



28 October 2022

Statement

YOUTH DETENTION NATIONAL SHAME

Subjecting children as young as 10 years of age to criminal legal processes and periods of incarceration in youth detention centres is extremely damaging and has long lasting impacts.

Children who come to the attention of youth justice systems are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our communities. Research indicates these children are increasingly likely to have had adverse childhood experience, which impede their physical, cognitive, emotional and social growth including impacting their ability to form positive relationships, and regulate emotions and behaviours.

Despite a Royal Commission into the Northern Territory's youth justice system 5 years ago which identified mistreatment, abuse, humiliation, and the detrimental impacts of isolation, we continue to hear from children and their families across Australia about the ongoing harm that youth detention causes.

Currently in the NT a child is more likely to be locked up than in any other jurisdiction in Australia. Of great concern, Aboriginal children in the NT are disproportionately incarcerated compared to non-Aboriginal children.

Over the month of September 2022, on average, **Aboriginal children made up 99.3% of the total detention cohort** in Don Dale Youth Detention Centre (DDYDC) and Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre (ASYDC).

The OCC's latest formal monitoring of DDYDC and ASYDC found both centres lacked a therapeutic framework to guide the operations of the centres. Further, staff shortages critically impacted on the centre's capacity to provide young people with access to basic services such as education and medical. These shortages result in frequent lock down of young people in their rooms for extended periods of time.

Significant and detrimental amendments were made to the NT bail reforms enacted in May 2021. At the time the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) advised the reforms would result in more children and young people in detention, in a jurisdiction that already locks up more children than any other in Australia. As a result a **233% increase in the individual number of children detained in the NT** was identified when comparing the month of May 2020 to May 2022.

The OCC stands with the community groups, legal experts, Aboriginal organisations and the Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ACCG) calling on the Federal, state and territory governments to raise the age of criminal responsibility, and resource and implement local-led solutions to keep our communities and children safe and protected.

Quotes attributable to Commissioner Hucks:

It is not in the best interests of our communities or our young people to be locking up higher numbers of children and entrenching them in the criminal justice system.

The tough on crime approach has not resulted in lower rates of offending – we need to continue investing in addressing the causes of crime, and supporting the locally led solutions we know are having a positive effect on the ground.

These alternative programs will hold young people accountable for their actions, while positively impacting their behaviour and building culturally and developmentally appropriate support networks.

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