



# **Towards Safer and more Congruent Prison Environments for Male Aboriginal Prisoners**

*A South Australian Study*

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# Abstract

This thesis presents the first empirical study into the accommodation needs of Australian Aboriginal prisoners in prison custody. The over-representation of Aboriginal people in the Australian prison system is increasing and the continuing deaths of Aboriginal peoples in prison custody by suicide are an important national issue. Previous prison studies have not addressed all of the issues surrounding this problem. Although the varying and differing accommodation needs of Aboriginal prisoners have been recognised since the 1800s, there is a limited understanding of the relationship between the prison environment and the rates of suicide among Aboriginal prisoners. The aim of the thesis is to investigate the issues and present findings which may contribute to the creation of prison environments which reduce stress levels, and may in turn decrease rates of suicide among Aboriginal prisoners.

The research investigates the prison environment for the Aboriginal prisoner from a people-environments approach, locates the act of suicide among a series of behaviours which may occur in response to an environment incongruent with the needs of users. These responses are influenced by a complex of personal, environmental and institutional factors.

Data for the research was gathered by studying five South Australian prisons and conducting a series of interviews with 55 male Aboriginal prisoners incarcerated within them. The prisons were documented using observations, interviews with staff and prisoners, photographic surveys and environmental walkthroughs. Both the accommodation standards, and the responsibility to provide those standards by the Department for Correctional Services (South Australia), are examined. The needs and preferences of the subject group were investigated using a three-stage interview process which included gathering personal and incarceration profiles, a forced choice experiment employing photographic sets and a number of drawing exercises to elicit design preferences.

The results present a picture of the Aboriginal prison population in South Australia and their design needs. It shows that there are commonalities among the Aboriginal prisoner population in that they are relatively young, have relatively large numbers of children and are dependent on other family members for stability outside the prison environment. Aboriginal people display non-complaint and resistance behaviours and are consequently segregated at an alarming rate in South Australian prisons.

The research identifies that prison environments in South Australia are often incongruent with the needs of Aboriginal prisoners. The thesis presents the argument for prison environments to move from being designed within philosophies of segregation and separation to recognising the importance of Aboriginal domiciliary practices, lifestyles structured around the social group and the need to maintain connections to country for all Aboriginal prisoners. The need for prison environments to take into account the identity and spirituality of Aboriginal prisoners is highlighted. The thesis yields further understandings on the design of prison environments for Aboriginal prisoners and will stimulate debate on incarcerating Aboriginal people in a Western tradition.