

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Youth detainees face 'invasive' strip searches

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Hundreds of strip searches are conducted on youth prisoners in NSW and Victoria every month, with new data revealing contraband is found less than 1 per cent of the time.

In one month last year, two NSW youth prisons conducted 403 juvenile prisoner strip searches and uncovered one item of contraband: a ping pong ball.

The figures show that juvenile prisoners in Victoria were strip searched 1798 times in a six-month period during 2017. A total of 14 items were uncovered, including medication, cigarettes, wood, watches and sunglasses.

The Human Rights Law Centre, which obtained the data under freedom of information laws, said it revealed an "invasive, dehumanising and utterly unnecessary" strip search regime.

But a week after the 21-hour riot at the Central Coast's Frank Baxter Juvenile Justice Centre, government spokespeople stressed the searches were necessary to stop contraband entering these facilities and said stringent oversight was in place to prevent abuse.

"This is a tricky topic," University of Sydney criminology expert Garner Clancey said. "On one hand, you have the recent disturbances in Frank Baxter and calls for tougher regimes of incarceration for young people; while on the other you have the focus on exposing strip search practices by police and now in cor-



Youths at the Frank Baxter Juvenile Justice Centre last week. Photo: AAP

found is also a bit tricky. Low success rates, it could be argued, show that searches work in preventing contraband entering the facilities."

After the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse found strip searches were frequently used as a cover for abuse and retraumatised young prisoners who had previously been abused elsewhere, both Victoria and NSW have updated their youth strip search guidelines. Youth detainees must now remain partially-clothed as they are searched.

But the independent watchdog overseeing prisons in NSW has reiterated its call for an end to routine strip searches of juvenile offenders.

"The practice of searching young people by asking them to partially remove their clothes may be humiliating and distressing for young people," the inspector of custodial services Fiona Rafter said in a report issued earlier this year. "This is particularly the case given that many young people in detention have experienced abuse."



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Twenty men aged 16 to 20 were arrested following last week’s riot, which had guards fearing for their lives in locked offices as detainees stole chainsaws and metal poles and attacked other inmates.
“While [403 strip searches at two prisons in one month] seems like a lot, it might amount to one or two searches for every young person admitted in the chosen month,” Associate Professor Clancey said.
“Determining success by what is

Professor Chris Cunneen, a criminology expert from the University of Technology Sydney, said the data showed strip searches were used extensively and routinely. “What’s really clear is that occasionally there are targeted searches, but what is far more common is that there are routine searches,” he said.
A Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety spokesperson said strip searches helped keep prisoners safe.
with Natassia Chrysanthos

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