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NATSICC calls for quick and decisive action to change the system

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) has expressed shock and devastation at the treatment of young people incarcerated in the Don Dale Correctional Facility in Darwin and called for quick and decisive action on this important national issue.

“The systematic abuse on our children is wrong; our nation is hurting with all the suicides and the ongoing abuse through generational trauma,” said NATSICC NT Councillor Dean Chisholm.

Bishop of Darwin, Eugene Hurley said the recent ABC Four Corners footage, detailing abhorrent and inhumane treatment of young people, has brought to light a betrayal of the trust that has been placed in the correctional system.

“It is that betrayal of trust, that we thought we could take for granted, that so confronts us as a community,” Bishop Hurley said.

“So many of us feel less as human beings today; we sense that we are all complicit in some vague way for trusting people to do what we considered to be the decent thing.”

Compounding the outrage is the fact that the continual calls for the criminal justice system to address the rate of youth incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been ignored - 97% of all youth detained in the Northern Territory are Aboriginalⁱ. Across Australia, young Aboriginal people are 26 times more likely to be in detention.

Victorian NATSICC Councillor Sherry Balcombe, a volunteer at a youth correctional facility in Melbourne, said that she was sickened by the footage. “I have always been treated with the utmost respect by the kids and to see this footage is heartbreaking. In many cases they are already damaged and the continued abuse only continues the cycle of institutionalisation. We urgently need change.”

NATSICC is calling for the Royal Commission to urgently investigate whether a culture of cover-ups and a lack of organisational empathy towards young people is endemic throughout the criminal justice system.

“The process of change must be immediate and across the board,” said NATSICC Chair, John Lochowiak. “Our young people cannot afford for us to wait. The Royal Commission needs to properly engage the families and communities that are affected by incarceration” The process of change in the Criminal Justice System must be immediate and applied across Australia.

- Alternatives to incarceration need to be incorporated into the national juvenile justice system, given our nation is already hurting with all the suicides and the ongoing abuse through generational trauma.
- The mistreatment of the ‘invisible’ or those most marginalised, including children is bordering on endemic and it needs to stop.
- The Royal Commission must engage families and communities that are directly affected by juvenile incarceration, to discover why Young Aboriginal people are 26 times more likely to be in detention and what can be done to break the cycle.

NATSICC representatives are available for interview

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ⁱ Review of the Northern Territory Youth Detention System Report January 2015