

POLICY FUTURES

A Reform Agenda



¹ Royal Commission and Board of Inquiry into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory.

It's Time to Treat Sick Kids, Not Punish Them

According to the 2019 United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, children in detention 'have a markedly higher prevalence of mental disorder than their community peers'.

In the Northern Territory (NT), more than half of children who gave evidence of their experience in youth detention at a Royal Commission¹ had a history of self-harm and/or suicidal ideation. These children are over-represented by First Nations people, and mental health care continues to be inadequate despite the Royal Commission's findings. First Nations children must be provided with greater access to and higher quality mental health care in detention and in their communities, to minimise the harm caused to them and to effectively reduce their risk of criminalisation and re-incarceration.

Overseas practices have proven that involving mental health professionals in court processes helps to recognise the relevant mental health vulnerabilities and trauma needs experienced by young people in a timely manner and allows for appropriate interventions to be put in place. A properly funded state-wide commitment to better assess and treat children with behavioural health challenges with evidence-based programs has also proven to reduce both recidivism and subsequent public expenditure on incarceration.

Clement Ng
2016 Churchill Fellow (NT)

Key Policy Recommendations

1

Pilot a youth mental health diversion list in the Northern Territory to provide children with complex mental needs with effective responses before their untreated mental health problems escalate and it becomes necessary to detain them at an exorbitant cost to taxpayers.

2

Work with Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) to co-design and fund them to deliver holistic community mental health services at the individual, family, and community levels.

Acknowledging that families and communities generally offer the best support for children with mental health problems, First Nations children in the NT and remote parts of Australia should have equal access to quality adolescent mental health services in their communities. This will prevent them from unnecessary criminalisation and further harm caused to their mental health due to being removed from their communities and incarceration.

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Closing the Gap

Recommendations support the following targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

Target 10

Adults are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15 per cent.

Target 11

Young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (10-17 years) in detention by 30 per cent.

Target 14

People enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.



Cost of Incarceration

At present, the NT government spends approximately

\$3,313
per day

OR

\$1.2 million
per year

to incarcerate a young person.

Recommendations could reduce this high level of public expenditure.



Benefits of diversion

Behavioural Health Juvenile Justice program breaks the cycle of incarceration

In Ohio USA, a statewide Behavioural Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) program was established in the late 1990s to better assess and treat children with behavioural health challenges.

OUTCOMES //

Less than 4% of young people who participated in the BHJJ program ended up being committed to state-run detention facilities and those that did showed **reduced rates of recidivism**, according to the latest evaluation.

IMPACTS//

\$196,000 - \$5,170 = \$190,830

Est. cost to detain a child in custody

Cost to participate in BHJJ per child

Potential tax saving per child in BHJJ Program

It is estimated that the net benefit of implementing diversion reform in the NT will be \$5.36 million a year (2027) and the reoffending rate will be reduced from 46.5% to 32%. An additional \$8.2 million benefit is estimated in terms of reduced future crime costs and adult incarceration by 2027 if all the Royal Commission recommended interventions are implemented.
- Deloitte 2017. Northern Territory youth justice models: Fixing a broken system.