



Office of the Inspector of the
Law Enforcement Conduct Commission

**Report under section 242(3) of the
*Law Enforcement (Powers
and Responsibilities) Act 2002*
for the period ending 28 May 2020**

Covert Search Warrants

August 2020

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Legislative Changes

There were no legislative changes during the reporting period.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Sections 46C and 47 of the *Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Act 2002* (the Act) authorise specified persons within the NSW Police Force, the NSW Crime Commission and, since 1 July 2017, the Law Enforcement Conduct Commission to apply to eligible judicial officers of the Supreme Court for “a covert search warrant”. They are known as covert search warrants because the occupier of the property does not need to be told about the search until the time specified in the warrant by the issuing Judge. This will usually be several months after the search.

1.1 Purpose of covert search warrants

It is not intended that covert search warrants are to be used as a routine investigative tool. Covertly entering and searching premises is a significant departure from standard entry and search powers. However, an application may be made to the Supreme Court for a covert search warrant in the investigation of ‘serious offences’ as defined in the Act.

Section 46A (2) of the Act defines a serious offence as:

- (a) any indictable offence punishable by imprisonment for a period of 7 or more years and that involves the following:
 - (i) the supply, manufacture or cultivation of drugs or prohibited plants
 - (ii) the possession, manufacture or sale of firearms within the meaning of the Firearms Act 1996,
 - (iii) money laundering,
 - Note: For example, section 193B of the Crimes Act 1900.
 - (iv) car and boat re-birthing activities,
 - Note: For example, section 154G of the Crimes Act 1900.
 - (v) the unauthorised access to, or modification or impairment of, computer data or electronic communications,
 - (vi) an activity involving theft carried out on an organised basis,
 - (vii) violence causing grievous bodily harm or wounding,
 - (viii) the possession, manufacture or supply of false instruments,
 - (ix) corruption,
 - (x) destruction of property,
 - (xi) homicide,

- (xii) kidnapping,
- (b) any offence under Division 10 (sexual offences against adults and children) of Part 3 of the *Crimes Act 1900* punishable by imprisonment for a period of 7 or more years,
- (c) an offence under section 80D (causing sexual servitude) or 80E (Conduct of business using sexual servitude) of the *Crimes Act 1900*,
- (d) an offence under section 93FA (Possession, supply or making of explosives) of the *Crimes Act 1900*,
- (e) an offence under Division 15 (Child prostitution) or 15A (Child pornography) of Part 3 of the *Crimes Act 1900*,
- (f) an offence under section 308F (Possession of data with intent to commit serious computer offence) or 308G (Producing, supplying or obtaining data with intent to commit serious computer offence) of the *Crimes Act 1900*,
- (g) an offence of attempting to commit, or of conspiracy or incitement to commit, or of aiding or abetting, an offence referred to in paragraphs (a) – (f).

Before granting a covert search warrant, the issuing Judge must also be satisfied that it is necessary for the entry and search to be conducted without the occupier's knowledge.

While the initial searching may be done covertly, eventually the occupier must be given formal notice that it has occurred. The length of time before the occupier's notice must be served is determined by the issuing Judge who may authorise delaying service of the notice for up to six months at a time. In exceptional circumstances the service of the notice may be delayed beyond 18 months, but it must not be delayed beyond three years in any circumstances. Covert search warrants expire 10 days after the date on which they are issued, unless the warrant specifies an earlier expiry date. Warrants may be granted to allow a search for a particular thing or things, or a kind of thing or things.

1.2 Application process

A Judge of the Supreme Court may consent to being nominated by the Attorney General as an 'eligible Judge' under the Act. The Attorney General may then declare those Judges who have consented, to be 'eligible Judges' under the Act. Both the consent and declaration must be made in writing.

An application for a covert search warrant must be made in person to an eligible Judge. The applicant must be a police officer who is duly authorised by a police officer of the rank of Superintendent or above to make such applications. Applicants from the NSW Crime Commission must be the Commissioner or Assistant Commissioner, or a member of staff appropriately authorised by the Commissioner or Assistant Commissioner. Applicants from the LECC must be the Chief Commissioner or Commissioner of Integrity, or a member of staff appropriately authorised by the Chief Commissioner or Commissioner of Integrity.

The application may be made by telephone if the issuing Judge is satisfied that a warrant is required urgently and the application cannot be made in person.

Applications are made using the Form 2 which is prescribed in the *Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Regulation 2016*. The form contains all the relevant information that s 62 of the Act requires to be considered for a covert search warrant application.

The form of the warrants (Form 12) is also prescribed in the Regulation as well as the occupier's notice (Form 22), and adjoining occupier's notice (Form 23). The criteria set out in ss 66, 67 and 67B of the Act in relation to these documents are covered in these forms.

1.3 Reporting requirements

Within 10 days of executing the warrant, or of the warrant expiry date if the warrant is not executed, the executing officer is required under s 74A to provide a report in writing to the issuing Judge. Depending on the type of report, it must comply with either Form 28 or Form 29, both of which are contained in the Regulation.

1.4 Role of the Inspector

Covert searching of premises is a significant departure from usual expectations of the privacy and sanctity of private premises. Covert search warrants give eligible law enforcement agencies, and their officers, authority to enter and search premises without the knowledge of the occupiers, in relation to the investigation of serious offences.

During the reporting period, the staff of the Inspector were required to inspect the records of law enforcement agencies to check on their compliance, and the compliance of their officers, with Part 5 of the Act. This provides rigorous external oversight of the use of these powers. Inspections must take place at least every 12 months. During the reporting period, only the NSW Police Force applied for covert search warrants and as such only those records were inspected for the purpose of this Act.

Pursuant to s 242(3) of the Act the Inspector is required to furnish a report to the Attorney General and the Minister for Police each year. The report relates to law enforcement agency records for the reporting period (29 May 2019 to 28 May 2020). The report details results of inspections together with any other statutory compliance matters of note. For various reasons, it is not possible for all inspections to be conducted during the actual reporting period.

The Attorney is required by s 242(7) of the Act to lay the report, or cause the report to be laid, before both Houses of Parliament as soon as practicable after receiving the report.

1.5 Scope of an inspection

Every covert search warrant file at each agency is inspected. This involves an examination of the application, warrant, occupier's notice, and report to the issuing Judge, and any other information contained on the file. Each inspection involves checking that:

- the applicant is authorised to apply for the covert search warrant (s 46C)
- the application is in the form prescribed by the Regulation and is made in person by the applicant (s 60)
- the application contains the information required by s 62
- the warrant is in the form prescribed by the Regulation (Form 12)
- the warrant fulfils the requirements of s 66, which includes detailed information about the premises, the occupant and their likely involvement in the searchable offence
- the occupier's notice is in the form prescribed by the Regulation (Form 22)
- the occupier's notice contains the particulars specified in s 67(2) to provide the occupier with sufficient information about the warrant

- any occasion of the postponement of service of the occupier's notice does not exceed 6 months, and that postponement is not delayed for more than 3 years in total (s 67A (1) and (2))
- where an occupier's notice is postponed for more than 18 months there are exceptional circumstances provided to the issuing Judge (s 67A (3))
- if adjoining premises are entered in execution of the covert search warrant, that the adjoining occupier's notice is in the form prescribed by the Regulation (Form 23) and contains the information specified, and that it was served on the adjoining occupier at the time the covert search warrant was executed – unless the issuing Judge directs that service of the adjoining occupier's notice may be dispensed with (s 67B)
- the report on execution of the covert search warrant is in the form prescribed by the Regulation (Form 28) and contains the particulars specified in s 74A
- where a covert search warrant authorises the return or retrieval of a thing seized or placed, the report is in the form prescribed by the Regulation (Form 29) and contains the particulars specified in s 74A
- the report was provided within 10 days after the execution of the warrant or the expiry – whichever occurs first – or within 10 days after the entry to the premises for the purpose of retrieving or returning a thing (s 74A)
- copies of any reports provided to the issuing Judge under s 74A are given to the Attorney General.

Records about the execution of covert search warrants and those relating to entry and seizures to ascertain the accuracy of the reports to the issuing Judge are also examined. This also involves follow up on later inspections to confirm that occupier's notices have been served as soon as any period of postponement has expired.

1.6 Inspection details

The NSW Police Force records are located at its Covert Applications Unit (CAU). In respect of the current reporting period records were inspected on 30, 31 May 2019, 27 April 2020 and 4 and 5 June 2020. Further follow-up inspections occurred on 14 and 15 July 2020. The NSW Police Force were cooperative in facilitating the inspections.

The NSW Crime Commission did not make any covert search warrant applications during the reporting period and consequently no inspections were conducted at that agency.

The Law Enforcement Conduct Commission also did not make any covert search warrant applications during the reporting period and consequently no inspections were conducted at that agency either.

Chapter 2. NSW Police Force

The files containing records relating to 48 proposed applications for covert search warrants prepared during the reporting period, being CSW19/015 to CSW20/020, were inspected. 11 proposed applications did not proceed. 37 applications did proceed and warrants were issued in relation to each of them.

Covert Search Warrants Granted - Five Year Comparison

| 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| 34 | 34 | 40 | 34 | 37 |

2.1 Warrants

In relation to the 37 warrants issued, 2 authorised the search and seizure of particular things specified in the warrant, and 33 authorised the seizure of ‘a thing of a kind connected with a searchable offence’ (s 47(3) (a)). The remaining 2 warrants authorised the search and seizure of both particular things and kinds of things. The types of offences investigated in relation to the warrants granted were drug offences, firearms offences, robbery offences, participate in criminal group and proceeds of crime and child exploitation offences.

2.2 Occupier’s notice

The service of the occupier’s notice was postponed for 6 months in relation to 35 of the warrants. A further 2 warrants had the occupier’s notice postponed for a period of 4 months. A warrant issued during the previous inspection period had the occupier’s notice postponed for a further 6 months.

Information relevant to each warrant is held at the CAU but the responsibility for the service of the occupier’s notice lies with the officer responsible for executing each warrant. These officers may be located anywhere across the state. The CAU has developed a register which assists with the preparation of its annual report on the results of these warrants. This register now specifies the time for the service of the occupier’s notice and the date on which the notice was actually served. This register also assists the CAU to monitor the service of the occupier’s notice at locations around the state.

2.3 Reports

During this year, of the 37 warrants that were granted to the NSW Police Force, 29 were executed and 8 were not executed. Of the warrants granted, only 1 report was not provided to the eligible judge within the required 10 day period.

2.4 Exceptions identified at inspection

Inspections revealed that the application forms in support of CSW19/033 and CSW 19/042 contained incorrect information. The explanation provided to inspecting officers by CAU was that these had occurred as a result of human error. The Officers responsible for the errors have been notified by CAU. CAU will continue to furnish assistance to officers in completing these forms and will also provide further training for officers who are responsible for conducting these operations.

2.5 Concluding comments

Apart from the exceptions outlined above, the NSW Police Force was otherwise compliant with Part 5 of the *Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Act 2002* in so far as it related to covert search warrants.

2.6 Recommendations

As the NSW Police Force has taken steps to address the issues raised in relation to the exceptions identified, no recommendations are made.

Chapter 3. NSW Crime Commission

The NSW Crime Commission did not apply for any covert search warrants during the period covered by this report.

Chapter 4. Law Enforcement Conduct Commission

The Law Enforcement Conduct Commission did not apply for any covert search warrants during the period covered by this report.