



26 April 2017

The Hon Margaret White AO and Mr Mick Gooda, Commissioners  
Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the NT  
PO Box 4215, Kingston ACT 2604  
Email: ChildDetentionNT@royalcommission.gov.au.

Dear Commissioners,

**Re: Submission to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory**

Please find attached a submission from the University of NSW on behalf of our research and service provider partners.

Given evidence has clearly identified the detrimental impact of juvenile detention on psycho-social and crime outcomes for young people, we recently published a review of current evidence for programs that aim to keep high-risk young people out of detention. By high-risk, we mean those teenagers with multiple, co-occurring risk factors (including school absenteeism, crime, substance abuse and poor mental health), the aetiology of which is usually rooted in early and repeated exposure to intergenerational trauma, racism, violence and crime.

We found that 70% of studies simply describe the harms and poor outcomes of these highly vulnerable young people, and only 6 studies (4%) presented data from good quality evaluations. Consequently, we are just completing a world-first evaluation of both the benefits and economic costs of an NGO delivered service for high-risk young people in NSW. The key results are summarised in the attachment.

We think a strong recommendation from the Royal Commission should be to establish a NT evaluation and monitoring framework that is integrated into the delivery of programs that aim to keep high-risk young people out of detention. This framework could be designed in partnership with evaluation experts to ensure it is robust and embedded into routine service delivery. It would provide a transparent mechanism to ensure cost-effective programs are being delivered to minimise the number of young people who end up in detention.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to make this submission. We would of course be very happy to meet you, or Counsel Assisting, or your nominated representatives to discuss this evidence in person, at a time and place of your choosing.

Yours sincerely,

Privacy

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cc: *The Hon Tony McAvoy SC, Counsel Assisting (E: mcavoy@ffc.net.au)*

## **Submission of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC, at the University of NSW) and our service provider partners to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory**

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We submit the following information and recommendations for the consideration of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory.

### **Summary of current evidence**

1. There is no question the balance of evidence shows that young people have poor psycho-social and crime outcomes once they enter juvenile detention or jail, relative to young people who are not incarcerated.
2. This is not an argument that no young people would ever be incarcerated, but a strong argument that the number incarcerated should be as low as possible.
3. Minimising the number of young people who are incarcerated requires the existence of cost-effective programs that are able to meet the multiple and complex needs of high-risk young people. Our systematic review of the international evidence on this topic found only 6 good quality evaluations of such programs (representing only 4% of all published studies on this topic). These evaluations show:
  - There are 4 common elements of successful programs. They: i) are multi-component (ie: more than one activity); ii) they use motivational interviewing; iii) they use cognitive behaviour therapy techniques; iv) they include work-skills development and case management activities.
  - This research paper can be accessed at this link:  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1753-6405.12573/full>
4. Evaluating and monitoring services requires the development of an evidence-based, standardised monitoring and evaluation tool. We have developed and applied such a tool to services in NSW. Results showed that the most prevalent risk factors of high-risk young people are school absence, unemployment, suicide ideation, mental distress, substance misuse, low levels of physical activity, low health service utilisation, and involvement in crime or with the juvenile justice system. This research paper can be accessed at this link:  
<http://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/14/2/208>
5. We have worked with service providers in NSW to co-design an evidence-based program for high-risk young people. It includes best-evidence components from international evidence that can be tailored to the specific circumstances of different clients and communities. This framework is readily applicable to services in the NT. A paper describing this framework is currently under review with a scientific journal, to ensure it is high-quality, but I could make it available on request.
6. Finally, we have demonstrated key outcomes achieved by this program in NSW using the program framework and the assessment and monitoring tool. These outcomes are available on request (they are currently being prepared for publication), but they assess the effectiveness of the program in terms of: i) the individual program participants; ii) the benefits to their communities in reduced crime; iii) the high value that communities place on these types of programs; and iv) a formal cost-benefit analysis to estimate their net economic benefit.

## **Recommendations**

1. Set targets to reduce incarceration rates for young people in the NT and their involvement in crime incidents.
2. In order to achieve those targets, align existing NT programs that aim to keep high-risk young people out of detention with current best evidence practice.
3. Establish a NT evaluation and monitoring framework that is integrated into the delivery of programs that aim to keep high-risk young people out of detention. The purpose of the framework is to provide a transparent mechanism to ensure cost-effective programs are being delivered to minimise the number of young people who end up in detention. It could be co-designed between service providers and evaluation experts, which will bring together the evaluation skills of researchers with the service provision skills of services and communities. It is timely and feasible because similar service providers and researchers have just demonstrated that it can be done successfully. The process of establishing and integrating the framework could be developed and managed by the NT's Office of the Children's Commissioner.
4. Include a residential component in programs where possible, which will help break the cycle of ongoing exposure to violence and disruption.