

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

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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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