

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DETENTION NETWORK

This submission comes from over seven years experience of visiting a number of detention centres in Australia, with regular visits during those years as a pastoral visitor inside the centre in Melbourne. It also includes the experience of working with asylum seekers who were released from detention into the community, and having contact, to this present day, with some of those people.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

There is a significant amount of evidence from research and experience provided by various psychiatrists, psychologists, non government agencies and other bodies to show that the detention of vulnerable people who seek protection, having fled conflict and persecution, is detrimental to their overall health and wellbeing. It can also have long term effects which will stay with them for many years, or even the rest of their lives.

REFORM NEEDS:

A major issue for reform is the immigration protection process and the issue of mandatory detention.

IMPACT OF DETENTION:

I saw many people arriving into detention, slowly lose their dignity and motivation, and sink into depression and anxiety. This was often treated with medication which added to the sense of despair. Originally, they had been people with some hope that things could get better but this hope soon diminished. No matter how physically comfortable detention centres are made, they are still a place of imprisonment. The system which operates requires people to often put aside their sense of any control over their lives. While I am not currently visiting a centre, it seems that many of the same restrictions are operating, or at least in some centres, e.g. gaining permission for the smallest items. Even in centres where educational and other activities are available, the psychological state of some of the people is such that they find it hard to summon up the motivation to attend. Offshore detention centres appear to be particularly problematic for a myriad of reasons.

It is particularly difficult for parents who try to keep some semblance of family life in the midst of feeling so powerless to provide for their children in a normal way. Children returning from school outside the centre were constantly reminded as they passed through the detention gates that they were in a facility surrounded by razor wire. This is not something which any child in Australia should ever experience, especially when it was determined in 2005 that detention of children would be "a last resort".

Many people spoke to me of the horrors they left behind in their home country but that they never thought of suicide. For the first time in their lives, suicide became an option in their desperation. Often this was caused by the uncertainty of knowing when they might be released, or whether they would be returned to their home country and the fear that this entailed. Length of time in detention is clearly a huge challenge to health and wellbeing.

LONG TERM EFFECTS:

While many who have experienced detention in Australia have gone on to rebuild their lives and make a wonderful contribution to this society, some whom I know, are still feeling the trauma of having been in detention in Australia. It has added to the trauma they had already experienced before coming here. This has led to the breakup of marriages and other relationships, in some cases, with children being left to live in a single parent family.

STAFF IN CENTRES:

There is also a great stress placed on staff in the centres. Some of them have been deeply affected by the situation they face on a day to day basis. They have often been ill-equipped to be dealing with people whose vulnerability increases the longer they are kept in detention.

COSTS:

The budget for centres far outweighs the more moderate cost of processing peoples' protection applications whilst living in the community. This has been shown in costings done by various bodies.

ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION:

There are numbers of alternatives to detention on offer. These have been designed from practice and procedures of agencies such as the Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project and the recent International Detention Coalition study, *"There are Alternatives"*.

CONCLUSION:

I would like to urge the Joint Select Committee to seek alternatives to detention for all the reasons given above in order that Australia can provide a dignified protection process to people no matter what way they enter the country.

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