

Media release

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LOCKDOWNS A SERIOUS THREAT TO MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

The mental and physical health impacts of lockdowns across the Tasmania Prison Service (TPS) and Ashley Youth Detention Centre (AYDC) continue to be the principal concern of the Office of the Custodial Inspector in its latest Adult and Youth Health Care reports.

The reports, which were deemed tabled in Tasmanian Parliament today, were compiled as a result of mandatory inspections of each of the state's custodial centres in 2022-23*. They cite staff shortages as the main reason for lockdowns across the TPS and AYDC.

The inspections were conducted by a team from the Office of the Custodial Inspector (the Office), along with medical consultant experts[^] Dr Kimberley Norris (mental health) and Dr Edward Petch (physical health).

"There are staff shortages across the TPS and AYDC, which are chronic in some areas, that at times necessitate those in custody being locked down for both their safety and that of staff." Custodial Inspector Richard Connock said.

"Both medical consultants who were involved in the inspections highlighted the significant effects of lockdowns on prisoners' and young peoples' mental and physical health.

"These include increased frustration and irritability, anger, depressive symptoms, and a general decline in mental health and wellbeing; as well as social isolation.

"Insufficient TPS correctional staff also reduce the ability to access health care and external medical appointments. Lockdowns also reduce Correctional Primary Health Service (CPHS) staff access into the adult custodial facilities."

One prisoner told the inspection team: 'the not knowing if having [a] lockdown that day is very stressful. Get told at 8am over the loudspeaker. Doesn't help your mental health, not knowing if you're coming out'.

In a letter to Premier Jeremy Rockliff from June 2023, one young person in AYDC described being locked down as being 'like dogs at the Dogs Home'. 'We get excited when people come to our doors, just like the dogs get excited when someone goes to their cage just because we have someone to talk to. Even the cows in the paddocks next to Ashley have more freedom than us.' (*A full copy of the letter is provided in Appendix 7 of the Youth Healthcare Report*).

While the inspections were carried out at all custodial centres across the state, the reports have been separated into Adult (men, women and reception prisons) and Youth (AYDC).

Adult Health Care Report summary (read the full report [here](#))

The *Adult Health Care Inspection Report 2023* makes 117 recommendations around improving prisoners' mental and physical health.

"It is my hope that these recommendations, if implemented, will ultimately help to improve the conditions of detention for prisoners and thus TPS and CPHS workplaces and the community as a whole," Custodial Inspector Richard Connock said. "Disappointingly, only 12 recommendations out

of the 46 recommendations I made in 2017 have been completed in the five years between the first and second round of inspections. 23 recommendations are still in progress. This represents a missed opportunity to support the health care of prisoners.”

Youth Health Care Report summary (read full report [here](#))

The *Youth Health Care Inspection Report 2023* makes 25 recommendations to improve the mental and physical health conditions for young people in detention.

“The most recent inspections found the state of physical health care at Ashley Youth Detention Centre (AYDC) was positive, with two main improvements being made from recommendations in my previous health care inspection,” Custodial Inspector Richard Connock said.

“These are the inclusion of condoms in exit packs provided to young people leaving AYDC, which translates to lower rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy; and the improvement of GP services, including young people in custody being able to access a GP of a particular gender, which increases the chances of them seeking medical care in situations where they may have previously felt uncomfortable.

“However, the same cannot be said for the state of mental health care at AYDC. Disappointingly, my team found the level of mental health support services provided to young people at AYDC to be largely unchanged since the last inspection in 2017.

“Dedicated psychology and psychiatry time for young people has not been increased and AYDC staff highlighted to my inspection team that the current psychology and psychiatry services are not sufficient to meet the needs of the young people at AYDC.”

Key findings:

- The 2022-23 inspections were the first time the TPS and CPHS response to the COVID-19 pandemic could be reviewed. Physical health consultant Dr Petch said the response appeared to be ‘world class’, with only 229 prisoners contracting COVID-19 in custody from the start of the pandemic to October 2022.
- The introduction of video conference visits during the pandemic has continued, enabling additional visiting options for prisoners who have family or friends who are unable to visit in person, which was commended by the Custodial Inspector as “an important factor in maintaining mental wellbeing”.
- The report raised concerns about mental health care facilities in prisons for managing acute mental health needs for prisoners at risk of self-harm. The inspection team reported that staff at Risdon Prison Complex said there were insufficient cells for the current acute mental health needs of the prison and that these cells need to be made more therapeutic; prisoners reported the atmosphere in these cells ‘made them feel worse’.
- Concerns were also raised about the lack of nursing staff available after hours in custodial centres and prisons, which restricted prisoners’ timely access to medications such as paracetamol and ibuprofen. Timing of the provision of medications such as sleep aids and psychotropic medications was also highlighted as impacting prisoners’ health.
- The need to improve the relationship between CPHS and TPS, including better protection for CPHS staff’s right of entry into prisons.
- More needs to be done to support the health not only of young people in AYDC, but also staff. “AYDC can be a stressful working environment,” Mr Connock said in the report. “This, along with ongoing short-staffing, ongoing media reports about AYDC and limited counselling providers with a specific knowledge of custodial settings, affects the physical and mental health of AYDC staff.”
- The 2021 state government announcement of the planned closure of AYDC and the lack of detailed plans for a replacement facility for young people in detention has impacted the mental

health of both young people and staff. “The sooner certainty can be provided as to the closure of AYDC the better, but this needs to be balanced against the need to ensure changes to youth detention in Tasmania are well designed, evidence based and in line with best practice to avoid future problems,” Mr Connock said.

***Issued by Paula Catchpole on behalf of the Office of the Custodial Inspector.
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Please note the Custodial Inspector is unable to make further comment than what is in this release and the reports.

*The Office of the Custodial Inspector (the Office) is required to conduct mandatory inspections of the state’s custodial centres every three years. The 2022-23 inspections into Mental Health Care, Physical Health Care and Substance Use Management standards across the TPS and AYDC were due to be held in 2020 but had to be rescheduled due to the health measures put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

^Dr Kimberley Norris is a Professor of Psychological Sciences and a Clinical Psychologist at the School of Psychological Sciences, College of Health and Medicine, at the University of Tasmania, who consulted on the Mental Health Care inspection. Dr Edward Petch is a Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist to Hakea Prison (Western Australia) and a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Western Australia who consulted on the Physical Health Care and Substance Use Management inspection.