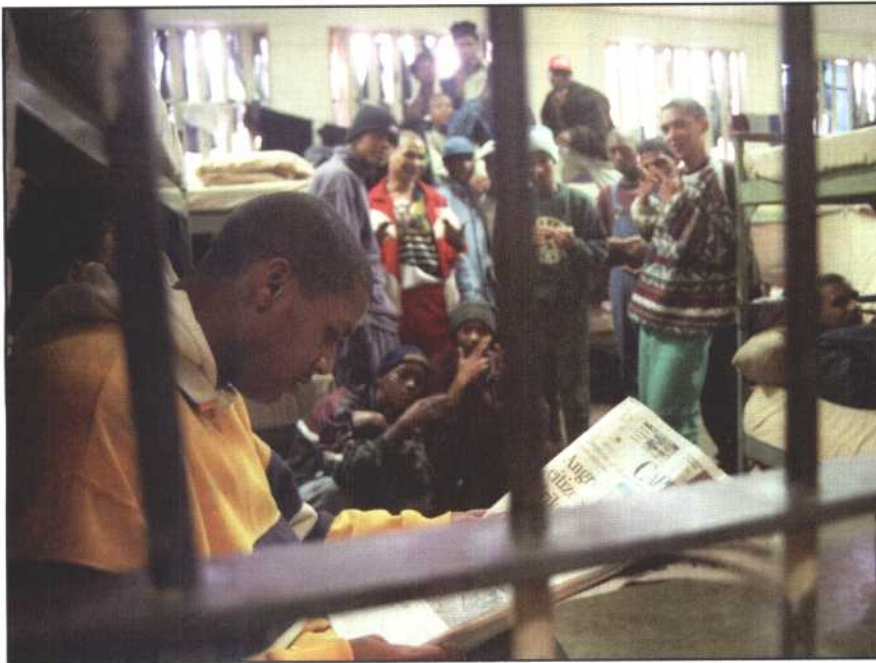




## PRISONS BAULK AT AIDS RESEARCH FINDINGS



*A Pollsmoor Prison cell in Tokai, Cape Town.*

The Department of Correctional Services (DCS), bruised by media exposures of corruption, overcrowding and claims that nearly half the inmates are HIV-positive, has allegedly clamped down on a pioneering HIV/AIDS researcher.

The department insisted that KC Goyer, a research consultant for the Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division (HEARD) at the University of Natal, sign a contract agreeing not to release her results without prior DCS approval.

Goyer said she was suddenly unable to access other prisons after Prisons Commissioner, Linda Mti, confronted the inspecting judge of prisons, Judge Hannes Fagan, over his stated estimate that 60% of prisoners were HIV-positive.

Goyer, a respected researcher who also consulted for the Crime and Justice Programme at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria, completed a comprehensive study at the Westville Medium Security B, the largest prison in

KwaZulu-Natal. Results from her anonymous, unlinked, voluntary HIV testing of 274 prisoners were presented at a DCS research workshop last year.

***65% of inmates participate in homosexual activity and 80% of these are raped.***

She had projected that HIV prevalence among South Africa's total prison population was currently 41% and would rise to 45% in 2004. She described these figures as 'conservative'.

Fagan quoted from Goyer's research at the meeting when he mentioned that 45% of new male arrivals aged between 20 and 25 years, were found to be HIV-positive. He also quoted her at a subsequent parliamentary portfolio committee hearing and added that, from his inspections of more densely overcrowded prisons, he believed the overall prison HIV prevalence could be

as high as 60%.

Given the high-risk behaviour of criminals before arrest, the high-risk profile of their demographic sector and the high risk of transmission inside prison, most researchers agree that HIV prevalence in prisons is at least twice that among the same age and gender group in the general population.

Fagan's own inspectorate conducted a study of postmortems on non-violent deaths in SA prisons in 1999 and found that 90% were from AIDS-related causes.

The judge's statement led to media reports calculating that up to 6 000 HIV-positive people were being released into society every month.

An angry Mti called a press conference in which he described the DCS relationship with Fagan as having 'reached a low point' and said the judge had 'made a guesstimate, which was not intended to be taken as a scientific fact'. Fagan then wrote an apology to the portfolio committee, admitting that his 60% prevalence estimate 'was a thumbsuck'.

Ten months ago, Mti sent a fax to Goyer denying her request for permission to release her report, saying this could not happen until seven 'concerns' had been addressed.

Goyer said she and her fellow researchers quickly responded in detail to all seven concerns and had clarified several further DCS queries by mid-February this year.

At the time of going to press, permission to release the report had not yet been granted. Goyer's request to present the findings to the parliamentary prisons portfolio committee was 'flatly refused'.

DCS Communications Director, Russell Jacobs denied that Goyer or HEARD were prevented from doing further research and said that if either wanted to do more they should 'submit





another application'.

He said Goyer was not refused permission to publish her study but 'asked to correct some areas of her research report which were found to be misleading'.

Jacobs was reported at the time as telling journalists that there had 'never been' an HIV prevalence survey conducted in prisons.

The DCS however admitted that its own official estimate of 3% HIV prevalence in South African prisons is 'unrealistically low'. This was based on prisoners who tested positive after

***Goyer 'conservatively' estimated current national prison HIV prevalence to be 41%, which would rise to 45% in 2004.***

voluntary counselling and testing.

A few weeks after the ruckus over Goyer's report, SABC TV's 'Special Assignment' aired the now well-known secret camera expose of corruption at Grootvlei prison in Bloemfontein.

Goyer said that within a week Mti declared a three-month moratorium on all prison research.

She acknowledges that the DCS has recently adopted a far more progressive HIV/AIDS prison policy in line with WHO standards, but says implementation is proving to be a nightmare.

She claims that condom distribution, the result of a hard-fought battle by Lawyers for Human Rights and the SA African Prisoners Organisation for Human Rights, is failing because of poor design and implementation.

While prison policy says condoms must be provided to prisoners 'on the same basis as in the community', it adds that 'a prisoner may not receive condoms before having undergone education/counselling regarding AIDS, the use of condoms, and the dangers of high-risk behaviour'. Counselling must

be recorded on the prisoners' medical file.

Of the 274 Westville prisoners Goyer interviewed, only one reported requesting a condom, and three-quarters of the others said they had never used one before being jailed.

Goyer said the DCS had recently mounted free condom vending machines in some prisons, but not in discreet enough areas for prisoners to avoid the stigma of being seen taking a condom.

Another flaw was that the Health Department condoms were not strong enough to resist anal intercourse - a defining feature of prison life. Goyer said her pleas for widespread distribution of water-based gel to reduce membrane tearing, went unheeded.

Lawyers for Human Rights estimate that 65% of inmates in South African prisons participate in homosexual activity. About 80% of these are raped.



K C Goyer.

Goyer said that while each province now had a Provincial HIV/AIDS Co-ordinator (PHC), such a nurse was expected to co-ordinate all HIV/AIDS programmes in the entire province in addition to their regular duties as a prison staff member.

She said PHC staff in each province operated in 'near isolation,' without the

benefit of sharing experiences and information with their counterparts. 'There doesn't even appear to be a phone list distributed.'

'Prevention of HIV in prison has more to do with improving prison conditions in general than specifically addressing HIV,' Goyer concluded. 'Overcrowding, corruption and gangs are the primary culprits behind rape, assault and violence.'

There are currently 182 000 people incarcerated in South African prisons, more than 40% of whom are serving less than one year, with only 2% serving life sentences.

From her research, Goyer said she learned that 'not a single constitutional right' of South African prisoners was being respected. This included living in conditions consistent with human dignity, ability to exercise, adequate accommodation, nutrition, reading material and medical treatment.

At Westville Medium B, she found that communal cells intended for 18 were crammed with an average of 50 prisoners who spend 18 hours each day in close proximity, with no ventilation or air circulation. Simple items such as blankets or shoes were exchanged for sexual acts.

Goyer estimated that 25 000 people are released from South Africa's jails each month, which translates to 300 000 former prisoners returning to the community each year, bringing infections and disease with them.

DCS Minister Ben Skosana recently announced a low-cost prison expansion strategy. He promised 30 000 extra beds in 'new generation' prisons for medium- and low-risk prisoners, strategically placed near the most overcrowded prisons.

Other proposed strategies included an integrated project for prisoners awaiting trial that is designed to slash detention times, and opening 99 courts countrywide on Saturdays.

Chris Bateman