

Escapes and absconds from custody in WA

Background

Between 1 January 2003 and 31 December 2012 there were 288 recorded escapes and absconds from Western Australia custodial facilities. Three quarters of these escapes/absconds originated from Broome and Eastern Goldfields Regional Prisons, and Karnet and Wooroloo Prison Farms. Only one person who escaped during this period remains at large.

Only seven per cent of the escapees/absconders were recorded on the Department's database as 'dangerous' and almost 74 per cent had a minimum security rating. Additionally, the numbers of escapes and absconds have dramatically decreased with only 17 per cent of cases occurring since 2008. This change in trend coincided with an upgraded perimeter fence at Broome and the installation of fences at Karnet and Wooroloo.

Escapes often rouse media interest and reduce public confidence in community safety. In early 2014 the escape of two prisoners whilst awaiting air transport from Geraldton to Perth, created significant media interest. The escapes resulted in a cancellation of any non-essential prisoner transfers, unless approved by the Commissioner. This decision had a serious impact on one female prisoner whose approval to attend her son's funeral was revoked at the last minute.

These escapes took place days after two prisoners had escaped from Roebourne Regional Prison during a cyclone where staff numbers had been reduced. In anticipation of the cyclone, prisoners were issued water and food for four meals and were secured in their cells. Roebourne Prison lost all power and security systems during the Red Alert Cyclone period and the prisoners used this as cover to assist in their escape. There was no media attention around these two escapes.

Purpose of the review

This audit will provide an overview of the circumstances in which persons escape from legal custody in Western Australia from 1 January 2003 to January 2014. The audit will examine changes in the number of escapes and absconds with timing in physical security improvements to prisons and will also examine the actions that have resulted from the escapes with a particular focus on the escapes in 2013 and 2014.

Terms of Reference

1. What are the circumstances in which persons escape and abscond from custody, including recorded precipitating events?
2. Are mitigation strategies implemented by the Department of Corrective Services (DCS) effective and do they correspond with a change in trend of escapes/absconds?
 - Physical security upgrades
 - Training
 - Assessment checklists
3. Are any consequences resulting from escapes proportional, consistent and effective at reducing escapes and absconds?

Methodology

- Data extraction and analysis of reported escapes, incidents and alerts on TOMS
- Analysis of the DCS mitigating strategies for escapes and absconds including when these were implemented
- Review of impact analysis conducted by DCS prior to implementing any mitigating strategies including capital works.
- Examination of the latest escapes and absconds from custody including
 - Reporting on the incident (including examining available CCTV footage)
 - Risk management process in place prior to the escape
 - Reviewing debrief material
- Potentially meeting with prisoners or staff (including custodial, medical and other) to provide further information on case studies of interest.