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Correctional Officer Health and Safety

Some State and County Correctional Facilities Could Better Protect Their Officers From the Health Risks of Certain Inmate Attacks

Background

California’s correctional facilities—state prisons and county jails—confined nearly 200,000 individuals in 2018. Officers who work in these facilities face threats to their health and safety, including an assault known as a *gassing attack*—when an inmate throws bodily fluid on them. These attacks are considered a type of aggravated battery and facilities have a number of responsibilities to carry out following such an incident. We reviewed how the health and safety of correctional staff who are subject to gassing attacks are protected at three correctional facilities.

Key Recommendations

To ensure the health and safety of its employees, the correctional facilities should do the following:

- Notify victims of their right to request that the inmates be tested for a communicable disease and that medical and counseling services are available following a gassing attack, and document such notifications.
- Ensure investigations are conducted in a timely manner by setting goals for how long investigations should take and consistently collect sufficient physical evidence of the crime.
- Impose internal discipline on inmates to deter future gassing attacks and consistently track gassing attacks to identify best practices for preventing future attacks.

Key Findings

- The three correctional facilities’ procedures following gassing attacks do not adequately ensure victims receive proper care.
 - » One facility’s procedures did not effectively ensure that victims were immediately informed of all available aftercare services.
 - » None of the three facilities properly informed victims that they could request inmates involved in gassing attacks be tested for a communicable disease. In fact, two facilities knew that inmates had a communicable disease yet did not inform some officers who had been exposed.
 - » None of the facilities consistently documented that they informed victims of available counseling services.
- Only 31 percent of gassing attacks at the three correctional facilities from 2015 through 2017 resulted in inmate convictions, in part, because the facilities did not consistently investigate gassing attacks in a thorough and timely manner.
 - » Of the 45 cases we reviewed at the three facilities, district attorneys declined to prosecute four because the facilities did not collect sufficient evidence of the crime.
 - » Two facilities unnecessarily extended their investigations and took an average of seven and three months before they referred cases for prosecution, while the other facility did not refer four of the 15 cases we reviewed.
- Two facilities often did not impose discipline on inmates involved in gassing attacks, such as reducing privileges or placing them in secured housing, and did not track gassing attacks to identify high-risk situations and deter repeat offenders.

Two Correctional Facilities Took an Unreasonable Amount of Time to Complete Their Internal Investigations of Gassing Attacks

