

Inmates send jails to blazes

EXCLUSIVE

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PRISON firebugs are using bibles and aluminium foil to set fires in their cells, forcing guards to put out dozens of blazes last year.

Despite a ban on smoking, lighters and matches, prisoners still managed to light 86 fires in jails and police or court cells last year.

A Corrective Services NSW spokeswoman said inmates were treated for "minor smoke inhalation" in most cases.

"Inmates will use any flammable item they have access to — such as paper, toilet paper, linen and clothing — which can be ignited by tampering with electrical items," she said.

"It's highly

dangerous and it's very lucky we haven't had a death so far," Nicole Jess, who chairs the prison officers' branch of the Public Service Association, said. "Staff have had to go to hospital for smoke inhalation."

Ms Jess said prisoners were tearing pages out of bibles and setting them alight by sticking forks and foil into power points.

Some, she said, removed the power plug from TV sets and used the electrical wire in the cable to spark a fire.

Ms Jess said most fires were started so inmates could smoke smuggled tobacco, tea leaves and even banana peel.

"They're not doing it deliberately to light a fire, they're doing it to make a wick so they can light cigarettes or

smoke tea leaves ... they even smoke banana peel," she said. "A pouch of tobacco in jail is worth \$150."

Ms Jess said some prisoners had received electric shocks.

"But they're more likely to start a small fire and they don't have the equipment themselves to put it out," she said.

"They're not just putting their own lives at risk, but the other inmates plus the officers who respond to the risk."

Prisoners started 112 fires in 2015, the year smoking was banned on health grounds.

The Corrective Services spokeswoman said prison guards were given 10 weeks of intensive training to deal with fires "efficiently and safely".

"The deliberate lighting of a fire by inmates is treated very seriously," she said.