

# PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

## Prisoner Rehabilitation Department of Corrective Services



THE AUDIT OFFICE  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

### About the audit

Currently NSW has over 9,000 people in prison, and this figure is growing.

Prisons help us to feel safe by removing offenders from our streets. But are they rehabilitating prisoners? Do they help address factors associated with crime, such as antisocial thinking, drug abuse, poor work skills, and limited education? And do they stop prisoners from offending again? The Department of Corrective Services has this challenging task.

This report examines whether the department knows if it successfully rehabilitates prisoners, matches them to programs that best meet their needs, and has an effective reintegration strategy in place.

### Audit opinion

In recent years the department has significantly changed its approach to rehabilitating prisoners. It has introduced programs to address offending behaviour based on evidence of what works. It has also developed partnerships with other agencies to help reintegrate prisoners into the community. We believe the department is on the right path and should continue building on these initiatives.

Despite these efforts, almost one in two prisoners return to prison or community supervision within two years of release, and most of these return to prison. While the return to prison rate has increased by 25 per cent during the last ten years, it has fallen slightly since 1999-2000.

In our opinion there is a risk that the department releases prisoners who have not addressed their rehabilitation needs. The department appears to address immediate health and welfare concerns. But

it does not formally assess the education and work needs of all prisoners. It is currently rolling out a risk assessment tool to measure their risk of reoffending and identify key rehabilitation needs.

Prisoners do not always access or complete rehabilitation programs. The demand for intensive violence and sex-offender programs exceeds available places. And while they can access work, health services and education, there are no offence-based programs for prisoners with sentences of six months or less. Yet they account for more than half the prisoners released each year.

Reintegration is a key factor in reducing reoffending and requires a multi-agency response. Yet staff report significant problems accessing services for former prisoners, particularly high risk areas such as housing, work and drug use. While the department funds various community agencies and supervises offenders on parole, it does not provide community support to prisoners released without parole.

We accept that many of the factors that affect reoffending are outside the department's immediate control. Crime is more than a justice issue, it is a social one too. These complex issues will only be resolved with a whole of government approach.

The department recognises these challenges and has projects underway to address many of these issues.



## Further information

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Internet site: [www.audit.nsw.gov.au](http://www.audit.nsw.gov.au)

## Findings

### Are prisoners rehabilitated?

While the department monitors prisoners' individual achievements, it has limited information on overall rehabilitation outcomes other than reoffending. We were unable to find out the extent to which prisoners as a group improved their health, employability, and education skills.

Currently one in two prisoners return to corrective services within two years of release, which is similar to other states. Most of these return to prison. The return to prison rate has risen by 9 percentage points over the last 10 years. It is now about 44 per cent, having fallen from a peak of 46 percent in 1999-2000.


Out of cell hours and participation rates for work and education have been declining although some improved slightly in 2004-05. These are indicators of program accessibility and delivery.

### Are prisoners matched to programs?

There is a risk that the department releases prisoners who have not addressed their rehabilitation needs. To reduce this risk the department has been improving program access, how it assesses prisoners, and selects and delivers offence-based programs.

Despite these initiatives, the department still has some way to go to address this issue. It does not formally assess the education and work needs of all prisoners. As a result we could not work out whether the department identified all rehabilitation needs.

Prisoners do not always access or complete rehabilitation programs. They might refuse to participate, be on a waiting list, or be in prison for only a few months. Demand for offence-based programs far exceeds supply. And while they can



access work, health and education programs, prisoners with sentences of six months or less cannot access offence-based programs designed to reduce reoffending. Yet they account for more than half the prisoners released each year.

### Is there an effective reintegration strategy?

The department is introducing new processes to help prisoners prepare for their release. It has also developed partnerships with other justice and welfare agencies to help reintegrate former prisoners into the community.

Despite this, staff still have significant problems accessing community services for former prisoners. We were unable to find out whether reintegration is successful, particularly in key risk areas such as housing, work and drug use. While the department funds various community agencies and supervises offenders on parole, there are no support arrangements in the community for offenders released after fixed sentences.

## Summary of recommendations

We have made a number of recommendations designed to improve how the department:

- monitors and measures success
- identifies prisoner needs and risks
- increases program accessibility
- works with other agencies to improve reintegration.