

‘Serious, systemic corruption’ in Victoria’s prison system



A new report from IBAC says Victoria’s prisons are vulnerable to serious systemic corruption.

By David Estcourt
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Victoria’s prison system is facing serious, systemic corruption issues in both its private and public custodial systems, according to a report from the state’s anti-corruption agency that cites “excessive use of force and inappropriate strip-searching practices”.

Investigations by the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission, conducted over several years, uncovered ongoing corruption and misconduct risks across the system.

IBAC’s “Special Report on Corrections”, tabled in Parliament on Tuesday, said that staff in Victoria’s prisons had engaged in misconduct including excessive use of force and inappropriate strip-searching practices and, in the case of a prisoner with an intellectual disability, misuse of force.

“IBAC has exposed serious corrupt conduct in Victoria’s private and publicly managed prisons through its investigations and research,” the report says.

“IBAC substantiated allegations of misuse of force by corrections officers against two prisoners, one of whom has an intellectual disability.”

The report said prison guards would unlawfully turn off their body-worn cameras (BWC) during use-of-force incidents, and that guards had illegally accessed prisoner information.

“IBAC found the strip search of a male prisoner took too long and was conducted in the presence of a female officer, contrary to policy,” the report says.

“IBAC identified the apparent deliberate interruption of BWC recordings during use-of-force incidents, including by covering the BWC lens and coughing when force was being applied.

“IBAC found that a property officer at the Melbourne Assessment Prison had misused Corrections Victoria’s computer systems on multiple occasions by accessing restricted information outside the scope of their official duties.”

The report found that prisoners were grooming correctional staff to engage in corrupt activity, and that inmates tended to target prison guards who were socially isolated, lonely, or had a lack of support from colleagues.

“Personal information shared through social media can also facilitate grooming by offenders’ family members, friends or associates,” the report says.

The report also found that some corrections staff at Port Phillip Prison failed to follow procedures when reporting and investigating use-of-force incidents on inmates.

“They failed to provide prisoners with a genuine opportunity to tell their account, and submitted incomplete incident reports that failed to draw on all the evidence and critically examine the incidents,” the report says.

There are more than 7000 people held in Victoria’s publicly and privately run prisons. Often prisoners struggle with issues including mental health conditions, drug addiction and a history of trauma, the report says.

The Age recently reported that a prison guard’s widow is suing the Department of Justice after her husband killed himself at a maximum-security jail after alleged bullying by his colleagues.

William “Bill” Maxwell allegedly took his own life at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in March 2018 after he wrote a report implicating his fellow guards in an assault on a prisoner, court documents allege.