

15 March 2023

C164504

[REDACTED]

Tēnā koe [REDACTED]

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (OIA) request of 30 January 2023 to the Department of Corrections – Ara Poutama Aotearoa, requesting information about assaults on Corrections Officers.

Assaults on our staff are unacceptable. Corrections staff come to work every day to keep New Zealanders safe. They deal with some of New Zealand's most challenging people, and do an exceptional and brave job in often very difficult circumstances. Prisons can be volatile environments, and many of the prisoners our staff work with can behave unpredictably and act without warning.

Every assault on a member of our staff is taken seriously and I expect any prisoner who resorts to violence to be held to account. This may be through internal misconduct charges, a change in security classification, or referral to Police for consideration of criminal prosecution.

A number of highly complex factors contribute to violence in prison. Over 80 percent of the prison population have convictions for violence in their offending histories and more than 90 percent have a lifetime diagnosis of a mental health or substance abuse disorder.

Additionally, 35 percent have a gang affiliation which is a known predictor of violence. In recent years, there has been an increase in the proportion of the prisoner population who are gang affiliated, which mirrors growth in gang membership in communities. Gang members are over-represented in acts of disorder and violence in prison. Gang members are also known to incite other people in prison to carry out violent acts on behalf of the gangs.

A growing proportion of the prisoner population are on remand, and there is a strong statistical association between remand status and incidents of assault within prison. In addition, a growing proportion of the prisoner population have histories of extensive methamphetamine use which is associated with significant and lasting impacts on mental and emotional functioning, including issues such as anger control.

The reality is the threat of violence is something we cannot eliminate entirely, but we do everything possible to minimise this risk. We have invested significantly in training and tools to keep our staff safe. This includes tactical skills, such as de-escalation, through to the

provision of stab resistant body armour, on body cameras and the expanded deployment of pepper spray.

We implemented further initiatives to improve safety in prisons in 2020/21. This includes reinforcing the use of tactical communications, implementing rostering guidelines to ensure an appropriate mix of staff experience during shifts, improving how training data is recorded, and establishing staff safety plans.

We also worked with the Corrections Association of New Zealand (CANZ) and the Public Service Association (PSA) to develop the Violence and Aggression Joint Action Plan and all prison sites now have an individual site safety plan to address violence and aggression. These plans are led by the Prison Director in consultation with local site union delegates.

The 12 months to January 2023 have seen a reduction in assaults from the previous 12 months, with the number in January 2023 remaining below the same period in 2022. The impact on staff availability has also reduced, as noted in the figures you have requested below. Again, no assault on a Corrections Officer is acceptable, and we continue to work on improving the safety of our staff.

You have requested:

*Would it be possible to request the stats on assaults on Corrections officers for the entirety of 2022, whether it be assaults without injury, assaults and serious assaults.*

*- What was the number of workdays lost as a result?*

*- And how does it compare to previous years?*

*- And has there been any data on assaults from this year?*

We responded on 28 February 2023 refusing your request for assaults data as it is publicly available and extended the due date for the remainder of your request to 10 March 2023. We apologise that we have not met our extended due date.

Injuries to frontline custodial staff which occurred in 2022 and are coded as "Violence & Aggression" have so far resulted in 6,321 days lost. For injuries occurring in 2021, there were 8,068 days lost.

These figures do not include any incidents from 2022 where a decision on work-related injury cover had not been made as at 31 January 2023. Some incidents will continue to accrue lost days due to long-term injuries.

Positions considered when compiling this data include Corrections Officers, Senior Corrections Officers, Principal Corrections Officers, Instructors and Principal Instructors.

Please be advised that should you have any concerns regarding this response you have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate our decision to extend the timeframe. Contact details are: Office of the Ombudsman, PO Box 10152, Wellington 6143.

Ngā mihi



Richard Waggott  
Deputy Chief Executive  
People and Capability