

AUSTRALIAN RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IN PRISONS

Last updated 7 August 2020 (originally published 30 March 2020)

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Purpose

To compare the response of different Australian jurisdictions to the COVID-19 pandemic in prisons.

Jurisdictional responses

Australian Capital Territory:

22 March: Social visits were stopped.

23 March: [Bail](#) was granted to a detainee on the basis that the risk of her contracting COVID-19 in the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) and the effect of the limited social activities available in the AMC due to the virus constituted a ‘change in circumstances’.

27 March: ACT Corrective Services has set up [virtual visits](#) using Zoom software. Each detainee will be allowed one video visit per week. Visitors will be asked to put themselves in a location where other members of the public cannot be seen on camera and other people are not allowed to be invited into the link. Three detainees were isolated after displaying flu-like symptoms, but all have tested negative for COVID-19.

8 April: The [COVID-19 Emergency Response Act 2020 \(ACT\)](#) came into effect. It allows declarations of emergency to be made for the adult prison and the youth detention centre for the period of the COVID-19 emergency, though it must be reviewed every 28 days. A declaration of emergency allows

restrictions on activities in the centre; access in, or to or from the centre; and communications between detainees and others. It also provides for young detainees to be granted 'COVID-19 leave'.

28 April: ACT Corrective Services released a [factsheet](#) on the measures they are implementing in response to COVID-19.

13 May: The [COVID-19 Emergency Response Legislation Amendment Act 2020 \(ACT\)](#) was notified. It allows for detainees to be granted 'COVID-19 leave'. It also extends the length of time an adult detainee can be held in a police cell from 36 hours to 48 hours.

26 May: ACT Corrective Services is working on a [recovery plan](#) and has advised visitors that it is highly unlikely contact visits will recommence before the end of June.

23 July: The recommencement of social visits to the AMC has been delayed. ACT Corrective Services has [released details](#) about what procedures will be in place once they do recommence. Visits will initially be restricted to one adult and one child per visit to maintain social distancing requirements. Each detainee will be able to nominate 10 people to visit, but will only be allowed one 'in person' visit per week. There will be strict visitor identification procedures and all visitors will be required to complete an ACTCS COVID-19 Screening Form. Zoom visits will continue after social visits recommence.

New South Wales:

19 March: 600 tablet computers will be rolled out across NSW prisons to [facilitate video calls](#).

24 March: [Legislation](#) was introduced to allow the NSW Corrective Services Commissioner to make orders permitting prisoners to be released early on parole. The release must be "reasonably necessary" due to "the risk to public health or to the good order and security of correctional premises". [Social visits](#) have been suspended and options to increase the use of audio-visual links for personal visits are being explored.

28 March: The [first case of COVID-19 in a NSW prison](#) was confirmed- a health care worker at Long Bay Prison Hospital.

3 April: [Commissioner Peter Severin](#) said that he has not yet seen any need to use the powers he has been granted to release low-risk, vulnerable prisoners in the event of a coronavirus outbreak.

9 April: It was reported that a group of up to [17 prisoners climbed onto the roof](#) of the Supermax facility at Goulburn prison after being angered by social distancing restrictions implemented in the prison.

14 April: There have been [no confirmed cases within the inmate population](#) in NSW. 191 inmates have been tested and cleared since 31 March and 30 remain in isolation for testing and monitoring. Video visits are being piloted across the state. Each inmate is receiving up to three free phone calls per week. A 14-day quarantine period for any new inmates is being implemented. All staff are being screened before entry into the prison which includes a body temperature check. Dedicated isolation hubs are being established in facilities across the state and work has commenced on creating a field hospital for any inmates who become acutely unwell due to COVID-19.

15 April: The ABC reported that there had been '[riots](#)' at Wellington and Goulburn prisons over Easter. At Wellington Correctional Centre, gas was used to subdue the prisoners after they started a fire and destroyed equipment.

18 May: The [ABC reported](#) that there have been riots at five NSW prisons and last week a prison guard was taken hostage at knifepoint for five hours after drugs were confiscated. These incidents are allegedly due to reduced opportunities for drugs to be smuggled into the prisons. Corrective Services NSW reports that there have been [no confirmed cases](#) of COVID-19 within the inmate population in NSW, with 440 inmates tested. More than 16,000 video visits between inmates and their families have been facilitated.

27 June: Corrective Services NSW published their [COVID-Safe Roadmap](#). 'It sets out a three-step process for resuming the programs and activities that are currently suspended or restricted.' There remain [no confirmed cases](#) of COVID-19 within the inmate population in NSW.

27 July: The [ABC reported](#) that a drone full of buprenorphine was intercepted near Cessnock Correctional Centre. In response, Commissioner Peter Severin said, "Since visits were cancelled to correctional centres in March due to COVID-19, we've seen people increasingly using mail, drones and tennis balls in an attempt to smuggle drugs into our prisons." This incident occurred two days after a tennis ball full of buprenorphine was intercepted by guards outside the same facility.

30 July: An inmate at Parklea Correctional Centre has [tested positive](#) for COVID-19. The inmate had been isolated from the time of his arrest and subsequently by Corrective Services NSW, and was then transferred to an Isolation Hub.

1 August: NSW has not recommenced in-person social visits. [Video visits](#) will continue to be offered at all centres after in-person visits recommence.

4 August: The [Canberra Times](#) reported that the NSW prison population has fallen by almost 11 per cent throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The NSW youth detention population is also reported to have fallen by 27 per cent from February to June 2020.

Queensland:

25 March: A corrections officer from Wolston Correctional Centre [tested positive](#) for COVID-19. The officer had contact with other officers and prisoners during a number of shifts.

26 March: [All visits to correctional centres were suspended](#). Only Queensland Corrective Services personnel, approved Queensland Health officers and others subject to the appropriate approvals will be allowed into the prisons. All staff will undergo medical screening before entering.

29 March: All 25 close contacts of the officer who tested positive for COVID-19 at Wolston Correctional Centre have tested negative but remain in self-isolation. It was ascertained that prisoners were at low risk of contracting the virus due to limited interactions with the officer. The [total lockdown of Wolston has been lifted](#). All prisons are at [Stage 3 restrictions](#) meaning all visits have ceased and all officers and essential staff entering the prison will undergo health screening.

7 April: Prisoners at Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre climbed onto the roof to [protest](#) the restrictions on visits. All Queensland prisons were placed in early lockdown to prevent more disruptive behaviour.

8 April: All new receptions and transferred prisoners will be placed in [isolation in high security centres for 14 days](#). Commissioner Peter Martin APM stated “During the isolation period, prisoners will be confined to a cell, with no engagement with other prisoners or out of cell time.” Prisoners will still be transferred from reception and remand facilities to placement facilities but will be subject to isolation upon reception into a new facility. All prisoners who are pending discharge will be temperature checked 14 days or less from the point of discharge to ensure they do not require isolation.

20 April: An [officer has tested positive](#) while off duty and so Wolston Correctional Centre was locked down while Queensland Health undertook contact tracing. The officer last attended the centre 12 days ago.

23 April: 23 prisoners at Wolston Correctional Centre were [quarantined](#) after they were identified as close contacts of the officer diagnosed with COVID-19.

24 April: Queensland Corrective Services fast tracked the introduction of [prisoner email](#) to provide another communication channel for prisoners. The email is sent to the prison, printed off and provided to the prisoner. If a reply is requested, the prisoner is given a reply sheet to write a response which is then scanned and emailed to the recipient.

1 May: [Queensland Corrective Services announced](#) that ‘the isolation policy would be changed to be cumulative, which meant that prisoners who were transferred between centres during their isolation period would not have to restart their 14 days.’

5 May: [Bluetooth headsets](#) are being provided to prisoners who are in isolation so they can make and receive calls from within their cells. Officers are able to maintain control of the phone at all times while limiting physical contact with the prisoners in isolation.

13 May: [Queensland Corrective Services](#) stated that they will be looking to reintroduce personal visits once Queensland reaches stage 3.

21 May: Queensland Corrective Services has published their [recovery commencement plan](#).

5 June: Queensland Corrective Services launched a [prisoner voicemail system](#). Approved contacts can leave a voice mail message for prisoners at any time of the day or night. Prisoners can then retrieve the messages and reply with a voicemail message.

12 June: Queensland Corrective Services moved to [Stage 2 of easing restrictions](#) across correctional centres. This includes the reintroduction of all professional visits with health precautions and the removal of the mandatory 14-day isolation of new prisoners. Personal visits are planned to recommence on 10 July.

1 July: Queensland Corrective Services announced that [personal visits will be re-introduced](#) in correctional centres across Queensland from 10 July.

29 July: [Personal visits to prisons in South East Queensland have been suspended](#) again, due to the risk of community transmission. All other visits, including those by legal and health professionals, will continue. Every person entering prisons will continue to undergo health screening and new reception prisoners are subject to 14-day isolation protocols.

Victoria:

19 March: [Bail](#) was granted to a woman in custody on the basis that the COVID-19 pandemic constituted 'exceptional circumstances'. The delay in her case and the significant lockdown of the prison if COVID-19 were to enter the prison were taken into consideration.

21 March: All personal visits were suspended. Two prisoners scaled the top of their unit at Barwon Prison in [protest](#). Phone access has been increased and prisoners are being encouraged to write letters. [Video calls](#) will be trialled.

28 March: [Protective quarantine units](#) have been established across five prisons. All prisoners coming into the prison system will be required to spend 14 days in one of these units. Prisoners in these units will have access to in-cell phone calls, video-based visits, books, education material, printed exercise routines and TVs. This quarantine does not apply to prisoners who are transferred to those five prisons.

6 April: The [Email a Prisoner service](#) has been introduced to allow family and friends of prisoners to send messages. It costs \$0.90 to send a message and \$0.75 to request a reply. Emails will be provided to prisoners in 2 business days.

24 April: The *COVID-19 Omnibus (Emergency Measures) Act 2020* was passed. This [Act allows](#) new prisoners entering prison to be quarantined for 14 days, and visits to the prison by members of the public may be restricted. Lawyers may only visit clients in the prison if prison management permits the visit to proceed in accordance with social distancing measures. Prisoners may be required to undergo medical assessment, testing and treatment to manage the risk of COVID-19.

1 May: The [Supreme Court of Victoria](#) found that there was a prima facie case that prison authorities had breached their duty of care to safeguard the health of the person in prison. The Victorian government announced that a former immigration detention centre in Melbourne's west will be used as [temporary housing for prisoners](#) released from prison during the pandemic.

11 May: Hopkins Correctional Centre at Ararat was [locked down](#) after three prisoners returned inconclusive tests for COVID-19. They since tested negative. More than 260 inmates and staff were [tested](#) as part of contact tracing measures.

25 May: [Corrections Victoria](#) stated that there will be no immediate changes to the measures introduced in prisons in response to COVID-19, despite easing of restrictions in the community.

18 June: Victoria's [prison population is at a two-year low](#) due to a reduction in crime and increased approval of bail applications. At the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, the number of prisoners has fallen nearly 30 per cent.

1 July: The [Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 \(VIC\)](#) was amended to allow a young person in a youth justice centre to be isolated in a 'locked room separate to others and from the normal routine of the centre' to detect, prevent or mitigate the spread of COVID-19 or other infectious diseases for up to 14 days. This can occur 'whether or not the person isolated is suspected of having, or has been diagnosed as having, COVID-19'.

17 July: A prisoner in protective quarantine at the Metropolitan Remand Centre in Melbourne [tested positive](#) for COVID-19. They have since been placed in isolation.

19 July: [Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre](#) in central Victoria went into lockdown after a staff member employed by the Department of Education tested positive for COVID-19.

21 July: A GEO prison officer at Ravenhall Correctional Centre [tested positive](#) for COVID-19. Ravenhall and five other prisons (Hopkins Correctional Centre, Langi Kal Kal, Barwon Prison, Fulham and Loddon) were placed into lockdown. [The Guardian](#) also reported that a new arrival at the Parkville Youth Justice Centre tested positive to COVID-19 during their mandatory 14-day quarantine period.

22 July: An [asymptomatic prisoner](#) in protective quarantine at the Metropolitan Remand Centre returned a positive COVID-19 test. This case was not linked to the previous cases in that facility or in Ravenhall.

23 July: The [precautionary lockdown was lifted](#) at Hopkins Correctional Centre, Barwon Prison, Loddon Prison and Langi Kal Kal Prison. The prisoners who required testing following the staff COVID-19 case returned negative results. Corrections Victoria are supplying all prisons and facilities with face masks, which are mandatory for staff and professional visitors and for any prisoners suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19. All other prisoners are being encouraged to wear them.

24 July: Loddon and Tarrengower prisons were placed in [lockdown](#) for the day while Corrections Victoria assessed whether the prisons have had any exposure to the community transmissions case at Don KR Castlemaine. Fulham Correctional Centre has resumed normal operations, but Ravenhall Correctional Centre remains in lockdown until all staff members identified in contact tracing have returned negative results.

25 July: Ravenhall Correctional Centre returned to [normal operations](#) after being in lockdown since 21 July due to a staff member testing positive for COVID-19.

26 July: A prisoner in protective quarantine at the [Metropolitan Remand Centre](#) tested positive to COVID-19. The prisoner was placed in isolation.

28 July: Two asymptomatic prisoners already in protective quarantine at the [Melbourne Assessment Prison](#) tested positive for COVID-19. The prisoners were placed into isolation and the prison was placed into temporary lockdown.

30 July: Two prisoners recently detained at the [Melbourne Assessment Prison](#) tested positive to COVID-19. A staff member at the same facility tested positive, but the staff member had not been at work since 25 July and the cases do not appear to be linked.

[The Bendigo Advertiser](#) reported that eight COVID-19 cases can now be linked to the Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre. All eight cases were staff members, seven employed by the Department of Education. All young detainees that were tested have returned [negative results](#).

2 August: A prisoner in protective quarantine at the [Metropolitan Remand Centre](#) tested positive for COVID-19.

3 August: [The Age](#) reported that two staff members had tested positive for COVID-19 at the custody centre beneath the Melbourne Magistrate's Court. Both Victoria Police and Corrections Victoria have since been working to relocate the other detainees at the facility.

4 August: The interim report of the [Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) by the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee was tabled. The report discusses the preventative measures put in place by Corrections Victoria and notes some issues of concern that were raised with the Committee were the use of isolation in youth justice facilities and the risk of homelessness for people exiting prisons.

Western Australia:

20 March: [Social prison visits were suspended](#). Prisoners will be given additional phone calls and other technology is being explored.

25 March: WA Corrections Minister has stated that [WA's prison system is equipped](#) to manage the COVID-19 risk through the isolation of prisoners, increased prison cleaning regimes and the suspension of prison visits. He also stated that "Western Australia's prison estate is also expected to have another 512 beds in place across four new units at Casuarina Prison by late April, which will significantly boost WA's prisons capacity".

1 April: Community work undertaken by minimum-security prisoners was [suspended](#).

26 May: Despite community restrictions easing, social visits to prisons and the Banksia Hill Detention Centre will [remain suspended](#) for now. All custodial facilities are expected to have [access to more E-visit and Skype kiosks](#) by mid-June.

2 June: More than [100 e-visit kiosks](#) have been set up across WA's prisons. The rollout is continuing towards an eventual total of about 170 kiosks.

12 June: [Planning](#) is underway to resume social visits to prisons. It is expected that face-to-face visits will be reintroduced within a few weeks. Other restrictions being lifted include the use of prison gyms and sporting ovals, and religious services have resumed.

22 June: Bookings for social visits are open with the [first visits to be scheduled for 27 June](#).

16 July: [Social visits have resumed](#). Physical distancing and enhanced personal hygiene guidelines remain in place and visitors are screened before being allowed to enter the visit area.

South Australia:

23 March: All personal visits were [suspended](#). Booking for professional visits were reduced by 50% and only one adult visitor is allowed per prisoner. The use of video conferencing for professional visits is being explored.

8 April: [Video visits](#) are available for immediate family members across all prisons using Zoom. There are [no confirmed cases](#) of COVID-19 within SA prisons.

18 June: Corrections South Australia announced their [COVID-19 transition plan](#). From 13 July, a small number of [face to face visits sessions](#) will be introduced.

13 July: Face to face visits by domestic visitors resumed across South Australia. Virtual visits are continuing. The Department of Correctional Services is implementing a [three-stage plan](#) for the

reopening of the state's prisons for social and personal visits. At the current stage (Stage 1), visits are limited to 1 adult visitor and their children per prisoner. Visits are also limited to 45 minutes.

17 July: Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Victoria, face-to-face social visits at [Mount Gambier Prison](#) have been postponed. This decision will be reviewed weekly and virtual visits remain available.

7 August: All social visits to South Australian prisons were [suspended](#) for two weeks. Video visits remain available.

Tasmania:

21 March: All personal visits have been [suspended](#). Phone access is being increased and Skype and other virtual visit options are being explored.

1 April: More than 50 additional iPads have been obtained and [video visits](#) are to commence next week. Additional phone credit has been provided to every prisoner.

22 April: Inmates are [producing facemasks](#) in their Industries area. About 1000 of the masks have already been produced for use within the prison and its associated health services areas.

29 April: All prisoners and remandees received into custody are being placed in [mandatory isolation](#) for 14 days. Isolated prisoners will still have access to mail and telephone and in some cases virtual visits. Over the next week, fixed non-contact temperature scanners will be installed at entry points to all correctional facilities.

7 May: 26 tests have been conducted within [Tasmanian prison facilities](#) and there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19. All new receptions are being isolated for 14 days. 253 virtual visits have taken place between prisoners and their family and friends.

Northern Territory:

25 March: All social visits were [suspended](#). Prisoners will have increased opportunity to use the phone and other communication options were being explored. Visits from non-essential service providers were also suspended.

25 March: The NT Corrections Commissioner [announced](#) that 50-60 low-risk inmates could be considered for release from prison.

1 April: All professional visits including legal support services were [suspended](#).

8 April: [New measures](#) were put in place to support prisoners, including: increasing access to phone calls and other communication platforms; small group physical training sessions; issuing extra board games; increasing access to television programs and DVDs; increasing access to information on hygiene and social distancing and installing extra handwashing facilities; and providing material in plain English and Aboriginal languages about what coronavirus is and what it being done to protect prisoners.

20 May: Restrictions on professional, legal and social visits have been [eased](#). From 20 May to 5 June, prisoners can receive a maximum of one adult and two child visitors during the scheduled visiting times.

Prisoners will wear facemasks for all visits. It is expected that the normal quotient of four visitors per prisoner will resume from 5 June.

Australia-wide

- [CDNA Guidelines for the Prevention, Control and Public Health Management of COVID-19 Outbreaks in Correctional and Detention Facilities in Australia](#) (version 3)
- [Open letter to Australian governments on COVID-19 and the criminal justice system](#)
- [Second National Open Letter to Australian Governments on COVID-19 and Prisons and Youth Detention Centres](#)
- [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Policy Statement on COVID-19](#)
- On 5 May [National Cabinet](#) discussed managing COVID-19 in corrections facilities. They agreed that supply of PPE to corrections facilities should be considered a priority in the context of the national supply of PPE. In partnership with jurisdictions, the Australian Government agreed to develop 'Safe Travel Plans' for newly released Indigenous prisoners.
- [Joint Submission to the Select Committee on COVID-19, 'OPCAT, places of detention and COVID-19'](#) - submission made by a broad alliance of civil society and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and senior academics.
- [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Submission to the Commonwealth Parliament's Senate Select Committee on COVID-19](#)
- [Change the Record, 'Critical Condition- the impact of COVID-9 policies, policing and prisons on First Nations communities'](#)