



It's time for transformational change:

A youth development approach to youth detention

Olga Havnen

CEO

Danila Dilba Health Service

“perpetuating a failed system that hardens young people, does not reduce reoffending and fails to rehabilitate young lives and set them on a new course, is a step backwards.”
– Commissioners Mick Gooda and Margaret White.

The Final Report of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of young people in the NT found that the youth detention centres in the NT were “not fit for accommodating, let alone rehabilitating, children and young people.”

Despite this finding and some legislative changes and other commitments by government, one year later, young people are continuing to be detained in conditions that are not safe, culturally appropriate or compliant with international standards. Through our Danila Dilba Youth Social Support Program, which provides youth support at Don Dale, we continue to observe and raise concerns about the physical conditions at Don Dale, in particular the lack of therapeutic support and the deterioration in the mental health of young people in detention.

The United National Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (the Beijing Rules) set the minimum standard for administration of juvenile justice. Australia is a signatory to this agreement. Relevantly the rules state:

Juveniles deprived of their liberty have the right to facilities and services that meet all the requirements of health and human dignity

While I acknowledge that there has been a significant investment by NTG to improve the physical appearance and infrastructure at Don Dale, the facilities are not used in a manner that is conducive to a youth justice model of learning, wellbeing and development. In particular, it is concerning that the facilities at Don Dale continue to be utilised according to a more conventional corrections style of operation (e.g. keeping young people in extended periods of lock down and separation) and operate on the basis of prioritising and managing risk, safety and security rather than meeting the needs of children and young people.

We cannot ignore the facts. The reality is that the majority of young people in detention have special needs that require therapeutic support. A recent study by the Telethon Institute in Western Australia, found that 91% of young people in detention had a neurodevelopmental disorder. A third had Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) but two-thirds were seriously impaired on three domains. The Royal Commission also found that cognitive impairment and FASD is likely to be widespread among young offenders in the NT. In spite of these findings, a year later and there is still no access for comprehensive health and mental health assessments (to identify these kinds of



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risks) upon entry into detention. How can we expect to get the best outcomes for young people, when we won't invest the time and resources into determining their risks and ensuring they have tailored supports in place to manage these risks?

In my opinion, a fundamental shift in philosophy, staffing and management of detention centres is required. In relation to staffing, the Beijing rules state:

“[staff] should be qualified and include a sufficient number of specialists such as educators, vocational instructors, counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists. These and other specialist staff should normally be employed on a permanent basis.”

The Royal Commission heard evidence about different approaches being taken in places such as Canada, Scotland, New Zealand, Spain and the United States, where the focus is on youth development and provision of tailored supports. In some secure youth facilities the premises were relatively new and purpose built, in other examples old former youth detention facilities are now managed by alternate providers (NGOs) delivering high quality therapeutic youth support programs. These alternative approaches to youth justice are achieving significant success in reducing youth offending and recidivism.

I am particularly compelled by the Spanish example. In Spain, youth detention centres are run by NGOs, the largest of these is an NGO called Fundación Diagrama (Diagrama), which runs 70% of youth detention centres in Spain. This model has also now been adopted in France and the United Kingdom because it is proven to work: Diagrama has a recidivism rate of approximately 20%, which is vastly different to the NT where the recidivism rate is close to 80%.

The Key to Diagrama's success is having excellent, committed workers who are able to talk with the children and develop a trusting relationships. Staff are trained to be actively involved in the education and rehabilitation of young people, whether they are teachers, social workers, psychologists, health workers, security officers, caterers, maintenance or administration.

The Diagrama centres provide young people will social emotional wellbeing support, assessment and development. Children receive an average of 30 hours a week of school and are also encouraged to achieve additional qualifications, as well as participating in sports, activities and community service. There is also a strong focus on rewarding good behaviours with earned privileges and responsibilities. Staff are highly qualified (educators, social workers, psychologists and teachers), but the service costs are significantly lower than our centres in the NT because staffing ratios are much lower.

Central to Diagrama model, as well as other international examples that have been proven to work (the Missouri Model in the United States, and New Zealand 'residences'), is the recognition that we get the best outcomes for young people when their families are meaningfully involved in their rehabilitation.

International best practice demonstrates that building large centralised detention centres, far from young peoples families and communities, is planning for failure. The evidence shows that small, regionally based secure facilities (closer to family and community) achieve the best outcomes for young people, their families and the community. In my opinion, we should halt the plans to construct large, expensive, new detention centres in Darwin and Alice Springs and look closely at the evidence of what works internationally.

For more information about Diagrama, I highly recommend viewing this short clip: <http://www.diagramafoundation.org.uk/national-news/bbc-visits-diagramas-youth-custodial-centres-spain-learn-more-about-its-reeducational>

