

Snapshot: Investigations into the use of force at the Metropolitan Remand Centre and the Melbourne Assessment Prison

In 2019, the Ombudsman began investigating a complaint that a Metropolitan Remand Centre officer 'choked' a prisoner in an unmonitored cell. During 2020 and 2021 we investigated six other complaints about use of force at the centre, and a further incident at the Melbourne Assessment Prison. We found unreasonable force was used in four of the eight cases. All showed concerning behaviour and poor decision making by prison officers, and suggested systemic problems with the use of force and workplace culture.

Key findings

- Some prison officers are escalating situations not defusing them.
- The frequency of incidents occurring in CCTV blind spots is concerning.
- Officers are also failing to use body worn cameras as required. As with the frequency of incidents occurring in CCTV blind spots, this can raise suspicion about officers' actions and motives.
- Prisoners are often reluctant to report unreasonable use of force incidents, and when they do, they may be considered less credible than officers.
- Some officers lack respect for prisoners. They make threats, use unprofessional language and use violence in retaliation.
- A culture of silence in some parts of the prison system encourages officers to lie to protect each other.

Recommendations

This report made 12 recommendations including:

1. increasing prison officer accountability and compliance around body worn camera use
2. improving CCTV coverage of high-risk locations for incidents, and requiring officers to use monitored areas for sensitive conversations with prisoners
3. reviewing the effectiveness of training in de-escalation techniques
4. ensuring all prisons have recruitment, vetting and probation processes which effectively screen out unsuitable candidates
5. ensuring prisons actively monitor and address officer conduct issues
6. building a culture of transparency by publicly reporting the number of use of force incidents, alleged assaults and proven assaults.

By the numbers



139

allegations of unreasonable use of force made to the Ombudsman over past 3 years



37%

of those allegations came from the Metropolitan Remand Centre



1

incident of the eight we investigated was captured on CCTV



1 of 22

officers interviewed who witnessed the incidents gave evidence critical of a fellow officer

Final word

'There is no easy fix for these longstanding and sometimes intractable issues, and this report does not purport to solve them. Its purpose is to expose what is too often hidden behind prison walls and to encourage actions in addition to words.'

Deborah Glass, Victorian Ombudsman