



# Research Bulletin

## **The Threat From Escapes: Some Facts About Prison Escapes**

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Department of Corrective Services

## THE THREAT FROM ESCAPES: SOME FACTS ABOUT PRISON ESCAPES

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Escapes by prisoners have attracted a great deal of media attention and generate some alarm in the community. When a prisoner serving a long term for violent offences escapes, and especially when such an escaper commits a serious offence, the intensity of reaction is easily understood. Such incidents are often followed by administrative changes designed to tighten security or to prevent prisoners with alarming records from absconding from low security conditions.

This Bulletin presents some facts about the danger to the community from escapees and the costs of reducing this danger.

### Grounds for Concern

Examination of newspaper items dealing with escapes suggest that the main grounds for concern which have often been expressed are apparently based on the following beliefs:

- (1) The N.S.W. escape rate is unusually high
- (2) Prisoners held for violent offences are, if they escape, very likely to commit similar offences whilst at large
- (3) Such prisoners are very dangerous and should not be placed in low security prisons and should not be accepted into temporary absence programmes
- (4) Prisoners are at all times trying to escape to resume criminal careers and must be prevented from doing so
- (5) Violent escapees contribute substantially to violent crime in N.S.W.
- (6) Violent crime could be reduced by more secure custody of prisoners, and particularly of prisoners sentenced for violent offences.

Are these assumptions realistic? Certainly some prisoners, despite excellent behaviour while in prison, do escape and commit very serious crimes. What we examine here is the magnitude of this very real problem.

### The Escape Rate

Over a seven year period, for every 100 man years spent in prison, 5.1 escapes have occurred. This rate is obtained by dividing the number of escapes in a year by the average

### Summary

Prison escapes can attract great media attention and generate alarm in the community. Some prisoners with records of serious violent crimes have escaped and some escapees commit such crimes while at large. This Bulletin examines the size of this very real problem and tests how realistic are various assumptions apparent in some mass media treatments of escapes.

Data presented show that the N.S.W. escape rate of around 5.1 per hundred prisoner years has been fairly stable since 1974/75 and is similar to or below rates in other mixed security systems. In March/December 1981 this rate was reduced to 3.8. To prevent all or most escapes would involve huge capital expenditure (\$60 to \$300 million), increased running costs, and could increase recidivism and other social costs of imprisonment.

Data on recaptures and offences by escapees show that half stay at large less than 3 weeks and 80% less than 6 months. Around six in ten commit no proven offences whilst at large, and the most common offences (car theft and break, enter and steal) are relatively minor. Difficulties for escapees in remaining "free" are reviewed.

Serious violent crimes by escapees are estimated to be less than 2% of all those committed in New South Wales. While escapees who were originally imprisoned for violent offences are much more likely than others to commit further such offences whilst at large (14% versus 3%) most (86%) do not. Even those recaptured escapees who committed no offences face considerable increases in their sentences and a considerable time in high security gaols.

number of prisoners and multiplying by 100. In the period from July 74 to June 1981, the rate has varied from 4.3 in 1978-79 to 5.8 in 1974-75 (see Table 1).

Most of the escapes are from within minimum security institutions (55.0%). Many of these involve breaking the window of a hut in a rural camp and running off overnight.

Over the same seven years, escorted excursions, day leave, unsupervised attendance at classes outside prisons and the work release programme have jointly accounted for 18% of escapes. Escapes from fully secured institutions (which hold over half of all prisoners) were only 2.7% of the total. Table 1 presents a breakdown of escapes by the type and level of security overcome, and escape rates for each year and for the total period from July 1974 to June 1981.

Is the N.S.W. escape rate high? The Royal Commission into N.S.W. Prisons thought it acceptable by world standards.

Table 2 shows rates from various systems and periods. Some exclude absconds by prisoners on temporary release (work release, day leave, study leave, etc.) while others include them. Hence, rates are presented under two headings, depending on what was included.

Several facts emerge from Table 2. The N.S.W. rate is similar to or below that found in jurisdictions which also have varied levels of security and active temporary absence programmes (Canada, New Zealand, Scandinavia). Escape rates are higher from low security institutions wherever the data could be found. Lower rates found in other Australian states thus could reflect differences in the percentage of prisoners held in low security and the numbers allowed on temporary absence. Also the smaller size of low security institutions in other States might have an effect as smaller institutions might have lower rates of absconds.

A substantial reduction does appear to have been achieved in March to December 1981, to a rate of 3.8 per 100 prisoner years. This reduction is largely due to reduced rates of escape from within open, minimum security institutions. This is hardly consistent with the image of prisoners as all, at all times, trying to escape.

To further substantially reduce escapes, low security institutions would have to be replaced or upgraded to medium or maximum security. A further small reduction might be achieved if temporary absence programmes were abolished. Without such changes, the escape rate is not excessive when compared to similar systems elsewhere.

#### **The Danger From Escapes**

It is often assumed that those who have been violent will again be violent and that escapees are desperate to stay at large and will commit any crime to avoid recapture.

For what types of offences were escapees imprisoned? Table 3 gives a summary for three periods:- 1½ years from 1st July 1974, 1 year from 1st January 1976, and 1 year from 1st July, 1979. The percentage of escapees held for offences against person rose from 24.3% in 74-75 to 29.5% in 1976 and 29.4% in 1979-80. This parallels the shift in the prison population with a fall in the proportion of property offenders and a rise in the proportion of offences against person around 1975.

Given this trend, it appears that escapees should be becoming more dangerous if the mass media assumptions are correct. The only source of data on this is from convictions of re-captured escapees for offences committed whilst at large. This excludes offences which could not be proven and offences by escapees still at large, and so could understate the level of offence.

Nearly two-thirds of recaptured escapees are not convicted of any offences committed whilst at large. Table 4 shows convictions for the most serious proven offences committed whilst at large for four groups:

- (a) those escaping between 1/7/74 and 31/12/75 with court action complete when the study data were collected (data previously collected)
- (b) a similar group from those escaping between 1/1/76 and 31/12/76 (data previously collected)
- (c) a similar group from those sentenced prisoners serving terms for offences against person and escaping between 1/1/75 and 30/6/81 (period chosen to provide a substantial sample)
- (d) a similar group from sentenced prisoners escaping

between 1/7/79 and 30/6/80 who were serving terms for offences not against the person (period chosen to provide a recent sample)

Further conclusions from this table include:

- (1) Violent offences are rarely proven against escapees (2-3%)
- (2) Those serving terms for violence are 3-4 times as likely as those imprisoned for other offences to be convicted for a violent offences whilst at large. Even so, only 14% committed proven violent offences.
- (3) The most common proven offences were (in all groups) either larceny of motor vehicle (11% to 19%) or break, enter and steal (6% to 18%).

#### **Are Escapees Determined Desperados?**

Media treatment of escapes conveys an image of men desperate to escape and to resume their criminal careers. Some facts reported here challenge this image.

In all periods studied, half of those who escaped were recaptured within 2-3 weeks. Many are found near the institution they left, with no money, no transport and nowhere to go. Others are found "hiding" with family or friends, exactly where the police can most easily find them. Some (less than 30%) have committed minor property crimes (break, enter and steal and larceny of motor vehicle) to obtain clothes, cash, food and transport.

As we have seen, only a few carry out more serious violent offences (under 5%).

These facts suggest that few escapees have made effective plans for a course of action to remain at large and to live. Without outside assistance, an escapee has no money; inappropriate clothes; no identification; cannot show a driver's licence; cannot give the name of a previous employer and has nowhere to live. To obtain a job or welfare assistance would thus be very difficult. Also, to seek help from family or friends is to increase chances of police detection and to place people the escapee cares about at risk of being sentenced to prison for harbouring or aiding an escapee. Given this situation, it is not surprising that most are recaptured. It is perhaps surprising that relatively few are charged with and convicted of crimes that would assist their survival. These facts hardly support an image of escapers as determined, desperate criminals who all pose a major threat to the community.

#### **The Threat From Escapees**

From the data, it can be estimated that less than 2% of serious violent offences were committed by escapees. This estimate is arrived at as set out in the Appendix. Some relevant facts are:

- (1) From group (c) (covering 6½ years) there were 28 escapees convicted of serious violent offences. The offences included 4 murders, 2 attempted murders, 1 kidnapping, 2 major assaults, 15 robberies with major assault, 3 rapes and 1 attempted rape. This excludes relatively "minor" violence such as common assault and robbery with common assault; no indecent assaults were proven. The 28 offenders formed 10.5% of the 266 offenders against person who escaped, were recaptured and for whom court action was completed.
- (2) We can estimate that, in the same 6½ years, at least 2873 persons were convicted in New South Wales Courts of serious violent offences and sentenced to

imprisonment.

- (3) Escaped prisoners held for offences against person were thus no more than 1.0% of those convicted for serious violent offences in the period.
- (4) We can estimate that, for every 3 originally violent escapees who are convicted of serious violent offences at large, there are another 2 originally non-violent offenders so convicted.
- (5) Thus, with up to 1% of all convictions for serious violent crimes coming from those originally violent, we can estimate 2/3 of one percent from other escapees, to give an overall rate of 1 2/3%. To be conservative, call this "less than 2%".
- (6) Assume that recaptured escapers and other offenders are about equally likely to avoid conviction for serious violent offences they committed, and escapers still at large are no more likely to offend than those recaptured. The estimate which follows from these final assumptions is that less than 2% of serious violent offences are committed by escapees whilst at large.

### The Cost of Prevention

Most escapes could be prevented by holding all prisoners in secured institutions, and abolishing all temporary absence programmes. The financial cost would be immense. The new maximum security prison at Parklea is estimated to cost \$33 million to build. It will hold 220 prisoners in high security. On recent prison population figures, another 9 Parkleas would be needed to place all prisoners in maximum security, that is to move all those currently in open or variable security institutions to maximum security prisons. For this expenditure of \$300 million, the short term maximum effect would be a reduction of 2% or less in serious violent crime. The reduction in property crime would be far less as few such offences are cleared up (11% in 1979) and few convicted offenders are imprisoned.

If all prisoners were held in medium security, 4 additional prisons would be required at a cost of about \$15 million each. A reduction of under 1% in serious violent crime would thus cost about \$60 million dollars.

If only prisoners previously convicted of violent offences were confined in maximum security for their full term, the costs would be less. About 2 additional "Parklea" type institutions would be required at a cost of nearly \$70 million.

These are all capital costs. To these must be added the additional costs of operating more secure institutions of around \$5,000 per prisoner year.

The social costs would also be immense. There is evidence (Le Clair, 1981) that recidivism is greater for prisoners released directly from maximum security, than for similar prisoners who go through lower security programs, are allowed home leave, placed on work release or in special pre-release programs. Le Clair has found that, as more prisoners in Massachusetts have been admitted to low security programs to prepare them for release, recidivism has been reduced. To abolish similar programs in New South Wales could increase recidivism. Also, violence among prisoners is increased by the conditions of secure custody (cf Emery, 1970) and contact with families (which seems to reduce recidivism — see Kemp, 1980) is reduced.

### The Treatment of Recaptures Escapees

Following recapture, it is Departmental policy that an

escapee cannot be held in less than maximum security for at least three years following recapture. All appear in Court charged with escape and with any known offences committed whilst at large. These are accumulative to the original sentence, and add to any non-parole period in force. For those sentenced for escape with no other sentences from 1/7/80 to 31/6/81, the average additional sentence ranged from almost 8 months (for those originally sentenced for less than 12 months) to nearly 17 months (for those originally sentenced for over 10 years).

In four periods, the percentage receiving 12 months or more additional sentence for escape alone was:

39.0% (July 74 to December 75)  
39.3% (January to December 76)  
52.6% (July 78 to June 79)  
40.3% (July 80 to July 81)

Thus, apart from more severe sentences in 1978-79, there has been little change over a substantial period in the sentences given for escape.

### Conclusions

Escaped prisoners do present some threat to the community. However, less than 5% commit proven violent offences; most are recaptured, the majority fairly quickly (within 2-3 weeks). Six out of ten commit no proven offences whilst at large. About 14% of escapees held for violent offences commit proven violent offences whilst at large, with about 10% being serious violent offences. Less than 2% of violent offences committed in the community are the work of escapees. The costs of preventing all or some escapes range from \$60 million to \$300 million in capital costs (in 1982 prices) plus substantially increased running costs. Escape rates are not high compared to other systems with graded security and temporary absence programmes, and have recently been reduced. To reduce escapes by restricting or abolishing these programmes could add slightly to the threat to the community by increasing recidivism, apart from the increase in other destructive effects of secure institutions on prisoners, their families and the staff controlling them.

Overall, the threat to the community from escaped prisoners is relatively slight and does not justify the massive costs involved in radical action to prevent escapes. Action by the Department and the courts ensures that very few recaptured escapees escape again and that they are kept out of the community for some time.

Given the low chance of staying at large and the penalties imposed, it is surprising that prisoners take the risk of escaping. A study to examine why prisoners abscond from low security is being planned for 1982-83.

### References

- Emery, F.E. *Freedom and justice within walls* London, Tavistock, 1970.
- Kemp, B. Imprisonment and family separation: a literature review. *Research Digest No. 4*, New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, 1980.
- Le Clair, D. *Rates of recidivism: a five year follow-up*. Massachusetts Department of Corrections, 1981.

## APPENDIX

### Estimating the Threat From Escapes

From the data, it can be estimated that less than 2% of serious violent offences were committed by escapees. This estimate is arrived at as follows. The basis for calculations was the re-offences by those originally violent escaping over 6½ years as this gives the best estimate for the rate of violent re-offences.

- (1) From group (c) (covering 6½ years) there were 28 escapees convicted of serious violent offences. The offences included 4 murders, 2 attempted murders, 1 kidnapping, 2 major assaults, 15 robberies with major assault, 3 rapes and 1 attempted rape. This excludes "minor" violence such as common assault and robbery with common assault; no indecent assaults were proven. The 28 offenders formed 10.5% of the 266 offenders against person who escaped, were recaptured and for whom court action was completed.
- (2) In the five calendar years 1975-1979, there were 2,210 persons convicted in New South Wales courts of serious violent offences and sentenced to imprisonment. More recent figures are not yet available. Assuming the average of 442 persons per year was at least maintained in the next 18 months, we have an estimated minimum of 2873 such offenders in the period 1/1/75 to 30/6/81.
- (3) Escaped prisoners held for offences against person were thus 1.0% of those convicted for serious violent offences in the period.
- (4) From the 1979-80 data, 70% of escapers were originally held for offences not against the person. Of these originally non-violent offenders who were recaptured, 3.1% were convicted of a serious violent offence. Thus, about 2.2% of recaptured escapees in the period were originally non-violent but were proven to have committed serious violent offences (3.1% of 70%). For this year, 30% of recaptured and sentenced escapers originally offended against the person. Over the 6½ year period, 11% of such escapees are convicted of serious violent offences committed whilst at large, i.e., 11% of 30% = 3.3% of all recaptured escapers with court action complete. Thus, for every 3 originally violent escapees who are convicted of serious violent offences while at large, there are 2 originally non-violent offenders so convicted (based on 3.3%/2.2%).
- (5) Thus, with 1% of all convictions for serious violent crimes coming from those originally violent, we can estimate 2/3 of one percent from other escapees, to give an overall rate of 1 2/3%. To be conservative, call this "less than 2%".
- (6) Assume that recaptured escapers and other offenders are about equally likely to avoid conviction for serious violent offences they committed, and escapers still at large are no more likely to offend than those recaptured. The estimate that follows from these final assumptions is that less than 2% of serious violent offences are committed by escapees whilst at large.

**Table 1: Absconds and escapes from New South Wales Corrective Services custody, 1974-1980**

Escaped from	Year commenced								
	1 July:	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1974-1980
a) Within Secured Institutions		4.0%	—	2.7%	7.2%	1.2%	0.9%	2.7%	2.7%
b) Within Variable Security Institutions		10.6%	4.9%	10.1%	15.0%	12.5%	20.1%	16.7%	13.0%
c) Within Open Institutions		62.1%	55.7%	57.4%	56.7%	62.5%	45.8%	46.2%	55.0%
d) Areas adjacent to Secured &/or Variable Security Institutions		2.5%	8.2%	1.6%	3.9%	2.4%	3.7%	4.3%	3.8%
e) Escorted work parties away from Institutions		2.0%	6.6%	5.9%	1.7%	2.4%	9.8%	3.8%	4.7%
f) Escorted sports/educational excursions away from Institutions		1.0%	2.2%	2.1%	4.4%	4.8%	5.1%	5.4%	3.6%
g) Day/Weekend Leave		4.0%	2.7%	2.7%	1.7%	4.8%	7.5%	9.7%	4.8%
h) Unsupervised Educational Programmes		5.1%	6.6%	5.3%	5.0%	1.8%	1.4%	2.2%	3.9%
i) Work Release Programme		7.6%	12.0%	7.4%	2.8%	6.0%	2.3%	4.3%	6.0%
j) Other		1.0%	1.1%	4.8%	1.7%	1.8%	3.3%	4.8%	2.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>198</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>188/year</b>
Daily average prison population		3399	3688	3662	3658	3896	3836	3417	3651
Rate per 100 prisoner years		5.8	5.0	5.1	4.9	4.3	5.6	5.4	5.1

**Table 2: Rates of Escapes/Absconds per hundred prisoner years in custody for various jurisdictions.**

Prison System	Period Covered	Escape Rate	
		(Non — Returns Excluded)	(Non — Returns Included)
New South Wales			
All Institutions	74-80F	4.4	5.2
Open Institutions	79F	7.3	—
New Zealand	75-77F	—	5.2
Canada (Federal)	77C	—	5.0
Denmark	74-79C	12.6	—
Finland	74-79C	4.5	—
	77C	—	7.8
Norway	74-79C	5.2	—
Sweden	74-79C	34.8	—
England			
"Open" Prisons (Males)	79C	10.6	—
	75-79C	7.6	—
Detention Centres*	79C	9.5	—
	69-79C	15.3	—
Victoria			
All Institutions	74-79F	—	2.2
Minimum Security	74-79F	5.3	—
South Australia	75-79F	—	2.5
Queensland	75-79F	—	1.3
Western Australia	75-79F	—	15.6
Northern Territory	76-79F	—	2.8
Tasmania	75-79F	—	0.6

F: Financial years commencing 1 July in the years indicated.  
C: Calendar years commencing 1 January in the years indicated.

\* Open security establishments for male offenders aged 17-21; rate excluded **escapes** which required overcoming security barriers or staff observation, but all involved crossing the boundary of the establishment.

**Table 3: Most Serious Offence for which Escapee held at time of Escape for Three Periods**

Period of Escape Commenced: Ended:	1.7.74 31.12.75		1.1.76 31.12.76		1.7.79 30.6.80	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Most Serious Offence Against Person</b>						
Murder & Attempt	3	1.1%	3	1.6%	3	1.5%
Manslaughter & Kidnap	8	2.8%	1	0.5%	—	—
Major Assault	2	0.7%	7	3.8%	5	2.5%
Other Assault	10	3.5%	6	3.2%	2	1.0%
Rob & Major Assault	12	4.2%	22	11.9%	37	18.1%
Other Rob & Extort	27	9.5%	7	3.8%	7	3.4%
Rape & Attempted Rape	4	1.4%	5	2.7%	3	1.5%
Indecent Assault	2	0.7%	3	1.6%	2	1.0%
Other Sexual	1	0.4%	2	1.1%	1	0.5%
SUB-TOTAL	69	24.3%	56	30.3%	60	29.4%
<i>Not Against Person</i>	215	75.7%	129	69.7%	144	70.6%
TOTAL	284	100.0%	185	100.0%	204*	100.0%

\* 214 in Table 1. The 204 here excluded 8 remandees and 2 subsequently not charged with escape.

**Table 4: The most serious proven Offence committed whilst at large by various groups of re-captured Escapees**

Period Commenced: Ended:	1.7.74 31.12.75		1.1.76 31.12.76		1.1.75 30.6.81		1.7.79 30.6.80	
	All		All		Against person		Not Against person	
Original Offence:	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Re-Offence</b>								
<b>NONE PROVEN</b>	111	60.0%	56	55.5%	168	63.2%	81	62.3%
<b>Homicide</b>								
Murder & Attempt	—	0.0%	N/K		6	2.3%	—	0.0%
Manslaughter & Kidnap	—	0.0%	N/K		1	0.4%	—	0.0%
<b>TOTAL HOMICIDE</b>	0	0.0%	N/K		7	2.6%	—	0.0%
<b>Assault</b>								
Major	2	1.1%	N/K		2	0.8%	—	0.0%
Other	—	0.0%	N/K		3	1.1%	—	0.0%
<b>TOTAL ASSAULT</b>	2	1.1%	N/K		5	2.9%	—	0.0%
<b>Robbery &amp; Extort + Major Assault</b>	—	0.0%	N/K		15	5.6%	4	3.1%
Other	2	1.1%	N/K		6	2.3%	—	0.0%
<b>TOTAL ROB</b>	2	1.1%	N/K		21	7.9%	4	3.1%
<b>Sexual</b>								
Rape & Attempt	—	0.0%	N/K		4	1.5%	—	0.0%
Indecent Assault	—	0.0%	N/K		—	0.0%	—	0.0%
Other	—	0.0%	N/K		—	0.0%	—	0.0%
<b>TOTAL SEX</b>	0	0.0%	N/K		4	1.5%	—	0.0%
<b>TOTAL AGAINST PERSON</b>	4	2.2%	2	2.0%	37	13.9%	4	3.1%
<b>Property &amp; Fraud</b>								
Fraud	2	1.1%	2	2.0%	1	0.4%	—	0.0%
B.E.S.	20	10.8%	18	17.8%	15	5.6%	14	10.8%
Larceny M/V	35	18.9%	11	10.9%	31	11.7%	23	17.7%
Other	11	5.9%	7	6.9%	8	3.0%	7	5.4%
<b>TOTAL PROPERTY</b>	68	36.8%	38	37.6%	55	20.7%	44	33.8%
<b>Other</b>	2	1.1%	5	5.0%	6	2.3%	1	0.8%
<b>TOTAL NOT AGAINST PERSON</b>	70	37.8%	43	48.5%	61	22.9%	45	34.6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	185	100.0%	101	100.0%	266	100.0%	130	100.0%