

New evidence of mistreatment in Western Australian juvenile prison

By Eric Ludlow
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In a statement released earlier this month, which was quickly buried by the corporate media, Amnesty International (AI) detailed mistreatment and abuse of youth at a detention centre in Perth, the Western Australian state capital.

During a visit to the Banksia Hill Youth Detention Centre, AI interviewed two inmates who said they were subjected to solitary confinement in the “Intensive Support Unit” for weeks on end. This occurred in cells no larger than a car parking space, with as little as 10 minutes outside the cell each day, during which time they were handcuffed.

The inmates were sometimes denied showers, fed through a grill in the cell door and had limited access to psychological support.

The AI statement also revealed that, “according to several sources,” three young people were held in solitary confinement in the unit for at least two weeks at a time between last May and August after several detainees allegedly went on a “rampage.”

Further concerns were raised about the treatment of prisoners in the unit, including lack of proper medical treatment, excessive use of force, lack of family contact, education and exercise time and denial of access to programs or services.

The mother of one of the two teenagers who spoke with AI told the *Guardian* they were held in solitary confinement for more than 250 days. She said: “Banksia Hill has demonised him. He’s not being rehabilitated, he’s being contained, and that’s what we do to animals.”

Amnesty International’s indigenous rights manager, Tammy Solonec, said: “These are very serious allegations, which if confirmed would put the practices at the Banksia Hill Detention Centre in clear breach of international law and standards, and may amount to

torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (CIDT).”

Under international law, solitary confinement is defined as “physical and social isolation of individuals who are confined to their cells for 22 to 24 hours a day.” Short-term solitary confinement (less than 15 days) can constitute torture. More than 15 days of solitary confinement “constitutes torture or CIDT and must be absolutely banned.”

These outrages are continuing after a series of official reports acknowledged abuses in Australian juvenile prisons, but held no governments to account for them.

Last June, Western Australia’s Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS) released a report outlining issues at Banksia Hill, such as low staff morale, incorrect records regarding cell lockdown times, the use of spit hoods and a massive increase in “self-harm” among inmates.

Some prisoners were denied legally-required time out of cells, violating the state’s Young Offenders Regulations, requiring that all detainees have a minimum of one hour of exercise every six hours. Log books indicated that one young person was “out of cell for 15 minutes, five minutes of which were to speak to a psychologist.”

According to the report, there were 196 incidents of self-harm and attempted suicide in 2016 compared to 77 in 2015 and 38 in 2014. It said changes in reporting practices did not account for the increase and there were likely many more undocumented incidents.

The state’s Department of Corrective Services did not “routinely assess young people when they are admitted to custody” for mental issues and, therefore, such problems were never identified.

The OICS report cited a 2009 survey in the state of New South Wales, which found that 87 percent of

juvenile prisoners had “at least one mental health diagnosis.” Around 82 percent of the females and 68 percent of the males had behavioural disorders.

The report also raised concerns about the accuracy of reporting at the centre. One inmate was logged as having spent an extra 3.5 hours in a cell when the actual time spent was 19 hours.

The OICS received “credible claims that some electronic records were deliberately being entered incorrectly to meet legislative requirements.” The OICS requested CCTV footage to test the accuracy of the log books and electronic records, but it was informed by the department that the footage had been taped over.

These accounts follow a royal commission into the Don Dale youth detention centre in the Northern Territory after video footage surfaced in 2016 showing systemic abuse and torture there. As intended, the Turnbull government’s royal commission was a whitewash, with no one held to account. As a result, the abuses have continued.

Last October, the New South Wales government held a review of behaviour management in the state’s juvenile detention centres following claims that some detainees were being locked in their cells for up to 23 hours per day.

The Queensland Labor government ordered a similar review in August 2016 after concerns were raised about lack of staff and the use of excessive force.

In Victoria, punitive measures by the Labor government have reached unprecedented levels. After unlawfully moving teenagers to the adult Barwon Prison in November 2016, Premier Daniel Andrews’s government passed, with bipartisan support, legislation requiring any youth over the age of 16 charged with serious offences to be tried and sentenced as an adult.

This is part of a broader campaign against working class youth in Australia and internationally, under conditions of high unemployment and ever-more glaring social inequality. Governments and the media are attempting to portray youth as “out-of-control” to justify the brutal measures to punish and intimidate them.

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