

Teens stuck in custody

Bail denied for young people with nowhere to go.



ROUGH JUSTICE: Indigenous youths kept behind bars just for somewhere to stay. Photo: Thinkstock

Some courts are unable to grant Indigenous children bail because authorities are unable to find them a place to stay, a parliamentary inquiry has been told.

The problem was highlighted when police, magistrates and community leaders vented their frustration over the inability of governments to reduce the high number of Indigenous children and teens serving time behind bars.

At a recent roundtable discussion in the Sydney suburb of Redfern, the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee was presented with a litany of complex and overlapping problems from those working at the coalface of the youth justice system.

Committee chair Shayne Neumann (Blair, Qld) said the rates of Indigenous youth in detention were “alarming” and conceded that Australia had gone backwards in its handling of the issue in the past 20 years.

According to witnesses, key factors contributing to the over-representation of Indigenous youths in custody include:

- accommodation shortages resulting in children languishing in detention;
- poor program and service coordination;
- inadequate help for those with drug, alcohol and mental health problems; and
- lack of support for parents dealing with troubled children.

Magistrate Joan Baptie of the Sydney Youth Drug and Alcohol Court told the committee courts are unable to release some young people because authorities have failed to find them somewhere to live.

“That often cannot be resolved and you have government departments that say, ‘that’s fine, just lock them up that will solve the problem of accommodation’,” she said.

“It sure does – but it’s not in this young person’s interest one would have thought because ultimately at some

LATEST

REVIEW TARGETS BARRIERS FACING MENTALLY ILL

Obstacles blocking access to education, training and employment opportunities for those with mental health issues will be the focus of a new parliamentary inquiry.

House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee Chair Amanda Rishworth (Kingston, SA) said the inquiry will also highlight the need to improve collaboration and coordination between government and service providers, as well as strategies to improve community, carer and employer capacity.

“The area of mental health is a particularly big issue for the federal government as is employment participation and education,” Ms Rishworth said.

“So we are bringing these two together to see what the barriers are that stop people with mental illness actually entering into the workforce,

staying in the workforce, and getting an education.

“Mental illness is a wide ranging issue, but we will be looking at everything from the chronic mental health issues, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, to the more prevalent issues such as depression and anxiety.”

The committee’s report and recommendations will aim to complement COAG’s National Action Plan on Mental Health and the Fourth National Mental Health Plan.

“We want to refine these strategies. It will be important for the inquiry to look at best practice and look at where things are going well, where the strategies are working, and where the strategies are not working, and come up with some recommendations for the government,” Ms Rishworth said. ●

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BUILDING A LIFE

When trying to explain to the young kids of Redfern why they don't want to end up in jail, Roy Smith is able to draw on his own experience.

"I've been in trouble with the police a fair bit," he said.

"I try to talk to them about when you're incarcerated, there's nothing for you. You can't get a job and there's no education. There's nothing there."

Like many Indigenous children, Roy's early life was marred with alcohol abuse and violence.

"My father was an alcoholic," he said. "I come from a family out west where you have to be hard. I was hit around a lot as a kid. I've seen my mum get bashed, a lot of confrontation between the families, my uncle and everyone like that."

Roy has been able to turn his life around with the help of Shane Phillips who is the chief executive of the Tribal Warrior Association.

Roy credits Shane with restoring his confidence and pride and for helping him realise life is about giving as well as taking.

Roy now works as a paid mentor along with a team of others at Tribal Warriors to help Indigenous teens in Redfern build a life from a tough childhood instead of turning to crime and substance abuse.

"We're trying to get them to see, even though you come from a place of hardship and breakdown – or somewhere that's not good, somewhere where violence, alcohol could be around them – that they don't have to turn to that path. They can go and be their own individual," he said.

Shane is keen to expand the association's mentor program.

He told the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee at a recent hearing that having positive role models in Indigenous communities is invaluable.

"We've got young blokes like Roy who are responsible, who want to do something with their lives and they've actually made this much stronger than even we imagined," he said. •

stage they're going to be released back into the community and they're going to be angrier and less able to integrate."

Katherine McFarlane of the NSW Corrective Services Women's Advisory Council said the consequences for the children and their communities are far-reaching.

"In one instance I was looking at a file [and] a child had been in custody three weeks on what was an offensive language charge – a no jail offence – they were in jail for three weeks because no one could come up with anything," she said.

"You get this really bizarre situation where the child's being punished because no one can get organised enough to provide a safe environment for them.

"What that does to the child in terms of their belief and trust in the justice system is really questionable."

The committee was also told communities were in a "state of emergency" as witnesses urged immediate action from governments at all levels struggling to deal with the complexities of the problem.

Australian Institute of Criminology figures show Indigenous youths aged 10-17 are 24 times more likely to be jailed as non-Indigenous youths.

They are also 16 times more likely to be under supervision and 29 times more likely to be in detention on an average day as other young people.

Governments were urged to fund more programs to keep children on track from an early age, with the

suggestion that money be diverted away from prisons and into community support.

Queensland Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson said while crime rates were generally going down, more Indigenous people were ending up in jail – a situation he described as "troubling".

He called for a bipartisan approach from all governments to address the issue.

"Without wanting to sound negative in any way I do not think there is a single or simple solution to any of this, or a silver bullet. It's a long-term thing," he said.

Several witnesses highlighted the problems arising from administrative complexities and a lack of coordination between various agencies, which can hamper those making decisions on how best to help a young person caught up in the system.

Sam Jeffries from the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples said those working on the ground need to be given more freedom on where to allocate money.

"There needs to be some untied money for groups, whether it is local governments or state governments, so they have complete flexibility to do things that are outside the normal scope of designing and delivering programs and services," he said.

Several witnesses also stressed the importance of having strong mentors available for young people to help them make better life choices.



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Shane Phillips, chief executive of the Tribal Warrior Association in Redfern, emphasised to the committee how much of a difference mentors can make.

“Generational change is what we need. We are in a state of emergency. We cannot afford any more experiments,” he said.

“It’s really simple. We want to help people. We want people who have got some influence, who are worthy of trying to be a good mentor, help other people engage.”

Roy Smith is now working as a paid mentor for Tribal Warriors after overcoming a difficult childhood marred by alcoholism and violence.

He said he tries to show kids their past does not need to dictate their future.

“I try and bring a bit of pride into them about being an Indigenous person,” he said.

Redfern Police Local Area Command Superintendent Luke Freudenstein works closely with Mr Phillips and other Indigenous community leaders. He told the inquiry he has had considerable success in reducing robbery rates through a number of sports programs run by police with the help of organisations such as Tribal Warriors.

“We’re obviously in t-shirts and shorts and we just box with them, and they see us as people who care for them,” he said.

“We’re not just there to arrest them, or to move them on or search them.”

Shayne Neumann said he hoped the committee would make some strong recommendations in its report to parliament.

“We’re tough on juvenile crime but unfortunately when we do that we have a situation where more and more Indigenous youth and young adults are actually caught up in the system,” he said.

“So we’ve got to be tough on the causes of crime and not just on the crime itself and that’s coming through in the evidence.” •

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GROWING DEMAND: Forestry’s future in the spotlight. Photo: Thinkstock

Forestry review welcomed

Australia’s peak forest industry body has welcomed a parliamentary inquiry into the long term options for the growth of and investment in Australian forestry.

Allan Hansard, CEO of the National Association of Forest Industries, said the inquiry provides an opportunity to refocus the industry.

“Australia’s forest policy framework is nearing the end of its shelf life,” Mr Hansard said.

“NAFI welcomes the terms of reference of the inquiry, including the analysis of the relationship between forestry and water resources and the industry’s ability to integrate with traditional agriculture in the landscape.

“Forests provide the essentials of life including renewable wood and paper products for shelter and other needs. On our current course, Australia will not have enough locally grown wood to meet our future needs. Australia’s growing population will require 7.1 million new dwellings and at least 64 million cubic metres of construction timber by 2050.”

The forestry review is being conducted by the House of Representatives Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry Committee.

Committee chair Dick Adams (Lyons, Tas) said the inquiry will assist in the future viability of the Australian forestry industry in the face of heightened environmental concerns and international competition in woodchips and paper milling.

“The industry is going through major change and Australia needs to change with it,” Mr Adams said.

“We need to ensure that innovation is being identified and supported, that

new ideas are accessible, and that the implications of change to the forestry industry upon communities and the economy are fully considered. We must get this right if we are to maintain an internationally competitive forestry sector.”

The inquiry will explore the social and economic impacts of the forestry industry, as well as current and future opportunities for industry development, diversification and innovation.

There will be a particular focus on models of investment, environmental issues, plantations, energy production, land use and farm forestry.

The committee will also investigate improvements in productivity and possible strategies to address the \$2.2 billion forestry trade deficit.

“Australia imports \$4.5 billion of forest and forest products, which is a big drain on our trade figures. We could improve that a lot,” Mr Adams said.

“The Australian community has a large and growing demand for forest products. We need to ensure that demand is being met in ways that are environmentally and economically sustainable, and beneficial to Australia.”

Education and skill levels will also be considered to ensure they match the employment requirements of the industry.

“I’m very conscious of making sure that we have enough foresters, with the changes to forestry that we do not lose the professional foresters, and that our training and academic levels are maintained,” Mr Adams said. •

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