

The Inspector of Custodial Services has called for a sharper focus on the needs of girls in detention and young women in prison. In releasing his report on the Yeeda Unit at the Banksia Hill Detention Centre, Neil Morgan said:

'The 20 January riot at Banksia Hill has generated a lot of debate about youth justice but most of this has focused on the boys. We mustn't forget the girls. Only a small number are in detention, often for short periods. They range widely in age, background and need, so it can be difficult and expensive to provide adequate services. But it is in the community's long term interest to provide them support so they do not return to custody.

We must also not forget the young women in adult prisons. The state has invested resources in programs targeted at young men but not young women.'

Prior to September 2012, girls in detention were held at the former Rangeview Remand Centre. Rangeview's facilities and services were inadequate and the establishment of a dedicated girls' unit at Banksia Hill (the Yeeda Unit) was intended to address these deficiencies. This inspection was conducted in May when most of the boys were being accommodated at Hakea. It concluded that while the physical facilities for girls were superior to those at Rangeview, services were still limited. Mr Morgan said:

'There was still too much of a gap between actual service delivery and the Department's good intentions. To some extent this may have reflected the backwash from the January riot and the entrenched problems that had caused the riot. But even given these factors, the gap was too wide and needs to be closed.'

The Inspector also called for innovation and lateral thinking about young women in the state's prisons. He welcomed the opening in 2012 of the Wandoo Reintegration Facility for 18 to 24 year old males but noted the absence of dedicated facilities and programs for young female prisoners:

'The number of female prisoners is growing at a faster rate faster than for males and the young women face enormous challenges. Almost invariably they are victims of violence as well as offenders, many are young mothers, most have histories of substance abuse, and many have significant mental health issues.

Sadly, most of the older girls in custody share the same characteristics and face the same challenges. It is time to look at how the needs of older teenage girls align with those of young adult women and how to best address their offending, social and support needs in both the community and in custody.

And the time really does seem right for debate and change: the government is committed to a fresh approach to youth justice and the Department is being restructured accordingly. Also, the number of children in detention has dropped, governance, management and staffing appear to be improving at Banksia Hill, and staff opposition to the girls being at Banksia Hill seems to be declining. We need to grasp this window of opportunity to work on reducing the risk of young women and girls becoming enmeshed in the custodial system.'

The Inspector said he will be undertaking another inspection of the Banksia Hill Detention Centre during 2014 to consider progress against the recommendations contained in this report and his earlier report into the 20 January riot.