

Imprisonment periods lengthening in Australian immigration detention centres

Max Newman
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The average period of time for those imprisoned in Australia's internal Immigration Detention Centres reached 445 days last month, highlighting the inhuman nature of the incarceration of refugees and others stripped of visas or residency rights.

According to a monthly report published by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, entitled "Immigration Detention and Community Statistics Summary," detention periods have risen sixfold since July 2013, when the average length was 72 days.

Almost a quarter, or 23.2 percent, of the 1,792 people detained in the centres on the Australian mainland and the country's Indian Ocean territory of Christmas Island have been there for two or more years. About half, or nearly 800 detainees, have been imprisoned for more than a year. Among the detainees are 91 children aged under 18.

These statistics did not include the 1,459 asylum seekers, including 68 children, held in Australian-controlled "offshore processing" camps on the Pacific island of Nauru (537 detainees) or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island (922), many of whom have been detained for more than two years.

A further 29,522 people were living within Australia, under restrictions and on insecure temporary visas. They were seeking residency, still living under the constant fear of being re-consigned to detention.

There is mounting evidence that the poor and dehumanising conditions in the detention centres, coupled with lengthening and indefinite detention times, are having a severe impact on the psychological wellbeing and mental health of those detained.

This impact was highlighted in International Health and Medical Service (IHMS) reports. These reports are prepared for and released privately to the Australian

government, but two were released this month under Freedom of Information application orders.

In the July-September 2014 quarter, the IHMS found that rates of severe mental distress were as high as 14.9 percent in the mainland and Christmas Island centres, nearly four times the general population in Australia.

Moreover, the report pointed to a direct correlation between mental distress and the length of stay in detention. It used the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), in which participants have their mental distress rated low, mild, moderate or severe.

On average, the longer a participant was detained, the higher the distress rating. During the first three months of imprisonment, 7 percent of participants reported severe or moderate mental distress. This ratio jumped to 26 percent after 13-18 months and 33 percent after 19 months or more.

There were more acute levels in the facilities on Manus Island and Nauru. The report noted that the levels of distress among those detainees would be seen in Australia only among patients "receiving specialist mental health case management care."

Children locked up in detention were worst affected. The report noted that children experienced "a variety of triggers, including previous trauma and torture, enuresis (bed-wetting), nightmares, family conflict and situational crisis."

In the April to June 2015 quarter, 21.8 percent of children aged from 5 to 17 in offshore detention were taken to a doctor and diagnosed with a mental health condition. Significantly, even infants were affected—15.6 percent of children under the age of 4 were taken to a doctor due to a mental health illness.

These results are likely to underestimate the levels of mental distress because participation in the surveys is voluntary. As the reports noted, the higher the levels of

anxiety, the less likely detainees were to participate in the surveys.

The number of people held in detention decreased to 3,251 in December 2015, from 10,201 in January 2013. According to the official detention statistics report, this was because of “releases into the community.” Yet only 603 people were reported to be “living in the community after being approved for a residency determination.”

Numbers of asylum seekers are known to have been forcibly deported to face possible persecution during this period, including to Sri Lanka, by both the previous Labor government and the current Liberal-National Coalition government.

After taking office in September 2013, the Coalition government ratcheted-up the efforts of Labor to block or deter asylum seekers through the bipartisan policy of “stop the boats.” The Coalition’s militarised and highly secretive “Operation Sovereign Borders” has blocked or turned back all refugee boats, directly violating the basic democratic right to seek asylum.

Under this regime, the Australian navy has paid the crews of boats, so-called “people smugglers,” to take refugees back to Indonesian waters.

This policy has seen a population shift in the detention facilities. In July 2013, 95 percent of detainees were asylum seekers captured in Australian waters. However, people whose residency rights have been revoked or who have over-stayed their visas made up 50 percent of those in domestic detention centres last December.

Reactionary amendments to the Migration Act in 2014 expanded the power of the Australian government to deport long-term foreign residents who were sentenced to periods of imprisonment totalling 12 months. After Iranians, about 200 New Zealanders now make up the second largest number of detainees by nationality, accounting for 10.2 percent of all domestic detainees. Another 80 people already have been deported to New Zealand.

These developments underline the wider implications of the anti-refugee policies pursued by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments. While scapegoating immigrants and refugees, Australian governments have vastly expanded their anti-democratic state powers, including those of detention and deportation, and these will be turned more broadly

against the working class as social conditions worsen.

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[12 November 2015]

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