

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 1500hrs ON 13 October 2021

Smoking in Western Australian prisons

Western Australia is one of only two jurisdictions in Australia that permits prisoners and staff to smoke on prison grounds. And while there are limitations as to where people can smoke, the Inspector of Custodial Services, Eamon Ryan, suggests it is not enough to tackle the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the country.

In a report released today, Mr Ryan has recommended that the Western Australian Government and the Department of Justice commit to a timeline to implement a smoke-free prisons policy across the state. He said there was a duty of care to improve the health outcomes of people in custody.

We found alarming levels of smoking among prisoners. About 82 per cent of prisoners' smoke compared to only about 11 per cent of the wider community. Many prisoners have poorer general health and underlying health conditions that are compounded by smoking. Yet, only limited effort has been made in recent years to encourage prisoners to stop smoking with most of the current reforms predating 2015 when a ban was ruled out.

However, the report highlighted that implementing a smoke-free policy was not simply about improving the health of people who smoke but also for those who don't. Both staff and prisoners reported being exposed to second-hand smoke, and many felt that the prisons should be doing more to manage those who did not comply with the smoking restrictions in place. Mr Ryan explained:

Crowding within the prison system has meant that many cells designed for one person now sleep two. In some cases, that means non-smokers are forced to share a cell with prisoners who smoke. Where prisoners are non-compliant and smoke in cell, this can have a detrimental effect on those sharing the space. And staff are also affected. We heard many examples of staff being exposed to second-hand smoke opening cells after overnight lockdowns. The risk of second-hand smoke exposure needs to be addressed to provide a safe workplace for staff, and a safe environment to live for people in custody.

Mr Ryan acknowledged the years of apprehension about adopting a smoke-free prison policy, particularly given concerns about the impact of a ban on prisoners' behaviour. Many prisoners openly reported using cigarettes and nicotine as a mood management tool to calm themselves within the stressful prison environment. However, 53 per cent of staff survey respondents said they had also used tobacco or seen other staff use tobacco to manage prisoners' behaviour. The Department does not recognise this as operational practice and Mr Ryan urged the Department to reinforce this with staff.

The report states that almost every other jurisdiction in Australia has implemented a smoking ban successfully with careful planning and clear communication. Mr Ryan has warned against introducing a ban overnight.

It must be a gradual process that is well resourced and complemented by the provision of useful activities that fill prisoners' time with distractions from withdrawals and healthy food options that help manage cravings. Quit groups, counselling, mentoring and access to

education and programs like Quitline are critical. So too is appropriate training and information for staff so they can help prisoners on their quit journey.

It is a complex issue and prisoners, their families, staff, management, and the Department all have roles and responsibilities if it is to be successful. There are also organisations skilled and willing to assist. I recommend everyone to work together in making this significant and important change.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector

For Further Media Information

The Inspector, Mr Eamon, will be available for comment from 3.00 pm on 13 October 2021 and can be contacted on 0421 480 925.

The full report will be available on the Inspector's website (www.oics.wa.gov.au).