

‘Ineffective, inhumane, and an impediment to rehabilitation’: Human Rights Commission report supports ending strip searches of women in prison

The Queensland Human Rights Commission has today published its report on a review into strip searching of women in prison.

Stripped of our dignity: a human rights review of policies, procedures and practices in relation to strip searches of women in Queensland prisons reports on the Commission’s review, which included interviews and consultations with prisoners and staff at all five of Queensland’s women’s correctional facilities.

The report’s title is drawn from an interview with a prisoner undertaken during the Review, who described the experience of being strip searched:

“You are stripped of everything. They don’t just strip your clothes; they strip away your dignity.”

The Review found that strip searches:

- are ineffective in making prisons safer, with a contraband detection rate of just 0.01% to 0.015%;
- are traumatic for prisoners, despite most staff working to reduce the harm of strip searches, and are particularly traumatic for those with a history of physical or sexual violence – 89% of women in Queensland prisons have experienced physical violence, domestic violence or child sexual abuse, and two thirds have experienced all three;
- impede rehabilitation, due to the degradation prisoners experience and the associated impact on the relationship between prisoners and staff; and
- unreasonably limit the human rights of prisoners and staff.

The Commission’s Review of the practice was a recommendation from the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce’s second *Hear her voice* report, which also recommended Queensland Corrective Services immediately move to implement widespread use of non-invasive search technology as an alternative to strip searching.

The Review was conducted with collaboration from Queensland Corrective Services, who have committed to ending strip searches in women’s prisons in future, following the installation of body scanners and training for staff on their operation. A body scanner trial will begin at one women’s correctional centre in 2024.

The report makes 24 recommendations to Queensland Corrective Services, including limiting strip searches to when a prisoner enters custody for the first time and no body scanners are available. Once body scanners are installed, strip searches should be prohibited entirely or authorised only in exceptional circumstances.

Stripped of our dignity provides guidance to corrections facilities and staff on making searches more trauma-informed and human rights compatible in the interim period.

The Commission’s report calls for a substantial investment in alternative technologies, in the form of body scanners and saliva swab testing instead of the current urine testing regime for drug detection, to help make prisons safer and less distressing for prisoners and staff.

Report

The full report and a summary version are available from the Queensland Human Rights Commission website at <https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/about-us/reviews/strip-searching>.

Quotes from Scott McDougall, Queensland Human Rights Commissioner:

- I commend QCS on their transparent and cooperative approach to this Review and for their support and assistance with providing access to information and facilitating site visits for my team.
- While making prison environments more humane is of obvious benefit to prisoners, it's also very important for staff in making their workplace safer, and for the broader community, in terms of less traumatised prisoners on release.
- Strip searches are unnecessarily traumatic and humiliating for prisoners, but they are also completely ineffective. They have an absurdly low rate of contraband detection and have negative impacts on prison operations. They need to be replaced by modern technological alternatives in drug and contraband detection.

Quotes from corrections staff cited in the report:

- 'No one likes doing it...I hated it from day one. For first timers it's humiliating and traumatising. We know that a lot of women have a history of trauma in prison.' (pg 62)
- 'It's counterproductive to everything else we're gonna do. We're trying to create better versions of humanity when they leave than when they came in and if we're dehumanising them by doing this stuff purely because a piece of paper says so - then we're not doing that.' (pg 63)
- 'Vicarious trauma is massive in corrections....It's incomprehensible to say we care about their outcomes, but we're still going to do things to them rather than for them.' (pg 116)

Quotes from prisoners cited in the report:

- 'When you come into jail, they strip you physically but they strip you of your self-respect, of your people, of your identity... then over time you have to build yourself up, build up your self-confidence, self-esteem, self -worth until you're delivered back into the world. Hopefully you've got enough self to be able to function.' (pg 59)
- 'They remind you that they're the ones in control and even your body, basically they own all of you.' (pg 61)
- 'My family used to come weekly. I just said to him, you know, we'll just make it monthly or every six weeks, only for the fact just to cut down that strip search.' (pg 79)

Contact

Kate Marsh
07 3021 9116
Kate.marsh@qhrc.qld.gov.au

STATEWIDE

tollfree
1300 130 670
info@qhrc.qld.gov.au
qhrc.qld.gov.au

Brisbane

Level 20
53 Albert Street
Brisbane Q 4000
PO Box 15565
City East Q 4002

Cairns

Ground Floor
10 Grove Street
PO Box 4699
Cairns Q 4870

Townsville

Ground Floor
187-209 Stanley Street
PO Box 1566
Townsville Q 4810

Rockhampton

Level 1
209 Bolsover Street
PO Box 1390
Rockhampton Q 4700