

NT CHILDRENS' SUFFERING HIDDEN UNDER GOVERNMENT CONE OF SILENCE

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Drs John and Ruth Rudge are Clinical Psychologists who run a private practice, Southern Cross Clinical Psychology Services based in Darwin. They have provided clinical psychology services to Top End Remote Aboriginal since 2008. Prior to this they worked across child welfare, health and justice in WA since the 90's. They first worked in remote communities in the NT Top End in 2003. Dr Ruth Rudge did her Doctoral Thesis on Juvenile Offending and Mentoring as a positive intervention in W.A. Juvenile Justice. Results of mentoring showed excellent long term indications and it was found to be extremely cost effective.

In 2009 Dr Ruth Rudge worked with one of the children seen on Four Corners before the young boy had offended. Both John and Ruth Rudge have worked with many other children who either needed urgent support and services from Child Protection or were already engaged with the Child Protection System. On their fortnightly remote visits to a range of communities they would refer multiple children in need of Child Protection services. Very often both Justice and Child Protection would be issues in these children's lives.

The N.T. Cone of Silence

There have been many people commenting on the issues related to NT Juvenile Detention Centres. Very few professionals who work at the coal face have been heard. Why have there been so few professionals if any speaking out? We have found there to be a cone of silence in the N.T. People fear that if they speak out, they may lose their job and may never work in the N.T. again.

We run a private practice and have provided remote clinical psychology services to communities across the Top End. We have worked at the coal face and have the unique position of not being fulltime employees of Government Non-Government Academic or Research based organisations.

We have in the past spoken out about the failure of Child Protection and other Departments. We have attempted to get NT based colleagues to speak out, even anonymously. Fear of repercussions have stopped them speaking. This cone of silence will make the Royal Commission a farce unless it is addressed. This is a crucial issue for the Royal Commission to address.

Selective Outrage – The Bigger Picture

There was public outrage over the Don Dale photos. The practices are torture and must be stopped. We support the release and rehabilitation of the boys. They will not be safe or have any chance of rehabilitation in Detention.

However, we now have spit hood and restraint chair focussed public outrage. This is not solely about spit hoods and restraint chairs. This is about the lives of these children before they even get to the Justice system.

As Pearson has said we can focus our selective outrage on spit hoods and restraint chairs. They are outrageous and should be banned, let us say this again.

However even more important is the welfare of these young boys and their rehabilitation support and care. We must look more widely at the issue as 7.30 ABC did again on 8 August, exploring precursors to Dylan Voller's offending and the systematic failure to respond in his early years. If we want to stop such torture and if we want these children to have a chance at a better life, then we must see the whole picture

This is about the child who has been forgotten by society. Often living so remote that stories do not get out. This is about children whose parents have often not been able to provide the safety and care a child needs for healthy development. It is about a child protection system that has failed in its duty of care to the child.

We have worked at the coalface across communities since 2003. We have worked in clinics homes schools and in the community in general. We have worked with many cases that we will describe that will we hope maintain your outrage and broaden it to the whole system that allows a child to end up in a spit hood and restraint chair in Don Dale.

Stories Behind a Child's Offending – System Failure

CII [REDACTED] It was 2009/10, well before any offending had occurred. He was 9 or 10 years old. Ruth worked with him in a remote community. He had been placed with his Grandfather by Child Protection. Child Protection it seemed deemed there was no other family member who had been available to care for the child other than the Grandfather, who child did not know well. It seemed the child was not strongly associated with this community. The school principle asked Ruth to see the child due to his difficult behaviour at school. Ruth saw him at the clinic with his grandfather on at least 2 occasions. The grandfather reported he was struggling to care for the child. The child appeared to feel isolated, withdrawn and alone. It appeared that he was not strongly bonded to anyone in the community. What he needed as all children do was to feel safe loved and in a comfortable familiar environment. He had not found this with his parents and was not finding this safety security and familiarity when I saw him. Such circumstances are as we know devastating destabilising and damaging for a child. The school principle then requested that Child Protection support the sessions. Once referred through Child Protection Ruth attempted to see the child on 2 occasions. He did not attend on either occasion. Following this Ruth was informed he had been placed with unrelated foster parents in Darwin. Ruth did not see him again.

This lack of consistency of service provision in Child Protection cases is very common. Workers themselves often stay only short times with the Agency due to the stressful nature of the work and other issues. Quite often inexperienced staff are employed because it is so hard to attract experienced staff due to the working conditions and demands. This will mean the staff lack the experience required to deal with the complex cases. They leave and the child experiences more inconsistency and lack of commitment to their wellbeing.

After CII [REDACTED] Ruth had a conversation with the School Principal and was informed that after this young boy left the community he ran away from this foster placement in 2009 shortly after being placed and then returned to his mother. Ruth does not have any case details between that time and CII [REDACTED]. He looks to have taken the very common trajectory that children in his circumstances may travel.

They are placed unsuccessfully and insufficiently supported, then they drift between many different placements, the Department will often not know where they are, the overloaded case manager will change, and the child drifts, does not attend school, is unsupervised, is exposed to substances and influences that link them with offending and then there is Don Dale.

For many of the girls we have seen it is often offending substance abuse then sexual activity and perhaps a pregnancy that leads them away from juvenile detention. But for boys, acting out, as an expression of distress, a lack of stability and safety, a lack of parenting and supervision leads to engaging with the law courts and detention.

Of the cases Ruth and John have reported to Child Protection Police and Guardianship Board we present some below. No names of communities are mentioned to maintain anonymity.

We have worked with cases where parents have informed us that young girls are held against their will by older males, unable to attend school, families seemingly helpless to keep the girls at home.

Groups of children engaging in self strangulation some to such a degree that they have callouses around their neck. None of these children attending school.

Cases of communities where of the 900 school age children only 200 attend school and not the same 200 each day.

The case reported by Ruth CII was of a young woman under the care of Child Protection. She had a severe health condition and associated disabilities, and family the Department had deemed unable to provide the necessary care and medical attention. Once reaching 18 was 'dumped' back into her community by the Department without any planning for the necessary care and support she needed. Two years later she was dead.

Cases of adolescent girls, engaging in anti-social behaviour, with clinics and then Child Protection being informed that they are also engaging in unsafe sexual activity reportedly at times in exchange for drugs or alcohol. With these same girls barely attending school after year 6.

The case of an 8-year-old boy, displaying highly sexualized and other disturbed behaviours. John worked with him for 9 months and then was defunded. What follow up he received is unknown. 5 years later he was re-referred to John by the boy's lawyer, the boy was charged with sexual assault.

The education system is failing, with education being a fundamental part of a child's healthy development. We know of cases of schools that after a well-funded boarding school was built, only managed to get one child through to year 12 non-university entrance over a number of years, and this was with one on one teaching.

These cases represent children hidden from mainstream attention due to race and remoteness. They represent a different standard that we hold to for Aboriginal kids and non-Aboriginal kids. In communities, things are tolerated that would not be in the urban world.

Pat Dodson recently spoke of the need to Wrap services Around these kids. There are interventions, Wraparound, mentoring, that do get results and don't come close to the cost of Detention, we hear \$500,000 plus per year per child in Detention. There is talk of building new Detention centres, spend half that money on the 39 kids in Detention, we could see real change.

This is another opportunity for change in children's lives. There have been other Royal Commissions in Deaths in Custody and Little Children in the N.T. Let us hope that this Royal Commission results in the urgent changes these children desperately need.

So to the Royal Commissioners Margaret White and Mick Gooda - please lift the cone of silence in the N.T., get the true stories - or the Royal Commission will be another wasted opportunity.