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MEDIA RELEASE

“I need people to help me”: Australia’s international shame of over-incarcerating Aboriginal children

Australia will come under the United Nation’s microscope for its compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in February next year. [According to a new report](#), Australia is on the path to international embarrassment for its treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Today at National Press Club the Child Rights Taskforce, the peak body for child rights in Australia, released its damning report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The National peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS), as a member of the Child Rights Taskforce, calls on the Commonwealth Government to implement the report’s recommendations.

“The report paints a bleak picture for the world of how Australia treats Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children,” said Cheryl Axleby, co-chair of NATSILS. “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being imprisoned and abused in detention, removed from their families in child protection systems and experiencing self-harm and suicide at unforgivably high rates. But Federal Politicians do not heed their cries for help.”

The report includes the voices of young people from an Australia-wide consultation. A young person at Northern Territory’s Don Dale youth prison told the Taskforce: “I hate it in here. I am not going to come back. I am not, but I need people to help me.” In the Northern Territory, 100% of children in prison are Aboriginal. Nation-wide, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 25 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous children.

“We have solutions ready to implement: national justice targets in Closing the Gap, justice reinvestment, prevention, diversion and family supports from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled organisations,” said Cheryl. “Governments around Australia must immediately raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age.”

The report calls for adequate funding and access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled legal and other support services that relate to children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services.

Sadly, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service’s Balit Ngulu - Australia’s only dedicated Aboriginal youth legal service - had to shut its doors in September due to lack of funding from governments.

“We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the justice system are often caught in child protection systems or experiencing disability or mental health issues. This is why holistic, culturally safe supports are absolutely vital to ending their over-incarceration. The Commonwealth Government needs a National Plan of Action for a whole-of-government approach and this has to start with justice targets.”

END OF RELEASE

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The Australian Child Rights Taskforce is the peak body for child rights in Australia. The membership is made up of advocates, service providers, individuals and experts, speaking with a united voice to promote and realise the rights of Australian children. The Children’s Report is available online [here](#).