What we recommended

Strategies we recommended to QCS include:

- providing advice to government on options to expand the number of cells available
- continued focus on workplace health and safety responses for officers
- addressing staffing issues created by overcrowding
- managing the impact of overcrowding on prison services and infrastructure
- ensuring the availability of psychology services to prisoners in shared cells
- improving the configuration of existing shared cells to reduce impacts on prisoner wellbeing
- reducing the application of modified unit routines
- improved decision-making and risk assessment processes for shared cell arrangements
- ensuring transparency of information about prisoner numbers and overcrowding
- improved recognition in regional prisons of the special legal status of remand prisoners.

Specific recommendations for MCC include continuing to address staffing levels, improving infrastructure and access to services.

We did not make any adverse findings or recommendations about the QCS rank structure and uniform dress standards, or funding of uniforms and personal protective equipment.

The report recommendations were accepted without reservation by the QCS Commissioner.

Implementation

The ongoing implementation of the recommendations will be monitored as part of the program of inspections of prisons and subsequent reports to Parliament under the *Inspector of Detention Services Act 2022* (IDS Act).