

# Riverbank

1960 – 1996

**Other Names:**

- Riverbank Reformatory
- Riverbank Secure Treatment Centre for Boys
- Riverbank Maximum Security Centre

## Details

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Riverbank, in Caversham, was established in 1960 by the Child Welfare Department as a secure detention facility with a work-skills focus for up to 33 teenage boys. By 1970, 43 boys could be accommodated and by 1979 over 1,000 boys had been admitted to Riverbank for an average of nine months. After discharge, boys were placed in supervised after-care (similar to parole). In 1993, Riverbank was transferred to the Ministry of Justice. Riverbank closed in 1996 and was re-commissioned as an adult prison in 1998.

Riverbank was opened in 1960 by the Child Welfare Department (CWD). It had been some years in the planning, and was described in the CWD's annual report (1958, in *Signposts* 2004, p.436) to be Australia's first purpose-built maximum security reformatory for boys. Riverbank was to address the two tensions in youth offending: the welfare needs of young offenders, and their offending behaviours. The CWD aimed to have a 'reformatory' effect on the boys committed to Riverbank and staff and programs were chosen with care. Unusually for Western Australia at that time, officers received training before being placed to work at Riverbank. There was a significant emphasis on work-skills training for boys at Riverbank and the CWD's annual reports throughout the 1960s list the contributions made to other institutions in the State by the work of the boys at Riverbank. By the mid-1970s, Riverbank had an on-site factory and made a range of goods for various charities. School-age boys at Riverbank had lessons supervised by an Education Department teacher. Riverbank's first computer-aided learning system was introduced in 1986.

The CWD reported in 1968 (*Signposts*, p.439) that programs at Riverbank also sought to 'teach more socially acceptable behaviour' and commented on the 'paradoxical situation' of trying to do this while the boys were living in an isolated institution. A series of events that brought community members in for dances, sports, and social evenings was arranged. Socially-acceptable recreation options (such as weightlifting, photography, stamp collecting and badminton) were also introduced.

From at least 1962, possibly earlier, all boys committed to Riverbank were wards of the State.

In addition to the institutional program an 'after-care' program had been part of the Riverbank model since its inception. From 1960, boys could be placed on 'trial-leave', and by the mid-1960s the number of boys having 'after-care supervision' was reported annually. Boys were under after-care supervision until their wardship expired, which could be up to four years. They could be returned to Riverbank at any time during that period if they were deemed to be seriously uncooperative with their after-care officer.

Three hostels were used as annexes for Riverbank: 'Fourteen' in Aberdeen Street, Perth (from around 1970 to 1979); McDonald House (from 1983 to around 1985); and the Victoria Park Annexe (from 1980 until 1996).

In 1971, the CWD reported (*Signposts*, p.439) that a 'pre-release living quarters' had opened outside the gates of Riverbank and in that year the increasing number of admissions was said to be having a detrimental impact on

authorities' ability to deliver rehabilitative programs.

Admissions to Riverbank had grown sharply (*Signposts*, pp.438-444). From 1961-1968, annual admissions had increased only from 61 to 67, with a capacity for 33 boys at any one time. In 1969, there were 90 admissions and in 1970, 123. Additional accommodation was added, bringing the capacity to 43 beds and admissions continued to grow: 173 admissions in 1971, 318 in 1974, and fluctuating from 200-300 until 1986, when annual admissions dropped to 153. These figures refer to numbers of admissions, not the number of boys admitted. Sentences could range from eight days to around one year but could be longer. There were five boys on indefinite sentences in 1980, rising to 11 in 1981, 16 in 1986 and three boys in 1988.

In the early 1980s, Riverbank reported (*Signposts*, pp.443-444) the number of boys who were re-admitted. These figures show that a majority of admissions were re-admissions and that those boys who were re-admitted were sent back to Riverbank twice in any given year.

The CWD reported (*Signposts*, pp.439-443) that Riverbank was admitting 'more boys, younger boys and boys with a greater number of offences' than previously and in 1973 described some boys as 'more damaged' than others. The reports from the 1970s indicate authorities' belief that Riverbank should, as far as possible, mimic the wider society with internal work, education, and social systems. Female officers were introduced in 1973, Aboriginal group workers in 1974, and the factory was a full-time job for boys by 1976. Social events continued with camps and outdoor release for work and education. There was also an economic system of 'points'. The points system had three elements: earning points, spending points and being fined points for misbehaviour. However, Riverbank was first and foremost a maximum security detention centre and boys regularly tried to, and did, escape – causing the perimeter security to be tightened in 1973 so that officers could spend more time on program delivery (the inference being that they had previously had to spend a lot of time looking for boys who were absent from those programs). By 1980, seventy percent of admissions were subject to court-ordered maximum security detention, which curtailed Riverbank's discretion to provide boys with off-site activities.

Between 1975 and 1976, the number of Aboriginal boys admitted to Riverbank grew from 14.5% to over 50% and by 1977, authorities were reporting (*Signposts*, p.440) their concern that many of these young people were being re-admitted.

As in other youth detention facilities in WA, boys who were sent to Riverbank often had a range of complex issues to deal with. By 1975, reports show that boys with alcohol-related offending were routinely admitted and in the 1980s disruptive and violent behaviours were being reported. There were four suicide attempts by young people at Riverbank in the 1992-1993 year.

On 1 July 1993, the responsibility for Riverbank was transferred from the Department for Community Development to the Ministry of Justice. In 1995, there were sufficient beds for 34 boys. Riverbank was closed in 1996 and was re-commissioned as an adult prison in 1998.

In 2001, the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS) inspected Riverbank, which was then an adult prison. The report gives some insight into the conditions that boys would have experienced at Riverbank, which had held young people only five years earlier. The OICS reported (p.11) that there 'unresolved issues relating to the presence of asbestos in the fabric of the main buildings' at the time of de-commissioning but when it was re-commissioned, Riverbank only underwent limited upgrading and refurbishment. Although the cells had been refurbished (p.12), the structure hadn't really changed. The 2001 inspection (p.19) found the cells were smaller than contemporary international standards specified, the windows did not open, were high and small and the opaque glass and security grills prevented anyone looking out. There was an airconditioning system that had been installed in the 1980s, but it recycled air through corridors, cells and toilets, and did not freshen or cool the facility uniformly. The education centre, which the report said (p.26), was largely unchanged from when it was a youth detention facility was described (p.20) as having a 'depressing, bunker-like feel to it'.

After its re-commissioning as an adult prison in 1998, Riverbank was reported (OICS 2001, p.12) to house 'a relatively high proportion of intellectually disabled prisoners'.

# Gallery

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## Riverbank, workshop

**Description:** 'Riverbank, workshop' is a digital copy of an image included (p.58) in the *Annual Report 1975* of the Department for Community Welfare. The caption reads, 'Riverbank attempts to replicate the outside community with such facilities as factory workshops and "Token" economy system'.

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## Riverbank, trailbike

**Description:** 'Riverbank, trailbike' is a digital copy of an image included (p.57) in the *Annual Report 1975* of the Department for Community Welfare.

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## Riverbank, woodwork

**Description:** 'Riverbank, woodwork' is a digital copy of an image included (p.41) in the *Annual Report 1987* of the Department for Community Services. The caption reads, 'Youths at Riverbank have a chance to learn woodwork skills'.

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## Riverbank, computers

**Description:** 'Riverbank, computers' is a digital copy of an image included (p.44) the *Annual Report 1986* of the Department for Community Services. The caption reads, 'Computers are proving to be a useful and popular teaching aid at Riverbank'.

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## Workshop activities at Riverbank

**Description:** 'Workshop activities at Riverbank' is a digital copy of an image included (p.41) the *Annual Report 1986* of the Department for Community Services.

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## Riverbank

**Description:** This is a photograph of Riverbank, showing the front of the buildings behind a security fence. The photograph was taken by former resident Frankie Panaia, and published on his webpage 'State Wards Perth Australia'. 'State wards Perth Australia' was a collection of images compiled by Frankie Panaia. The collection included historic images from official sources such as annual reports, photographs of facilities taken by Frankie from 2003, and some newspaper articles. The webpage is no longer in operation.

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# More info

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# Chronology

- **Riverbank (1960 – 1996)**
  - Banksia Hill Detention Centre (1997 - current)

## Related Entries

### Run by

- [Ministry of Justice, State of Western Australia \(1993 - 2001\)](#)
- [Department for Community Development, State of Western Australia \(1 October 1992 - 1 July 1995\)](#)
- [Department for Community Welfare, State of Western Australia \(1972 - 1985\)](#)
- [Department for Community Services, State of Western Australia \(1 January 1985 - 1 October 1992\)](#)

### Related Organisations

- [Fourteen \(1968 - 1979\)](#)

Fourteen was used as a hostel for boys on 'trial leave' from Riverbank from at least 1970.  
Date: 1970? - 1979
- [McDonald House \(1952 - 1985?\)](#)

McDonald House was an annexe of Riverbank.  
Date: 1983 - 1985?
- [Anglican Farm School, Stoneville \(1955 - 1961\)](#)

Boys who ran away from the Anglican Farm School, Stoneville on a regular basis were often sent to Riverbank as it was a more secure detention centre.
- [Hillston, Anglican Farm School, Stoneville \(1962 - 1969\)](#)

Boys who ran away from the Hillston, Anglican Farm School, Stoneville on a regular basis were often sent to Riverbank as it was a more secure detention centre.
- [Victoria Park \(Riverbank\) Annexe \(1980 - 1984?\)](#)

The Victoria Park (Riverbank) Annexe provided supervised hostel accommodation and after-care support services for boys released from Riverbank.  
Date: 1980 - 1984?
- [Watson Lodge \(1967 - 1984\)](#)

Boys from Riverbank renovated the house that became Watson Lodge.  
Date: 1967 -

## Resources

- Atkinson, Lynn, [An overview of juvenile detention in Australia](#), National Conference on Juvenile Detention: Proceedings of a conference held 10-13 August 1993, 1994
- Western Australia. Department for Community Welfare, [Annual Report: Department for Community Welfare](#), 1973 - 1984
- Department for Community Development, State of Western Australia, [Submission No 55 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), July 2003
- Department of Justice, State of Western Australia, [Submission No 177 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 24 September 2003
- Hetherington, Penelope, [Reformatories](#), Historical Encyclopedia of Western Australia, 2009

## Records

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For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

### Records

- [Youth Justice Records \(July 1994 - current\)](#)

- [Files - Community Welfare \("A" Series\), State Records Office of Western Australia \(25 August 1908 - 23 December 1990\)](#)
  - [Files - Child Welfare, State Records Office of Western Australia \(1 January 1917 - 16 June 1972\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/riverbank-2/>