

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee

Report

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (10.25 am)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, I wish to make a statement concerning the committee's inquiry into the high level of involvement of Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system across the states and territories of Australia. It is a tragic state of affairs that Indigenous juveniles and young adults are more likely to be incarcerated today than at any other time since the royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody released its seminal report in 1991. In that report, the royal commission said:

... the most significant contributing factor is the disadvantaged and unequal position in which Aboriginal people find themselves in the society-socially, economically and culturally.

That report talked about the sad state of Indigenous disadvantage and deaths in custody.

Currently, the detention rate for Indigenous juveniles is 28 times higher than that for non-Indigenous juveniles. Similarly, young Indigenous adults aged between 17 and 24 years of age are 15 times more likely than young non-Indigenous adults to be imprisoned. There is an alarming rise in the rate of imprisonment of Indigenous women across the country. Adverse contact with the criminal justice system is not confined to offenders; Indigenous people are more likely to be victims of crime, especially violent crime, than non-Indigenous people.

The committee has resumed the valuable work started by the last parliament. The committee has received 110 submissions and has travelled across the continent of Australia, from Fitzroy Crossing to Dubbo, to Perth, to Brisbane, to Melbourne and to Sydney to speak firsthand with those working in cities, regional centres and remote communities. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the former chair of the committee in the last parliament, the Hon. Bob Debus, for his longstanding, lifelong interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, and particularly his contribution as chair of the committee in the last parliament.

On 28 January 2011, in Redfern in New South Wales, the committee brought together participants from around Australia, including magistrates, state and territory police representatives, NGOs, academics and social researchers, counsellors, justice organisations and others working in diversion and intervention fields, for a roundtable hearing. The committee heard many terrific and wonderful success stories. For instance, Queensland Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson referred to Mornington Island, where robberies had dramatically reduced due to the dedication and long-term commitment of the local sergeant and his wife in developing the Police Citizens Youth Club and other programs working with Indigenous youth. These types of stories are happening across the length and breadth of the country; however, they are quite piecemeal and are without long-term outcomes.

The importance of role models and mentors was raised by many participants at the roundtable. Young Indigenous people are responding well to Indigenous mentors who are from their local community. Shane Phillips from the Tribal Warrior Association in Sydney described the role of a mentor, commenting:

A real mentor enables; they make themselves redundant
... People do not want a mentor for the rest of their life. They want someone to help them engage in what they need to engage in and take on the responsibility for themselves.

Another area raised was the lack of appropriate accommodation for youth, particularly out-of-home care and accommodation for those being released from the criminal justice system. Having positive places and positive influences can make a difference. It was generally agreed at the roundtable that supporting parents and families would help reduce intergenerational entrenchment in the criminal justice system across the country.

A major area of concern was the need for coordination within jurisdictions. The constant refrain was that there were silos—departments not talking to departments, organisations not communicating with each other and individuals not chatting to each other about what is going on. Too much buck-passing was occurring across the country. This is a point made by Superintendent Emmanuel from the Western Australia Police Service, who described its core business as the need to stop the buck-passing.

The problems are complex and long standing. We must harness the energy and knowledge of those working in the field to make broad and far-reaching recommendations. The committee is committed to that to reverse the trend, to increase the number of Indigenous young people involved in community life and to prevent them being entrapped in criminal justice systems across the country.