

Research Brief

Full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres: Staff and inmate perspectives

Bonnie B. Y. Ross, Julie Barkworth, & Mark Howard

AIM To conduct a qualitative review to gain insight into staff and inmate perspectives on the use of full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres, with a focus on exploring their views in relation to safety and security, decency and respect for inmates, and comparisons to other forms of contraband searching.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 correctional officers and 11 inmates across two NSW correctional centres. All were in support of the use of scanners for contraband searching. They described scanning as easier, more pleasant and a smoother, faster process compared to strip searching. In addition to benefits to operational ease and efficiency, the perception that scanners improve inmate dignity was evident.

Officers and inmates voiced several challenges associated with the use of scanners, the most significant of which is the ambiguity of scan images. Metal and large items were said to be easily detectable but small amounts of drugs were reported as difficult to discern. There was suggestion that false positives and false negatives are common, and dissatisfaction from inmates was voiced at the increased use of dry cells since the introduction of scanners. It was also highlighted that inmates learn to evade detection from scanners and continually employ creative methods to introduce contraband into prison.

There was indication that training on the use of scanners is needed to reduce guesswork and improve precision when interpreting scan images. The importance of multiple forms of security was also voiced, including supplementing scanning with manual inspections of clothing and strip searches where warranted.

Findings from the study offer qualitative evidence for the potential benefits of full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres. They also highlight that competing priorities within the operational context create complexity for best practice considerations. Insights from the current study, combined with quantitative evidence on scanner activities and outcomes (see Barkworth et al., 2024), can help inform continuous improvement in contraband searching practices at NSW correctional centres.

INTRODUCTION

Full body x-ray scanners are used in correctional centres across multiple jurisdictions worldwide, including in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Brazil (Bulman, 2009; de Moulpied et al., 1998; Nante et al., 2017). Their purpose is to detect contraband and prevent it from entering prison (Bell & Leese, 2020; Bulman, 2009; de Moulpied et al., 1998; Nante et al., 2017). Scanners are an alternative to traditional methods of contraband searching such as use of metal detectors, which are ineffective for non-metallic or internally secreted items (Bulman, 2009), and strip searches, which are highly invasive (Queensland Human Rights Commission [QHRC], 2023).

In New South Wales, a total of 66 scanners are in operation across 24 medium and maximum security correctional centres. The introduction of the scanners involved piloting in 2019 followed by a progressive roll-out from mid-2020 for scanning male inmates. Scanning of female inmates commenced from September 2021 and visitor scanning from November 2021.

The use of full body x-ray scanners is an adjunct to existing resources and procedures for contraband searching at NSW correctional centres. Scanning occurs for inmate reception, social visits, before and after escort by CSNSW officers or police, other inmate movements (e.g., returning from workshops), and when there is suspicion of contraband on an individual. This is consistent with the recommendation that operational measures to ensure safety in prison should incorporate technology systems (Tititampruk & Ketsil, 2021), the benefits of which include disrupting illicit drug supply (Bell & Leese, 2020). By routinely scanning inmates and visitors, the use of scanners is intended to not only improve safety and security within correctional centres but also minimise the need for strip searching. In turn, less frequent use of strip searching is expected to contribute towards a number of outcomes that are aligned with CSNSW objectives including better trauma-informed practice, improved decency and respect for inmates, fewer instances of inmate non-compliance and staff use of force, and less risk to staff from exposure to bodily fluids.

Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics (CRES) is undertaking a two-stage review of the use of full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres. The first stage involved a quantitative examination of scanner activity and anticipated outcomes associated with the introduction of scanners and detection of contraband (see Barkworth et al., 2024). Scanner activity was shown to increase as scanners were rolled out across centres, with most of both inmate and visitor scans occurring in the course of social visits. Immediate indications of scanners detecting contraband were most prominent among visitors, noting that this is the primary method of contraband detection for visitors. Detection of contraband among people in prison, however, may still regularly occur through cell searches and intercepting perimeter throwovers (Barkworth et al., 2024). While quantifiable shifts in detection of contraband were not immediately observed following the introduction of scanners, other unobservable benefits related to people's experiences with scanning are also important to consider.

AIMS

The present study reports on the qualitative component of the two-stage review of full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres. It aims to gain insight into staff and inmate perspectives on the use of the scanners, with a focus on exploring their views in relation to safety and security, decency and respect for inmates, and the comparison of scanners to other forms of contraband searching.

The study aims to address three key research questions:

1. What are the views and experiences of staff and inmates regarding the use of full body x-ray scanners?
2. To what extent has introduction of full body x-ray scanners affected activities relating to strip searches of inmates?
3. How has introduction of full body x-ray scanners affected perceived outcomes related to safety and security for inmates and staff?

METHODS

We used semi-structured interviews to gain detail-rich information on individuals' experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2002). Ten correctional officers and 11 inmates across two NSW correctional centres participated in our study (N = 21; see Table 1 for sample composition). Officers were 60% male, 40% female and had 12.2 years of experience in their role on average (a range of 4–26 years). Inmates were 55% male, 45% female and had spent 8.7 years in CSNSW custody on average (a range of 2–27 years). This sample size and composition paired with interviews is adequate for the study aims (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Table 1. Sample composition

Correctional centre	Officers (N = 10)		Inmates (N = 11)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre	4	1	6	–
Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre	2	3	–	5

Recruitment of the officers and inmates was assisted by a senior staff member at each centre (e.g., Manager of Security). Sampling was guided by inclusion criteria to ensure individuals recruited for the study had sufficient experience with and exposure to scanner usage within CSNSW. Officers were invited to participate in the study if they had been trained to operate full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres; had experience performing strip searching; and had worked as a correctional officer in NSW since before the introduction of the scanners.¹ Inmates were invited to participate in the study if they had been scanned by full body x-ray scanners at an NSW correctional centre; had experienced strip searching; and had been in CSNSW custody since before the introduction of the scanners. To ensure informed consent, we recruited inmates in consultation with each centre's Inmate Development Committee.² A participant information sheet and verbal explanation of the study was given to each officer and inmate, and written consent obtained, prior to the commencement of their interview.

Interviews were conducted in-person with each individual at their correctional centre in January and February 2024. All followed an officer- or inmate-specific interview guide and were audio-recorded then transcribed. The interviews averaged 20 minutes in duration (ranging from 11–32 minutes). Qualitative content analysis of interview data was performed on NVivo software. This involved systematically coding discrete meanings then constructing concepts based on patterned meaning across the dataset (Sandelowski, 2000). We

¹ Participants were encouraged to reflect on and compare their experiences of prior search practices with current practices involving scanners.

² The Inmate Development Committee (IDC) is a body of inmates that meets with management to discuss problems and concerns about inmate services, programs and activities within the correctional centre.

engaged in regular peer debriefing to critique the interpretive validity of emergent findings and kept an audit trail of the evolving analysis (Tracy, 2010).

The conduct of this study was approved by the Corrective Services Ethics Committee (ref. D2023/1382391).

FINDINGS

Officers' and inmates' perspectives on the use of full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres indicated that, overall, it is a better system for contraband searching but one that involves a degree of guesswork and requires ongoing training. A detailed explanation of officer and inmate views on the use of the scanners is provided as follows.

A Better System Overall

Overwhelmingly, both officers and inmates were supportive of the use of scanners at NSW correctional centres, with several inmates referring to it as the best initiative they have seen in prison. According to inmates and officers, visitors' response to the introduction of scanners has also been agreeable and the majority accept scanning as a condition of entry to prison.

Based on their observations of contraband searching practices since the introduction of scanners, officers and inmates reported that routine strip searching has been largely replaced by scanning. This decreased use of strip searches was said to be especially noticeable in processes surrounding social visits where, instead of being strip searched, inmates are now scanned pre- and post-visit. It was also noted that the introduction of scanners has changed procedures for visitors as they are no longer searched using a metal detector but scanned upon arrival for a social visit.

Officers' and inmates' comments indicated that scanning is easier, more pleasant and a smoother, faster process compared to strip searching which requires inmates to fully undress, be searched, then redress. Because of this, routine contraband searching of groups of inmates, such as for reception or social visits, was said to involve a lower risk of agitation and non-compliance that could escalate to conflict and staff use of force. Many officers and inmates viewed this as an important benefit of using scanners as it contributes to a safer environment for all.

With reference to the expedited process of contraband searching, many inmates remarked that the benefits of scanning are also noticeable to their visiting family and friends who are no longer subject to lengthy wait times. However, some inmates reported that their family and friends perceive visitor processing to be slower now with scanners than in the past with metal detectors.

Beyond its ease and efficiency, scanning was unanimously felt to be more dignified than strip searching. Comments from officers and inmates suggested that the less invasive, less intimidating search method lends itself to being conducted in a more respectful and professional manner. Inmates added that not only is embarrassment and humiliation avoided with the use of scanners, physically uncomfortable and dehumanising overalls no longer need to be worn during visits.³ They explained that by wearing prison greens, inmates are afforded a more approachable appearance which puts their loved ones at ease and in turn boosts their own mental wellbeing.

³ Where scanners are not used, during contact visits all inmates in maximum and medium security correctional centres in NSW must wear CSNSW-issued overalls that are pocketless and zip-tied at the back of the neck.

“Guys that wear the white overalls come out, they look really down. And your family’s confused and they’re worried about you... it scares the kids off sometimes. ... Now, it’s much better. ... We get to wear greens out to the visits. ... Your family can actually see you’re doing well, you’re not gaining weight, you don’t look depressed. ... Then if they’re not stressing outside it helps us with our train of thought.” – male inmate

Additional benefits mentioned were that scanning instead of strip searching is more personnel-efficient, as it can be conducted by a single officer who is not strictly required to be of the same gender as the inmate, and more hygienic, as it does not require officers to handle high volumes of inmate clothing.

Image Ambiguity

Officers’ and inmates’ comments indicated that the use of scanners for contraband searching is beneficial but not without challenges, the most significant of which related to the ambiguity of scan images. It was explained by officers that while scanners offer a means to view internally secreted contraband, interpreting scan images often involves guesswork. Items that are metal or appear as a *“big blob”* (female officer) were said to be clearly visible on scans, but smaller, non-metallic items—often drugs—were described as difficult to discern and especially inconspicuous when concealed among parts of clothing (e.g., bands, cuffs, collars, seams, straps, buttons, buckles).

Indeed, claims were made by inmates that contraband can be carried undetected through scanners and, equally, that non-contraband items can be falsely identified.

“I’ve been scanned before when I’ve been holding stuff and they told me, yes, you’re right to go through. Then there’s other times where I’ve been scanned and I haven’t been holding anything ... officers told me that I have stuff on me when I don’t.” – female inmate

According to officers, differences in anatomy across individuals and image resolution across scanners add to the challenge of interpreting images, as do bodies that are larger in size or that have medical implants. Body piercings and stool in the bowel can also resemble contraband when scanned, and certain gender-specific items of clothing can appear suspicious (e.g., bra straps). Another challenge reported was image distortion from movement during scanning, such as when scanning a drug-affected or otherwise agitated inmate at reception, or someone who is non-compliant.

Officers spoke of several strategies that can be used to ensure scan images are interpreted as accurately as possible: seeking a second opinion from a colleague or supervisor; comparing an individual’s pre- and post-visit scans; repeating a scan after repositioning the individual; and questioning the individual if in doubt. However, comments from officers and inmates indicated that diligence necessitates delay, which is problematic when efficiency is needed to minimise frustration at what inmates perceive to be a needlessly protracted process.

“When you check on the screen, it’s hard to understand—is that a drug? Or is that something else? So we just keep looking ... talking to our officers, have a look again ... it takes a lot of time for us to thoroughly check it.” – male officer

“When an officer knows what they’re doing, it’s quick. But when an officer doesn’t know what they’re doing, it’s slow. ... I get the shits because I know what the normal routine is and I’m like, you’ve just got to do this, this, this.” – female inmate

Other barriers to accuracy mentioned by officers include instances when a comparison image is not available (e.g., for visitors and newly received inmates) and when questioning or repeated scanning may be perceived as harassment (e.g., for visitors).

False positives

An aspect of the contraband searching process that attracted mixed views from officers and inmates was the use of dry cells and hospital escorts. It was explained that an inmate suspected of internally secreting contraband will be placed in a dry cell and, in most cases, escorted to hospital for clinical assessment. Although this same protocol has been followed since before the introduction of scanners, the frequency of using dry cells and escorts was believed to have increased since scanners have been in use. This was said to be due to scan image ambiguity creating more reason for suspicion relative to other methods of contraband searching.

According to officers, despite clinical assessment often revealing no contraband, the increased use of dry cells and escorts is beneficial as it fulfils a duty of care. They reported that dry cells may also be used as a precaution for inmates at reception who refuse scanning. Further, it was explained that an inmate consuming concealed drugs while in a dry cell still has the net benefit of preventing its distribution throughout the centre, and sometimes even the threat of being placed in a dry cell makes an inmate surrender contraband. On occasion, medical issues are also identified incidentally.

Comments from inmates, however, indicated dissatisfaction at the increased use of dry cells and escorts. Being placed in a dry cell was described as *“horrific” (female inmate)*, according to the description of such an experience offered by an inmate:

“They don’t let you shower at this period of time. You’re not allowed to use the toilet. You go into a cell, no toilet, mattress on the bed, that is it. Light on, all night. And then if you want to go to the toilet, you have to buzzer. You have a shit in front of the officer. The officer will go through your shit in front of you.” – female inmate

It was also explained that suspect inmates, such as those with a history of carrying contraband or who exhibit suspicious behaviour, are usually strip searched following a scan and subject to additional scanning at random. Inmates employed to work as groundskeepers or in areas such as reception may also be subject to additional routine scanning because of their proximity to contraband. Several inmates noted that, while some officers treat inmates fairly and respectfully irrespective of the search method, other officers were perceived to abuse the convenience of scanning and subject inmates to frequent additional contraband searches. For this reason, these inmates spoke of strip searching as preferable in certain instances because its outcome is irrefutable.

“They use the scanner as an authority thing. ... They’ll just find any reason to chuck you through the scanner. ... It’s the mental part of being told you have something when you don’t. ... Sometimes I would rather just want to get a strip search over and done with to prove to them, look, there’s nothing. Just stop violating me.” – female inmate

False negatives

Regarding safety and security, the introduction of scanners was said to have helped prevent items such as syringes and weapons being carried into prison. In terms of detecting drugs, however, multiple officers and inmates were of the opinion that scanning is no more effective than strip searching, albeit more pleasant. Although it was reported by some officers that contraband finds from scanning have reduced since the

introduction of scanners, many officers and inmates linked the phenomenon not to a deterrent effect of the scanners but to inmates—and visitors—learning to evade detection.

“I don’t believe that they’ve really done anything to deter at all. The girls looked at it like a new toy. Let’s practice, let’s do this. Let’s see if we can get away with this, or the boys said we can do this. ... They’re [officers] looking for certain things in certain places ... sometimes they’ll let girls go through and they’re loaded.” – female inmate

As explained, through trial and error and sharing tips with each other, inmates learn which locations of concealment are less obvious. Comments from inmates and officers also suggested that, depending on their thoroughness in checking scan images and performing manual inspections as needed, some officers are more susceptible to missing concealed contraband.

“Inmates were figuring that if they hid it in their socks or their shoes, the officers wouldn’t be looking there. ... It just depends on the staff who are running the scans as well. ... The inmates definitely have learnt what certain officers do and don’t look for on the scans.” – female officer

“The majority, we look into the pelvis part. We don’t look anywhere else ... look in mouth and pelvis. Where else can you put anything in your body?” – male officer

It was also reported that children and infants brought to prison for visits have been known to be used to carry contraband (e.g., in nappies), but officers’ and inmates’ comments suggested that the scanning of this age group is inconsistent. Several challenges associated with scanning children and infants were mentioned, including the need for infants to be held by an adult in the scanner; some children struggling to follow instructions to stay still; and certain visitors becoming indignant at the requirement for children and infants to be scanned.

Extending on these points, both officers and inmates remarked that even if scanners were foolproof, drugs are still plentiful in prisons as inmates continually employ creative methods to deliver contraband, with drones and tennis balls over the fence among them:

“Inmates aren’t stupid. You block one avenue, they’ll find another.” – male officer

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” – male inmate

Other Concerns

Beyond the major concern of image ambiguity, several other issues and commonly encountered operational challenges associated with using scanners were raised. Almost every officer and inmate described the palm identification mechanism on scanners as unreliable and reported that it is no longer used. Officers added that machine malfunctioning occasionally requires service from a technician which entails reverting to strip searches and the use of metal detectors.

Other inefficiencies mentioned were the need to re-enrol an inmate on each separate scanner because the machines are not linked on a central system, and the need for multi-step incident reporting because scanners are not connected to CSNSW’s Offender Integrated Management System (OIMS).

Officers also highlighted that scanners are inaccessible for people with mobility difficulty as the steps and conveyor belt on some models present a fall hazard.⁴ This was said to often necessitate strip searching inmates and using metal detectors on visitors in lieu of scanning.

Concerns about the safety of radiation exposure associated with scanning were also repeatedly mentioned by both officers and inmates. While most inmates and visitors were said to be reassured by verbal or written explanations of safety offered to them, several officers and inmates felt that it would be helpful to have more specific information on the health implications of scanning, such as its compatibility with various medical implants and its long term effects.

“They just say it’s such a weak amount of radiation that it’s not going to do any damage. But then they’ve said that about a lot of things, right? ... Being scanned as much as we are ... if you get a bunch of inmates that are sterile in five years then you’ll know why.” – male inmate

Training, Practice and Vigilance

Officers made various comments on the importance of continuous efforts towards the prevention of contraband in prison. It was highlighted that a reduction in any type of contraband has both direct impacts (e.g., preventing drug overdose) and secondary benefits, such as reducing the incidence of contraband-related standovers, coercion, and assaults among inmates.

With regards to the use of scanners, officers felt that training and practice are key to interpreting scan images with accuracy. However, except through on-the-job experience, opportunities for practice were said to be lacking both at initial training and on a continued, regular basis. It was explained that sharing expertise among teams and centres is helpful but ongoing formal training should be provided to officers as some who operate scanners are not only inexperienced but averse to advice from more experienced colleagues. There were also inmates who voiced their perception that officers are under-trained on the use of scanners to effectively detect contraband.

Another concern raised by officers was that scanners at some other NSW correctional centres are not in use because of scepticism towards the new method of contraband searching. It was also mentioned that there are occasions when no trained officer is available to operate a scanner. The suggestion was made for training on the use of scanners to be part of routine officer training and encompass all models of scanners. One officer further highlighted that a clinical opinion, though informed by medical training, can still be erroneous if not combined with custodial expertise.

“We’re not medically trained, but also the hospital aren’t looking for the same things that we’re looking for. ... [They don’t have] the securities perspective. ... We still tend to put them in a dry cell for 24 hours, which has in the past resulted in the inmate handing something over. So, the hospital has been wrong.” – female officer

Officers’ comments indicated that the prevention of contraband in prison should enlist multiple forms of vigilance. For example, officers suggested that although inmate reception now involves scanning instead of a full strip search, it should continue to include inspection of clothing for contraband when inmates unclothe from civilian wear and reclothe in prison greens. Officers explained that supplementing scanning with inspection of clothing and strip searching where suspicion is warranted is important, as is security intelligence and attention to suspicious behaviour during scan procedures and in the visits room. Such

⁴ CSNSW uses two models of scanners: Tek84 and Nuctech, which has a conveyor belt.

observation of behaviour can inform the need for responsive action, such as intervening an exchange of contraband or arranging a non-contact box visit if appropriate.

“Body scanners don’t negate the need for strip searches. ... If it’s in the clothing, they’re going to have to reveal at some point during a strip search, so it’s helpful to do a strip search as well to confirm what we’ve seen on the body scan. ... They work in conjunction with each other.” – female officer

“You need to keep an eye on them. ... If there’s a drug trade in the middle of the room ... you still need a human’s interaction to stop it happening. ... It’s up to the officers to be vigilant.” – female officer

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides findings from the qualitative component of a two-stage review of full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres. The aim of the study was to gain insight into staff and inmate perspectives on the use of scanners since becoming fully operational across all medium and maximum security centres in NSW.

Our findings suggest that the use of scanners has improved contraband searching in terms of operational ease and efficiency, and inmate dignity. In particular, staff and inmate perspectives consistently indicated the benefit of scanners in reducing the need for strip searches. This was most noticeable during social visits where the previous need to strip search inmates has been largely replaced with the use of scanners before and after each visit. Quantitative evidence from the first stage of the review also identified most scans occur in the course of social visits (Barkworth et al., 2024). The increased use of scanners in place of strip searches is perceived as enhancing both safety and security, and decency and respect for inmates, as contraband searching no longer entails the agitation and embarrassment previously associated with the process. However, findings also show that, like strip searching, scanning can be fallible.

Unlike traditional methods of contraband searching (i.e., with metal detectors and strip searches), scanners can identify internally secreted contraband as well as non-metallic items. To better leverage this in practice, our findings give clear indication of the need for training to be provided to staff in a more comprehensive and ongoing manner, with a focus on scan image interpretation. The importance of training for effective scanner use has similarly been evidenced by research in other jurisdictions (Bell & Leese, 2020). It is also apparent from our results that the operational context of scanners impacts on its precision of use. Namely, the need for speed when scanning groups of inmates so as to reduce agitation and avoid shortened visits, and the need for time to carefully check scanned images, are competing priorities. It is possible that findings for limited effects of scanners on trends in detection of contraband and internal secretions (see Barkworth et al., 2024) may partly reflect these and other challenges in implementing such technology in operational settings.

A key finding from our study was that the introduction of scanners has contributed towards decency and respect for inmates as intended. It is unsurprising that scanning is favoured as an alternative to strip searching inmates which is known to “erode bodily autonomy, perpetuate power imbalances and contribute to a punitive atmosphere” (QHRC, 2023, p. 4). However, while existing literature states that the use of scanners avoids triggering shame and past trauma (QHRC, 2023), our findings demonstrate that issues of decency and respect are multifaceted. In particular, there were inmates in this study who framed their experience of being repeatedly scanned at random as violating in a psychological sense. This echoes lived

experience literature that spotlights violence in prison as taking both physical and mental forms which inflict psycho-emotional damage (Carey, 2022). Minimising the sense of violation associated with the use of scanners is not straightforward, as it can be argued that targeted scanning of inmates suspected of carrying contraband is necessary vigilance. This highlights a tension between priorities to maximise decency and respect while also maximising safety and security. Our findings suggest that mitigating tensions associated with the use of scanners in a way that optimises each of these priorities could potentially be achieved through continuous development of best practice in search policy, scan accuracy, and training opportunities for staff.

Limitations of the present study should be considered. Given the focus on contraband activity, complete truthful disclosure from inmates may be less likely when interviews are conducted by CSNSW staff members under obligation to report uncharged offences. The sample size, while robust for the purposes of the study, does not allow further analysis of divergent trends across sub-groups and attribution of findings to specific characteristics (e.g., gender). Sampling was also conducted in metropolitan correctional centres only. Nonetheless, we achieved variation in the sample composition inclusive of male and female inmates and staff from an assortment of units within each centre.

This study offers affirming qualitative evidence for the use of full body x-ray scanners at NSW correctional centres. Of note, there is suggestion that building capacity for the accurate interpretation of scan images, and judicious use of scanners, would be beneficial. Insights from this study should be combined with quantitative evidence on the use of the scanners (see Barkworth et al., 2024) to inform continuous improvement in contraband searching practices at NSW correctional centres.

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Corrections Research Evaluation & Statistics
Corrective Services NSW
GPO Box 31
Sydney NSW Australia

Telephone: (02) 8346 1556
Email: research.enquiries@dcj.nsw.gov.au