

Report on Young People in Baxter Detention Centre and Port Augusta Residential Housing Project

Frances Milne from Baxter Visit in June 2004

Background

I decided to visit Baxter Immigration Detention Facility to see a detainee whom I had met and helped when he was in Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney, NSW.

While I was there I asked young people who were living in the residential housing project euphemistically called “community housing” by the Minister, what they thought about living in the residential housing project. The housing project consists of 8 houses – 4 on each side of a closed-off suburban street at the back of the caravan park. The only way mothers and children can see their fathers and older brothers is by visiting the Baxter detention centre twice a week on Sundays and Wednesdays. Youth in detention consider the residential housing complex no different from detention.

There were very passionate answers to this question which indicated the young people :

- appreciated living in a house and having your mother buy and cook the food;
- experienced anguish that they had to choose between getting out of detention or staying in detention to stop the family being pulled apart;
- considered it a prison where they had no freedom, were subjected to body searches before leaving and returning after attending school or going shopping etc
- can only see their fathers by going to see them in the visitors area on certain days;
- can only meet up with friends after school if the friends accompanied by a parent visits Baxter Immigration Detention Centre – consequently no-one sees school friends except at school;
- hated the right of the guards to enter their homes at will including their bedrooms to check all windows and doors were locked between 11pm – 7am, and check that everyone was inside the house;
- could conduct searches of their rooms which sometimes were completely ransacked;
- felt suffocated on hot nights when they were not allowed to open any windows;
- felt extreme resentment that if they went out to the cinema they were roped off in a block of seats, and the cinema was closed to the public;
- were only allowed to buy fruit or vegetables when they went out – no ice-creams, coke or cookies.

Where I talked with girls and boys in the same family, some of the boys seemed less despairing and more outgoing than the girls. These boys seemed to more easily diverted by engaging in football, while nothing seemed to have the same effect for the girls. The girls were in a dreadful psychological space – profoundly depressed, unable to even accept they might have a future. The girls would articulate their feelings at length glad to be asked their views. Boys tended to express anger rather than desperation and resentment.

Comments from Youth in Pt Augusta Residential Housing Project

Bagda , female 20 years, & brother, male,18 years

Bagda lives with her mother in the residential housing project. Having now turned 18 her brother had to move back into Baxter detention Centre with his father. The housing project consists of 8 houses – 4 on each side of a closed-off suburban street at the back of the caravan park. The only way she can see her father and brother is by visiting the detention centre. She considers the residential housing complex no different from detention except they have houses and can do their own cooking..

Some quotes from Bagda

“I hate the environment, how the guards treat us and we have to ask for everything. We are like stupid children and powerless. The worst thing that happens to you is that you have to wait for some-one to decide for your life”.

“I feel my youth has gone and I have no education and no future”

“Even when we go out shopping we go out in groups with 2 or 3 officers. We are just allowed to buy fruit and vegetables – no ice cream, coke or cookies”

“I want to cry and cry all the time and want to kill myself. But I’m afraid for my mother”.

“I do not sleep well. I take 1-2 hours to get to sleep, and wake up with nightmares several times a night”

Brother

“I still have terrible nightmares of being in detention. I enjoyed life as a young boy and played with all my friends in my country. But the nightmares started on journey and in Australia”.

Rishada (13 year old female) & Omar(16 year old male) .

They chose not to be in the residential housing project so that they would not be separated from their family. They go to school directly from Baxter Detention Facility but live as a family in Baxter.

R

“We came to Australia for a better life but it didn’t happen. We are always scared “.

“At school we were harassed because we were from detention – they see us arriving and leaving with guards. Some children said “why did you come over here ?” I couldn’t stop crying and when the teachers found out what was happening they suspended the those students for one day with warnings. The teachers and other students are very kind but we can never go to the homes of other students and they cannot come to our homes or go out with them. We are always with guards.”

“We would like to go to the cinema with our friends from school but we are not allowed to. If we go to the cinema they close the cinema to the public so we never have any normal life. I feel ashamed and nervous when people ask me ‘are you in detention?’.

“You can never feel safe – you are on guard all of the time”.

O

“I like school because I forget about the guards”

“Some people think we are living in heaven here (residential housing project). We do have our own house but we are searched and watched by guards all the time. ”

“The best thing about going to school is being in the football team and playing matches. But when the guards want to punish you they don’t put you in the isolation compounds, but stop you going to school or excursions or football.”

“If you don’t do this, we won’t let you go to the football in Pt Augusta.”

“One time I and my sister wrote to the Sunday Mail but the guards ripped out the letter from the newspaper so we could not see it”.

“Money is always a problem. GSL is much worse than ACM – they make you pay for everything. We don’t get enough money for even the basics for school like pencils, pens and clothes”.

Igmar (18 year old male) and Arta (15 year old male) (released July 2004 on permanent visas)

I

“The only difference between detention and the residential housing project is you have a house to live in and your mother cooks and gets the food and that is much better”.

“We came because we hoped to get protection and live like normal people. When we were first put into detention we were told we would be out in 6 weeks time. We have now

been here 3 and a half years. We are constantly threatened by Immigration that we will be forced to go back. I have nightmares of being forced back. I am depressed and stay in my room all the time”.

“I shake and sweat in my sleep because of nightmares. It is like small shocks and I wake up shaking. I turn up the air conditioner onto full”.

“I am angry but don’t show it. I put everything in my heart. I only tell my mother the easy things and I bear the other things myself”.

“We get woken by guards coming in every night, and they come back at 5-6am while it is still dark. There are head counts once or twice a day”.

A

“I thought in Australia I would be free and do what I want. But it’s not like that and I’ve become depressed and prefer being alone. I can’t handle relationships anymore”.

“I’m the opposite to my brother. I get angry and explode straight away. I’m angry most of the time”.

“I hate the guards checking you are there all the time. In the night I hear their big, fat footsteps stomping through the house – they do not knock they just come into the house and bedrooms”.

Paran (17 year old male) and Lari (12 years female) plus Mia (mopther),

P.

“There’s nothing good about the residential housing project because it is the same as Baxter. I hate it because it is boring and everyone must go to their bedrooms by 11pm.”

“I hate being body searched every day. I used to feel sad all the time – now I just get angry”

L.

“It’s good to live in a house – but bad to be separated from my father”.

Sashja (15 year old male) and Azram (14 year male) (released July 2004 on TPV – S only got a BVE)

S

“We like living in a house and choosing and cooking our own food in the residential housing project. But not the restrictions on our mother going out to buy food”

“ You can’t invite anywhere to come here or visit friends outside. The only way to meet friends from school is for their parents to bring them to the visiting area of Baxter Detention Centre in visiting hours. The visiting area is very small and there is nothing to do. So we never see our school friends except at school.”

“I attempted suicide with dad when I was in Woomera. They put us in a small cell like a jail. There was no window, mattress on floor, camera in the ceiling. No privacy for toilet or shower. So we went 2 weeks without a shower. We were very weak when we were let out. The only treatment was the nurse gave us a tablet.”

A

“I have nightmares every night. I dream my mother is dead and they killed her. I used to take tablets but they don’t help.”

“I don’t want medicine – I want freedom and my family” .

“When we were in Woomera and my mother was in hospital 8 months – they put me in another block with single men – it was terrible. I was only 12 years old”.

“Woomera was dreadful – there were fires every day. Many men tried to hurt and kill themselves. My brother hanged himself, others did too. Many were on hunger strikes. Some drank shampoo and many were cutting themselves”.

“I did cut myself – I still have scars and I hate it. It’s better to be numb and have no feelings. I get a headache when I cry and I can’t stop crying. When I’m angry I rip up paper sometimes, but I mostly go to bed and cry and shake”.

“Like the house and cooking our own food. Do not feel free behind a high grey fence”

“My mother misses my sisters and wants especially to be with the sister who is pregnant”.

“I like school – it is a little bit of freedom out of detention. “

“When my brother Sam tried to hang himself they locked him in observation 15 days.”

“Some kids hurt us – one boy said ‘I really, really hate you. Go back to your own country’. But the Counsellor and teacher were really good and suspended him for a day and said he must be nice if he speaks to us. “

“I have 3 good friends in detention with me and one good school friend”