



Report of Youth Justice Senate Inquiry

The [Senate Inquiry into Australia's youth justice and incarceration system](#) on 3 February 2025 consisted of 10 panels, following 222 submissions from organisations and experts across Australia.

The calls for changes came during the wake of the second young person to die in WA youth custody in under one year.

Across Australia, 17 youth detention facilities hold 845 children - 63% being Indigenous.

Australia and New Zealand Children's Commissioners presented evidence to the Inquiry. The panel was referred to by the Chair Senator Paul Scarr as "probably the most formidable panel of witnesses I've ever come across".



Australia and NZ Children's Commissioners

The National Children’s Commissioner, Ms. Anne Hollonds, stated:

“The most chilling thing was where the kids had no hope... no hope but moving to an adult jail.”

Ms. Shona Reid, The Guardian of Children and Young People, commented:

“Young people have a lot to say about the world and how the media and the community are treating them. They also have a lot to say about what happens to them when they enter or re-enter youth detention settings.”

The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, Ms. Zoe Robinson, shared how incarcerated youth felt that:

“The only way you get heard is to yell and scream... Here we are today on behalf of all children and young people yelling and screaming (figuratively of course).”

National Justice Project Professor George Newhouse [described the treatment incarcerated children receive](#) as *“No therapeutic treatment, no disability support, and no education, just brutality and punishment.”*

The [Canberra Times](#) reported that *“a harsher and more punitive justice system would not deter children from committing crimes but is more likely to result in higher rates of reoffending.”*

Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, WA’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, asked the Committee:

“In what other first world country, do we see children dying in custody?” “It is critically important for us to stand up collectively and say, ‘please hear the voices of our children and young people’.”

The Commissioners urged the Inquiry to listen to the evidence, in reference to several Australian jurisdictions that had gone against medical evidence, legal evidence, and Indigenous and human rights to enable punitive responses in youth justice.

The Community Justice Coalition and Justice Action's focus

The Honourable John Dowd AO KC, President of the [Community Justice Coalition](#), accompanied by Brett Collins, Coordinator of [Justice Action](#), presented before the Committee.

Video: [Full Inquiry](#) Inquiry: [Text](#) - Watch CJC and JA's [Presentation](#) - [Support the Petition](#)
Mr John Dowd AO KC shared that the use of computers will:

“help (young people) with skills for later on in life” and “will allow mental health functioning”. This will address the “main concern” to “stop young people being stuck alone in cells for a large part of their lives”.

He had previously described the youth recidivism rate and expenditure per youth each year in detention as **“outrageous”** with the cost of implementing computers in cells being insignificant compared to the benefits of such an initiative.

Mr Dowd told the Committee that working through Standing Committees and Inquiries can reinforce good principles such as those in the Justice Policy Partnership framework 2023. Justice Action noted that implementation of computers in cells would be relatively inexpensive. A server in a 600-person prison would cost \$260,000 and \$130,000 for annual maintenance. Furthermore, Optus estimated that bandwidth for unlimited video calls could be maintained for ‘a little over \$1 per month’ per person.

Justice Action **questioned the structure of the Inquiry:**

“People most seriously affected by the youth justice system have not been acknowledged”. “Kids should be encouraged to speak for themselves as they have their own representatives, who should have received the Inquiry’s terms of reference and contributed to the Inquiry.”

Justice Action invited the Committee to **experience a day in a cell:**

“I think it’s really important that people who are making judgments should actually be in a cell for a day and a night.”

Justice Action called for **detainee access to cyberspace**, specifically:

“support from the Committee for all youth in detention to have an entitlement to an iExpress email account. They will have a presence, a voice, and stability in cyberspace.”

iExpress is acknowledged as the first in the world platform. It would allow 800 kids to come on, express themselves, and have access to services. Kids feel sorry about what they’ve done. They’d like to say: ‘Can I say sorry?’ from inside their cell.”

Flip The Switch Flyer

A flyer carrying a request from youth detainees was handed out to all attendees of the Inquiry:



No youth justice authority in Australia provides telecommunications in cells for youth, although adult prisons in the ACT and NSW do.

“The 85% youth recidivism rate and \$1 million a year cost per youth is outrageous. Yet Youth Justice NSW told us last week: “our commitment (to computers in cells) has not wavered, but we do not yet have funding”, said The Hon Mr John Dowd AO KC.

The negative outcomes of youth incarceration could easily be reduced by in-cell access to external counselling, restorative justice, video calls with family, and education including art and music, while they are alone and bored in their cells.

The [First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group](#) recommended in their [Roadmap p.35](#) that, immediately:

“All governments focus on ensuring First Nations Australians in vulnerable settings, such as prison...are provided with connectivity to remain connected to family and country.”

“If the TVs in cells were interactive, that would open up mainstream services at little cost. This is consistent with the [Nairobi Declaration for Detainee Telecommunications Rights](#),” said Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans, Vice President of the Community Justice Coalition.

Detainees ask imprisoning authorities to ‘FLIP THE SWITCH’ to connectivity by transforming the TV screen that is in every youth justice cell into an interactive device. This would allow detainees to actively respond rather than be passive recipients of mind-numbing content. In-cell access to external counselling, restorative justice, and education including art and music through the **‘import model’** would be:

- Effective in providing trusted external counselling without a conflict of interest with a security role.
- Efficient, as they are often already paid for by governments.
- Existing through the sentence and available after release.
- Emotionally important, enabling detainees to feel connected to the outside community.

Computers in cells would give access to Restorative Justice, Music, Education and Peer Mentoring Services. Restorative justice reduces crime charges by 38%, music and arts reduce recidivism by 60%, and education reduces recidivism by 35%.

Media Reports:

SBS articles: [6/2/2025](#)

The Canberra Times articles: [3/2/2025](#)

The National Indigenous Times articles: [3/2/2025](#), [3/2/2025](#), [3/2/2025](#), [3/2/2025](#), [4/2/2025](#)