

NSW justice COVID survey, August 2021

For a story published by Croakey Health Media on 23 August, 2021, journalist Marie McInerney sought responses from NSW justice authorities.

Croakey submitted six questions to NSW authorities. They were:

1. How many COVID-19 cases have now been reported in the state's prisons/youth detention among prisoners and staff? Can you detail in which facilities? Do you record and follow up cases among prisoners who have exited prison?
2. What numbers of people (prisoners/detainees and staff) have been vaccinated so far, and what percentage do they make up?
3. Is there an issue with misinformation and vaccine hesitancy and, if so, what are you doing to address it?
4. Media have reported that a prisoner, tested upon entry to the Bathurst Correctional Centre, did not get a positive result returned until he had been released on bail and returned home to Walgett. Can you confirm that and advise whether it was against protocols and/or if new protocols are now in place to stop that happening again?
5. Media today has reported that four men have tested positive at Silverwater Prison, with two having spent time before at Bathurst Correctional Centre. Can you confirm this? Will movement between prisons be kept to a minimum to prevent the risk of spreading?
6. Are you seeking to reduce numbers in prisons of people who are at risk, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as a precaution in case an outbreak occurs, which, as you know, has been catastrophic in other countries.

We received the following responses.

Please attribute the following response to a Justice Health and Forensic Mental Health Network (the Network) spokesperson:

“Since early March 2021, the Network has delivered COVID-19 vaccinations in line with the Commonwealth Government and Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) advice.

The Network encourages all patients and Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) staff to get vaccinated. Informed consent is obtained by Network clinicians prior to any vaccination and is in line with Commonwealth Government and ATAGI advice. Patient information on the vaccines is provided in multiple languages as well as easy read formats. Any movement of inmates is decided by CSNSW and is not based on an inmate's vaccination status.

The Network, working with partner agencies, has developed robust infection control policies and protocols to stop the spread of infection. These include quarantining new arrivals from the general population for 14 days, the use of comprehensive PPE, as well as regular routine screening and testing.

As the patient at Bathurst was asymptomatic, was not identified as a close or casual contact of a known COVID-19 case, or visited a hotspot location, the test was considered a routine (surveillance) test and the swab was dispatched with the non-urgent pathology courier the following working day.

The patient was later identified as COVID-19 positive. The patient was contacted as soon as possible after the result was known and told to isolate. Close contacts were then notified and told to follow the usual NSW Health advice.

The Network takes the health and wellbeing of patients extremely seriously and over the last year has prepared so that patients and staff are protected in the event of an outbreak. Where an individual identifies as symptomatic, or a close/casual contact, the sample would be fast tracked.

The Network and its partners, continue to review the processes in place and will strengthen them as required.”

Re Question 6: **To be attributed to a Department of Communities and Justice spokesperson.**

STATEMENT

The NSW Government is committed to reducing reoffending rates across the entire community, including among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to prevent them from entering custody in the first place.

Initiatives being implemented across the justice system include record investments to reduce reoffending and increased opportunities for community-based sentences.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis the NSW Government passed laws in 2020 which would enable the release of certain inmates on parole should it be necessary because of the risk to public health or to the good order and security of correctional premises arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Certain serious offenders (such as offenders convicted of murder, terrorism offences, serious sex offences amongst others) would not be eligible for release under this power. To date, it has not been necessary to use this power.

BACKGROUND

- Amendments to the *Crimes (Administration of Sentences) Act 1999* enable the release of certain inmates early on parole in response to COVID-19.
- This flexibility gives the Commissioner of Corrective Services the power to protect the health of inmates and correctional services staff and maintain security during the pandemic.
- Certain classes of inmates will be automatically disqualified from being considered for parole, including inmates serving a life sentence, a sentence of imprisonment for murder, a serious sex offence or terrorism offences.

Re Questions 1 and 5: Please quote a Corrective Services NSW spokesman:

In the current 2021 Covid-19 outbreak, five fresh custody inmates have tested positive and one CSNSW staff member has tested positive.

To date, there are no known cases of COVID-19 transmission within the prison network by staff or inmate in 2020 or 2021.

Five inmates have been received into custody and subsequently tested positive from their time in the community.

Two of them had been at Bathurst Correctional Centre.

All five positive inmates are now housed in the Isolation Hub at the Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre at Silverwater, where they can receive the best care.

Movement between prisons is being kept to a minimum.

Further to Question 1:

A detainee who entered Cobham Youth Justice Centre on Friday, 6 August has tested positive during their first 24 hours in quarantine. They were transferred to hospital. Staff were informed and told to follow NSW Health advice and protocols.