



JOINT STATEMENT

New Youth Detention Crackdown Not the Answer

Seven months ago today, a coalition of non-government organisations from the Northern Territory and across Australia put out a joint statement, 'Berrimah Prison is not good enough for Territory's most vulnerable kids.'

We warned of the dangers of the Northern Territory Government turning its back on human rights and putting children in a run-down prison that was too run-down to house adult prisoners.

We called for urgent action from the Northern Territory Government to commission a purpose-built youth detention facility for the Top End – something that exists in every other state and territory.

Our calls were ignored.

Instead, the NT Government has moved further from the Australasian Juvenile Justice Administrators (AJJA) Standards that require age-appropriate youth justice services and resources that support safe, secure and positive environments for staff and young people.

They have tightened security but restricted access to basic services. For the young people in maximum security, they have all but removed access to education, counselling and treatment, and structured recreational activities. Maximum security detainees face excessive periods of lockdown and have nothing to do.

For the small number of detainees who have behaved inappropriately, they have been isolated in degrading conditions. Some have been transferred for days at a time to the adult prison.

The latest move by Corrections to place adult prison officers in the youth detention centre raises alarm bells about not detaining children in an age-appropriate way. We believe that it will not address the core problems.

Coercive power – punitive engagement, denial of rights, crackdown methods – is the least effective way to exercise control. Getting the parties to *want* to cooperate is far more effective. Coercive power usually serves mainly to heighten resentment and anger.

The one lesson that should be learnt from the last six months is that punitive and restrictive measures are not working.

These are children who are at risk of severe harm – physically, emotionally and mentally. Surely one must wonder what is occurring in Detention to drive them to such a course that these youth are

willingly scouring razor wire to affect their escape, risking severe injury. One presently hospitalised with 110 stitches.

We hold real and serious concerns for the emotional and mental wellbeing of these children.

What are the custodians doing to ensure that these already vulnerable and damaged children are not further traumatised in Detention?

A new approach is needed, one that respects the basic rights of children in detention, one that balances security needs with rehabilitation.

We renew our call for the Northern Territory Government to urgently commission a purpose-built youth detention facility for the Top End.

In late 2014 in response to the tear gassing of children in detention, the then Children's Commissioner Dr Howard Bath announced an own initiative investigation into youth detention. Dr Bath prefaced that it would be publicly released.

But the NT Government has so far refused to publicly release this report.

We call on the Northern Territory Government to publicly release the previous Children's Commissioner's independent investigation into youth detention.

The public must be given the full story about what is happening in youth detention facilities and why problems continue to arise.

And the Government must commit to listening to the experts before even worse tragedies occur.

We call upon the Northern Territory Government to urgently:

1. establish purpose-built detention facilities in Darwin and Alice Springs for the Northern Territory's most vulnerable children and young people, or, alternatively, upgrade the former Don Dale youth detention centre to an acceptable contemporary standard;
2. publicly release the previous Children's Commissioner's independent investigation into youth detention.
3. Establish an Independent Custodial Inspector (such as exists in Western Australia) who has unfettered access to youth detention centres to ensure national and International standards are being complied with.

Jesuit Social Services
Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Service
North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency
Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NT)
Northern Territory Council of Social Services
Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation
Criminal Lawyers Association of the Northern Territory