



Reversing the trend

Inquiry resumed into Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system

The new Parliament's Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs is set to resume its inquiry into the high level of involvement of Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system.

The detention rate for Indigenous juveniles is currently 28 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous juveniles. Young Indigenous adults aged 17-24 years are 15 times more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to be imprisoned.

The Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, The Hon Jenny Macklin MP, has requested that the Committee complete the inquiry. The new Chair of the Committee, Mr Shayne Neumann MP, acknowledged the excellent work done by the previous Committee and the large amount of evidence, research and knowledge available for the new Committee to continue its work.

Mr Neumann went on to comment that '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. This Committee is committed to finding solutions to reverse the worrying trend of increasing numbers of Indigenous juveniles and young adults becoming trapped in the criminal justice system'.

Mr Neumann added 'The level of concern amongst community members, government officials and the judiciary about Indigenous incarceration is higher than ever before. We know there is significant goodwill in the community and many intervention programs with some successes, but the situation is worsening and we must ask ourselves why this is the case.'

The inquiry is focussing on prevention and early intervention in order to identify strategies that will reduce the number of Indigenous Australians involved in the criminal justice system. Issues to be considered include:

- how the development of social norms and behaviours for Indigenous juveniles and young adults can lead to better social engagement;
- how alcohol and substance abuse contribute to Indigenous youth incarceration rates and the potential for health and justice authorities to address this;
- initiatives to improve the effectiveness of the education system and grow employment opportunity to reduce young Indigenous people's involvement with the criminal justice system; and
- best practice examples of programs that support diversion of Indigenous people from juvenile detention centres and crime, and provide support for those returning home from centres.

The inquiry will also identify cross-jurisdictional challenges to coordination of services for Indigenous youth in the justice system, such as whether preventative programs can be better aligned to advance the health and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people.

To date, the inquiry has received 106 submissions and has conducted 17 public hearings and forums around Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote communities ranging from Darwin to Dubbo, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane, Cairns, Adelaide, Perth and Fitzroy Crossing.

The Committee will conduct further hearings before tabling its report and recommendations in the first half of 2011.

The Chair, Mr Neumann, added: 'We owe it to Indigenous youth and to those inspirational individuals who are working hard on a daily basis in these communities, agencies and organisations across Australia to ensure that this report brings about practical and lasting change.'

The Committee will accept further submissions to the inquiry. For the full terms of reference and advice on making submissions, see the Committee's website at www.aph.gov.au/atsia or contact the Committee secretariat on (02) 6277 4559.

For media comment, please contact:

Committee Chair Mr Shayne Neumann MP on (07) 3201 5300

For background information, contact the Committee Secretariat on (02) 62774559 or atsia.reps@aph.gov.au