

ABORIGINAL YOUTH & DETENTION

The Northern Territory's ongoing struggle

THE MAIN ISSUE

The main problem is that Aboriginal young people are significantly overrepresented in youth detention in the Northern Territory, including young people from Alice Springs and surrounding remote communities. Although Aboriginal people represent only a small proportion of the Northern Territory's population, they make up a very large proportion of young people in detention. This shows that Aboriginal youth are disproportionately affected by the youth justice system. Alice Springs is an important example because it is a major regional centre for Central Australia, where many Aboriginal communities are located. The problem is not only the number of young people entering detention, but also the difficulty of reducing this overrepresentation over time. This raises an important question about why Aboriginal young people continue to be so heavily represented in youth detention in the Northern Territory



WHY YOUTH DETENTION

Why has the Northern Territory struggled to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in youth detention? This question relates directly to the Connaissance du Monde Thinking About Society theme because it explores how institutions, such as the government and justice system, shape the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. It focuses on issues of inequality and justice by looking at why high incarceration rates continue despite years of government reform.

A PROSECUTOR'S VIEW

To better understand the increasing number of young people in detention and why these numbers remain high, I was able to come in contact with Suzanne Mayhew, an experienced legal practitioner with a strong background in youth justice. She worked as a federal prosecutor in Australia from 2008 to 2020, dealing with different types of criminal cases and working closely with the Australian justice system. From 2020 to 2024, she worked as a Technical Adviser to the Office of Public Prosecutions in Vanuatu. She has also worked with the Northern Territory Director of Public Prosecutions. Her experience working in both Australia and Vanuatu allowed me to gain a better understanding of the justice system and the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in detention.

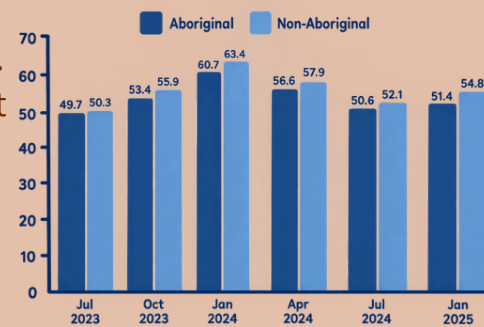


CASE STUDY: NORTHERN TERRITORY

YOUTH OVERREPRESENTATION

My research shows that youth detention remains a major issue in the Northern Territory, particularly for young Indigenous people. about 3 in 5 (60%) young people aged 10–17 in detention were First Nations, while First Nations people in this age group make up 6.6% of the general population. Nationally, more than half of young people in detention were First Nations, showing how strongly Indigenous young people continue to be overrepresented in the youth justice system

Average daily number of Aboriginal young people in detention



Australian Government

GOVERNMENT POLICY

The age of criminal responsibility in the Northern Territory has been reduced from 12 down to 10 years old. This change allows children as young as 10 and 11 to be legally detained, charged, and placed into detention. It costs more than \$1.3 million to lock a child up in custody for a year in the NT. But instead of improving community safety, going to prison makes it more likely that children will go on to reoffend. The government is relentlessly marching on with policies which are incredibly expensive, and fly in the face of the evidence about what actually works to reduce crime.

PRAGMATIC APPROACH

By way of a pragmatic approach, I want to understand how the increasing number of young people in detention is linked to problems such as social disadvantage, remoteness and limited access to services. As a young person myself, from Vanuatu I would also like to raise awareness about the importance of early prevention through the education system in Vanuatu. By comparing Australia and Vanuatu, I want to understand the differences in how both countries respond to challenges faced by young people and what Vanuatu could learn from the Australian experience.

