

01 March 2024

C177540

[REDACTED]

Tēnā koe [REDACTED]

Thank you for your email of 26 January 2024 to the Department of Corrections – Ara Poutama Aotearoa, requesting information about deaths in custody. Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA).

Corrections has a duty of care to all people in prison, which we take very seriously. While our prison population has fluctuated in recent years, the complexity of people coming into our management has changed. Our staff are managing a growing number of people, including a greater proportion of defendants remanded in custody, who often have mental health and disability needs. Our research shows that people in prison have higher rates of complex personality traits, and mental health and substance use disorders than the general population. It is estimated that 62 percent of those in prison have met the diagnostic criteria for either a mental health or substance use disorder within the last 12 months, and 91 percent will meet these diagnostic criteria at some time over the course of their lives. Our research also suggests that these psychological disorders can go undetected and untreated prior to prison.

For a variety of reasons, both individual and systemic, people in prison may not have had their health needs detected or addressed in the community. When a person enters prison, they undergo an induction process by custodial and health services. This includes a reception health assessment undertaken by health staff, which assesses each person's physical and mental health needs, including whether they may be at risk of self-harm or suicide and whether they require a referral to a prison doctor or other services to address immediate general and/or mental and addictions health care needs. Staff also assess people for a risk of self-harm and suicide whenever they become aware that a person's circumstances have changed, or their behaviour is a cause for concern.

Our Health Services staff work hard to ensure all people in prison receive a standard of healthcare that is reasonably equivalent to that available to the public. Every New Zealand prison has a health centre, and primary healthcare services are delivered by our Health Services team. This includes General Practitioner services, nursing, basic dentistry, physiotherapy, disability and mental health and addictions services. Where secondary or tertiary healthcare services are required, referrals are made on the same basis as any person in the community.

Corrections acknowledges that we have a responsibility to support the wellness and wellbeing of all older people in prison, acknowledging the varying needs of the diverse prison population. The population of older people in Aotearoa is growing and is set to continue growing in the coming decades. Although the older population (65+) in prison is low in comparison to other age groups, the trajectory of people in our prisons shows that over the next 20 to 30 years this age group will increase significantly.

Older prisoners present a range of mainly health-related issues, which require special management to ensure their imprisonment is safe and humane. In some cases modified accommodation with additional care is required.

Corrections has a High Dependency Unit (HDU) at Rimutaka Prison. The HDU is a specialist unit that accommodates up to 30 people who may have age-related health conditions or complex health and disability needs. These may include cognitive impairment, medical conditions or injuries and disability where there is a requirement for assistance to support their day-to-day activities of daily living. The HDU is the only unit of its type in a New Zealand prison. There is a higher rate of natural deaths in the HDU due to its population.

Some other sites also include units in prison that support older prisoners. Examples include the Rata Unit at Rolleston Prison which has been modified to accommodate men over 60 years of age, and the Rata Annex Unit at Waikeria Prison, which has been altered for accessibility and manages people with high and complex needs.

In 2020, a thematic report into the lived experience of older people in New Zealand prisons was published on the Inspectorate's website, available here:

<https://inspectorate.corrections.govt.nz/reports/thematic-reports/older-prisoners-the-lived-experience-of-older-people-in-new-zealand-prisons>

We are committed to ensuring prisons can cater to the needs of an ageing population. Our 2023-2026 Ageing Well Action Plan recognises that we have an ageing prison population, and aims to address the unmet needs of older people in prison. This is available here:

[https://www.corrections.govt.nz/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/50312/Ageing\\_Well\\_Action\\_Plan\\_v8\\_-\\_Digital.pdf](https://www.corrections.govt.nz/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/50312/Ageing_Well_Action_Plan_v8_-_Digital.pdf)

Corrections is committed to preventing unnatural deaths and incidents of self-harm in prisons. The causes of suicide are complex and people in prison are a known high-risk group. As we have become more aware of the level of significant mental health issues for people in prison, our role has expanded to strengthen our response to support the needs of this group. We make every effort to ensure people's mental wellbeing and physical safety during their time in custody. This can be very challenging for our frontline staff who work hard to support people with complex needs. Please refer to page 56 to 58 of our 2022/23 Annual Report for more information about Corrections' work to reduce suicide and self-harm in prisons, which is available on our website at:

[https://www.corrections.govt.nz/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/50578/Annual\\_Report\\_2022-2023.pdf](https://www.corrections.govt.nz/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/50578/Annual_Report_2022-2023.pdf)

Corrections' Chief Executive has also commissioned the Chief Inspector to undertake a thematic review of apparent suicides and incidents of self-harm threat to life in prisons from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021. This review supports our ongoing efforts to strengthen health services for people in prison. This report has been released on the Inspectorate's website at: [https://inspectorate.corrections.govt.nz/home/home\\_featured\\_news/suicide\\_and\\_self-harm\\_in\\_prisons\\_examined\\_in\\_office\\_of\\_inspectorate\\_report](https://inspectorate.corrections.govt.nz/home/home_featured_news/suicide_and_self-harm_in_prisons_examined_in_office_of_inspectorate_report)

All deaths in custody are investigated by the independent Office of the Inspectorate (the Inspectorate), with recommendations arising from the Inspectorate's review considered and where accepted, actioned appropriately. All deaths in custody are also referred to the Coroner.

Deaths in custody may also be referred to New Zealand Police. Where a death in custody is an apparent suicide or is otherwise suspicious, New Zealand Police make the decision on whether to investigate.

We are committed to learning from all suicides in prison to do everything we can to prevent further deaths of this nature.

You can find more information about deaths in custody on our website: [www.corrections.govt.nz/working\\_with\\_offenders/prison\\_sentences/managing\\_offenders/deaths\\_in\\_custody](http://www.corrections.govt.nz/working_with_offenders/prison_sentences/managing_offenders/deaths_in_custody)

You requested:

*I was wondering if you had on hand the number of deaths in custody in the last ten years, broken down by year, corrections facility, what unit and cause of death?*

The Coroner, not Corrections, ultimately determines the cause of death of a person who passes away in prison. Information held in coronial case files should be sought directly from Coronial Services.

However, Corrections can report on deaths in custody in the below two categories:

- Apparent Unnatural Deaths: this can include death as an apparent result of suspected suicide, an accident, suspected homicide or a death where the cause is unable to be initially confirmed; or
- Apparent Natural Deaths: the death while in custody of any person in prison, as an apparent result of natural causes.

Please see Appendix One which provides data for all apparent natural and unnatural deaths in custody in the last 10 financial years, broken down by category and prison site. Data for the 2023/24 financial year is provided up until 31 December 2023, as is subject to change until the full year process has been completed.

When reviewing the figures for apparent unnatural deaths, note that almost all these cases involved a suspected suicide. Cases of homicide in New Zealand prisons are rare. Within the specified timeframe two cases have occurred where people have been convicted of murder within a prison. One occurred at Christchurch Men's Prison in 2015, the other occurred at Auckland Prison in 2020. Both these cases received media coverage.

In a third case, a man has been charged following the death of a person at Auckland South Corrections Facility in December 2023. Please note that as that matter remains before the court and is subject to suppression orders, and in accordance with section 6(c) of the OIA, Corrections is unable to provide further details as to do so could interfere with court outcomes or jeopardise prosecution.

In response to your request for 'what unit' where deaths took place, please note that each of New Zealand's 18 prisons has many units and this type of information is not readily retrievable from our electronic records. There may be further complicating factors answering this part of your request, for example if a death occurred while a person was on an offsite transfer or a work party.

This type of information is not centrally recorded and instead it would require us to conduct a manual review of each deceased person's individual records. In accordance with the OIA, we have considered whether to affix a charge or extend the time limit for responding. However, given the scale of the request we do not consider that this would be an appropriate use of our publicly funded resources. This part of your request is therefore refused under section 18(f) of the OIA, as the information cannot be made available without substantial collusion or research.

As per section 18B of the OIA, we have considered whether consulting with you would enable the request to be made in a form that would remove the reason for the refusal. However, we do not consider that the request can be refined in this instance, due to the specificity of this request.

Please note that this response may be published on Corrections' website. Typically, responses are published quarterly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

I trust the information provided is of assistance. I encourage you to raise any concerns about this response with Corrections. Alternatively, you are advised of your right to also raise any concerns with the Office of the Ombudsman. Contact details are: Office of the Ombudsman, PO Box 10152, Wellington 6143.

Ngā mihi



Juanita Ryan  
Deputy Chief Executive Health

# DEATHS IN CUSTODY

## Death in Custody definitions

Corrections classifies deaths in custody inline with the following definitions:

- > Unnatural deaths - found by the coroner to be caused by homicide, suicide, accidental cause or a drug overdose, or where there is sufficient evidence to suggest to Corrections that these are the most likely cause of death.

Note that coronial inquests typically take a minimum of 12 months to complete.

- > Natural deaths - where a prisoner has died of natural causes.

## DEATHS IN CUSTODY

### Unnatural deaths - summary by financial year

This page shows statistical information on the:

- > Number of unnatural deaths, by location, by gender (based on the designaion of male and female prisoners)
- > Year-to-date numbers in the current financial year are subject to change until the full year process has been completed.
- > All deaths in custody are subject to a Coroner's enquiry. The majority of coroner's inquests can take 12 months at a minimum, with some taking three years.

### Number of unnatural deaths, by location

Location	*2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15
Auckland Prison				1	1		1		2	1
Auckland South Corrections Facility	1		1	1						
Christchurch Men's Prison	2			1	2		2			1
Hawke's Bay Regional Prison					1		2			1
Invercargill Prison	1	1		1					1	1
Manawatu Prison			1	1						
Mt Eden Corrections Facility	1	1	1		2		2		3	1
Northland Region Corrections Facility				1						
Otago Corrections Facility			1	1					2	
Rimutaka Prison				2	1					2
Rolleston Prison									1	
Spring Hill Corrections Facility	1	1	4	2						
Tongariro Prison										
Waikeria Prison					1				1	1
Whanganui Prison		1	2			1			1	
<b>Total male prisons</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>

Arohata Prison			1							
Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility			1		1					
Christchurch Women's Prison		1						1		
<b>Total female prisons</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>1</b>			<b>1</b>		
<b>Total all prisons</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>

\* to end Dec-2023

## DEATHS IN CUSTODY

### Natural deaths - summary by financial year

This page shows statistical information on the:

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Number of natural deaths, by location, by gender (based on the designaion of male and female prisoners)

Year-to-date numbers in the current financial year are subject to change until the full year process has been completed.

All deaths in custody are subject to a Coroner's enquiry. The majority of coroner's inquests can take 12 months at a minimum, with some taking three years.

### Number of natural deaths, by location

Location	*2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15
Auckland Prison			1				1	2	1	1
Auckland South Corrections Facility	4	2	1	1	2		1	1	1	
Christchurch Men's Prison		1					1	2		
Hawke's Bay Regional Prison					1			1	1	
Invercargill Prison						1				
Manawatu Prison		1		1						
Mt Eden Corrections Facility	2		2		1		1		3	
Northland Region Corrections Facility	1	1	3	1	1	1				2
Otago Corrections Facility	1			1	1			1		
Rimutaka Prison	1	4	2	2	7	6	3	3	6	3
Rolleston Prison		1			1				1	
Spring Hill Corrections Facility	1			1	2			3	1	1
Tongariro Prison		1		2			1			
Waikeria Prison	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	2		1
Whanganui Prison	1	1		1		1			1	2
<b>Total male prisons</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>
Arohata Prison					1					
Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility				1						
Christchurch Women's Prison				1						
<b>Total female prisons</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>



<b>Total all prisons</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>
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*\* to end Dec-2023*