



Summary of a Report on an Audit of Custodial Roof Ascents

Overview

A prisoner/detainee climbing onto the roof of a custodial building is commonly known as a 'roof ascent'. Such incidents are inherently disruptive. All prisoners or detainees in an affected facility are typically locked down and their participation in all activities, including education, sport and recreation ceases. Officers similarly find their normal routines disrupted. These incidents potentially carry a high level of risk to the prisoner or detainee. Staff are also potentially at risk if approaching the roof to undertake negotiations or if a decision is made to confront the prisoners or detainees directly.

The primary aim of the audit was to better understand such incidents, and to identify if there were policy and practical responses that might reduce their occurrence and the potential harm that might arise. To do this the audit analysed the frequency, characteristics and causes of incidents involving roof ascents by prisoners or detainees in Western Australia over the past decade (26 March 2002 - 6 March 2012).

The audit did not analyse the way in which the incidents were managed at the time they occurred. However, it should be recorded that the vast majority of incidents were resolved relatively swiftly and through a process of negotiation.

Findings

Within Western Australia's 16 primary custodial facilities roof ascents have often been used as a method of expressing discontent or to challenge authority. Over the past decade there have been 218 roof ascents (almost 1.8 roof ascents per month) with 151 (69.3%) of these incidents occurring in juvenile facilities. There were a further 156 'threatened' roof ascents, with 140 of these incidents (89.7%) occurring in juvenile facilities. Because of deficiencies in how the Department of Corrective Services (the Department) records these incidents some of the ascents may not have been identified by the audit. Therefore the actual number of incidents may be higher than reported.

The audit found that distinct peaks in roof-ascents occurred in 2002/2003 and 2008/2009. It had been hypothesised that these incidents could have had a 'viral' effect, with incidents spreading between juvenile facilities and then later to adult facilities. However, we found no evidence of incidents in juvenile facilities being echoed at adult facilities, although there did appear to be some 'viral' effect within juvenile facilities, with the aforementioned peaks in roof ascents primarily the result of a clustering in juvenile events.

Of the 369 actual or threatened incidents examined, 330 distinct individuals had been involved, with 85% of these individuals being male and 15% female. This represents an overrepresentation of females, given that they constitute only 8% of the custodial population.

Forty five per cent of adults males involved in roof ascents and 58 per cent of females were of Aboriginal descent. This represents a slight overrepresentation among men, and a larger overrepresentation among women, given people of Aboriginal decent make up approximately 40 and 47 per cent of the adult prisoner population respectively.

For juveniles, while approximately 80% of the detention population are of Aboriginal descent, 72 per cent of male juveniles involved in a roof related incidents were of Aboriginal descent while 86% of female juveniles engaging in roof ascents were of Aboriginal descent.

Table 1

Number of Individuals Involved

	Total events	Events involving one person	Events involving more than one person	Frequency of group events
<i>Actual Events</i>				
Juvenile	151	72	79	52%
Adult	67	56	11	16%
<i>Threatened Events</i>				
Juvenile	140	99	41	29%
Adult	16	16	0	0%

Examination of the characteristics of those involved in roof ascents uncovered significant differences between adults and juveniles. Only 12% of adults had more than one ascent to their name (as adults) and none had more than three. In contrast, a third of the juveniles had more than one and 10% had four or more, with one individual performing the maximum number of 13 roof ascents over the time period. Most of the adult roof ascents (83%) involved one person, in contrast with juvenile roof ascents, where only 48% were conducted individually. A similar pattern emerged for the threatened roof ascents, where 29% of these incidents were conducted as a group in the juvenile system, in comparison to none in the adult system. Hence, roof ascents appeared to have more of a social quality in juvenile facilities. The audit identified that in both juvenile and adult facilities known 'roof ascenders' were sometimes housed together, which suggested that consideration needed to be given to the adequacy of current risk assessment processes.

Table 2

Participation in Actual Roof Ascents

Number of roof ascents participated in	Number of prisoners (adults)	Number of detainees (juveniles)
1	64	109
2	8	31
3	1	10
4	0	3
5	0	5
6	0	4
7	0	3
13	0	1

The audit found that adults tended to be goal orientated in their behaviour, with the most common reason for the roof ascent being a desire to transfer to another facility. This occurred in approximately one-third of cases where the trigger for the incident was recorded.

Other adult roof ascents were triggered by specific grievances or concerns relating to matters such as property and cell placement, with the individual hoping that the roof ascent would lead to the resolution of their problem or communicate their dissatisfaction. Importantly, they were essentially focused on individual rather than group grievances.

Table 3

Most Common Triggers for Roof Incident (Adult)

Theme	No. Occurrences	% Events Occurred (excluding missing)
Wanted to be transferred	20	31.25%
Item retrieval/exchange	12	18.75%
Conflict with other prisoners	8	12.50%
Unit/cell placement	7	10.94%
External family/friend contact	6	9.34%
Self-harm	4	6.25%
Bad news (custodial)	4	6.25%
Unfairly treated	4	6.25%
General unhappiness	3	4.69%
Work	3	4.69%
Contact another prisoner	3	4.69%
Punishment	3	4.69%
Bad news (personal)	2	3.13%
Protest against prisoners not receiving cigarettes with their spend money	1	1.56%
Attempted canteen break in	1	1.56%
Wanted Royal Commission into police assault	1	1.56%
Wished to speak to an officer in another prison	1	1.56%
Angry at grille gate not being opened immediately	1	1.56%
Unhappy with medical care after swallowing razor blades, heard voices	1	1.56%
No trigger recorded	17	-

Roof ascents by juveniles, on the other hand, tended to be opportunistic rather than goal orientated, with a less clear pattern of triggers. Juvenile detainees did not want to be transferred as commonly as adult prisoners, which is likely due to the lack of available transfer options. However, a number of commonly occurring stressors did emerge, including discontent over the lack of contact with friends/family, bad news from family, grievances about treatment (including punishments), staff attitudes, and boredom from periods of lockdown.

Juvenile roof ascents tended to be more impulsive, reactive, and violent, with many appearing to use the roof ascent as an outlet for their frustrations, to challenge authority, and as a way of feeling some sense of freedom and power.

Table 4

Most Common Triggers for Roof Incident (Juvenile)

Theme	No. Occurrences	% Events Occurred (excluding missing)
External family/friend contact	9	15.52%
Punishment	8	13.79%
Bad news (personal)	7	12.07%
Contact another detainee	7	12.07%
Unit/cell placement	7	12.07%
Specific instruction	7	12.07%
Conflict with other detainees	7	12.07%
General unhappiness	6	10.34%
Curiosity/boredom	6	10.34%
Bad news (custodial)	4	6.90%
Wanted to be transferred	4	6.90%
Lockdown	3	5.17%
Self-harm	2	3.45%
Unhappy about lack of fruit	1	1.72%
Felt lonely since brother left prison	1	1.72%
Frustrated not knowing when he is going to the parole board (SRRB)	1	1.72%
Stressed about the possibility of being sent to the adult system	1	1.72%
No trigger recorded	25	-

An analysis of the punishment administered to individuals in response to roof ascents was made difficult by the large amount of missing data. In some facilities, only one quarter of the incidents had charges or incident outcomes recorded, an issue that the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS) has previously drawn attention to in previous inspection reports.¹ Without such information it is impossible to track and measure the extent of the adequacy and the consistency of responses.

The most common recorded response to incidents in the juvenile estate was 'regression', reflecting its status as a mandatory punishment for roof ascents at one juvenile facility. The use of regression has previously been the subject of an audit by our office.² For individuals who conducted roof ascents multiple times, regression was administered multiple times, with some juveniles being regressed for roof ascents up to 6 times in a 2 – 3 year time period. This suggests that regression is ineffective as both a deterrent and as a tool for behaviour modification.

Conclusions

Roof ascents are a high-risk activity that evolve from a combination of individual factors (cognitive development, stressful issues) social factors (peer influences) and situational factors (staff-prisoner/detainee relationship, ease of roof access, possibility of reward).

¹ OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre*, Report No. 76, January 2012.

² Ibid.

Actions taken by the Department to reduce the frequency of roof ascents were examined in the audit with feedback provided directly to the Department. That information is not appropriate for public dissemination. However, regardless of the effectiveness of individual measures it was evident that a holistic approach is required to prevent anti-social behaviour from being expressed.

The staff-prisoner/detainee relationship is of particular importance, with staff being able to minimise the stress and frustration that lead to many of the roof ascents through the open and expeditious resolution of prisoner/detainee requests, through the demonstration of empathy to issues involving the prisoner's/detainee's family, and by being even-handed in the distribution of rewards and punishment. It is similarly important to keep juveniles active and engaged by minimising the time that they are locked down. Adequate staff numbers are required to ensure lockdowns are minimised, in addition to allowing individual attention to detainees and sufficient educational and recreational opportunities.

Banksia Hill Detention Centre has recently become the only juvenile detention centre in the state with Rangeview Remand Centre being converted to a facility for young men aged 18-24 and being renamed as the Wandoo Reintegration Facility. Given these developments and the findings of this review, it is especially timely and important that the Department examine current practices and the implementation of holistic strategies to address the factors and stressors underpinning juvenile roof ascents.

What Should Be Done

Four recommendations were made in light of these findings:

1. Improve record keeping on the consequences for prisoners and detainees engaging in roof ascents and monitor the effectiveness of such responses.
2. Examine the adequacy of current risk assessment practices at both juvenile and adult facilities with respect to the co-location of known roof ascenders in the same units.
3. Evaluate and, where feasible, alter the practice of commonly transferring adult prisoners who have been involved in transfer-related roof ascents within a short time after their roof ascent.
4. Ensure that the redeveloped Banksia Hill Detention Centre and the Wandoo Reintegration Facility:
 - a. provide a positive, active, structured, full time regime for detainees and young adults (and are adequately staffed for this purpose); and
 - b. work to embed a positive culture and a proactive relationship between staff and detainees/prisoners.

Department of Corrective Services Response to Recommendations

Recommendation	Response
<p>1. Improve record keeping on the consequences for prisoners and detainees engaging in roof ascents and monitor the effectiveness of such responses.</p>	<p>Supported</p> <p>Policies and procedures are in place however there is clearly a need to improve record keeping and compliance with established procedures. Measuring the effectiveness of such responses is going to prove difficult as there is both a punishment aspect and behavioural modification focus.</p>
<p>2. Examine the adequacy of current risk assessment practices at both juvenile and adult facilities with respect to the co-location of known roof ascenders in the same units.</p>	<p>Supported in Principle</p> <p>Subject to operational constraints. The Department will examine the risk assessment process.</p>
<p>3. Evaluate and, where feasible, alter the practice of commonly transferring adult prisoners who have been involved in transfer-related roof ascents within a short time after their roof ascent.</p>	<p>Supported in Principle</p> <p>Subject to operational constraints. The Department will evaluate the practice of transferring prisoners subsequent to roof ascents.</p>
<p>4. Ensure that the redeveloped Banksia Hill Detention Centre and the Wandoo Reintegration Facility:</p> <p>(I) provide a positive, active, structured, full time regime for detainees and young adults (and are adequately staffed for this purpose); and</p> <p>(II) work to embed a positive culture and a proactive relationship between staff and detainees/prisoners.</p>	<p>Supported in Principle</p> <p>These recommendations are consistent with the December 2010 report on "Making a positive Difference in the lives of Young People in Youth Custodial Service" which provides a framework for the management of young people in detention. The Department will continue to strive to embed these values and acknowledges the value of continuous Improvement.</p>

The Office appreciates the Department's positive response to our recommendations, and will assess progress made against these recommendations at a later date.

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