

Australia: Children detained in adult watch houses in Queensland

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program earlier this month revealed that the Labor government in the northeastern state of Queensland is detaining children in adult watch houses, where they are subjected to abuse and violations of their basic rights.

Watch houses are facilities, often attached to police stations, where arrested people are temporarily detained. Those kept in the maximum-security watch house in Brisbane, the state capital, have been charged with serious crimes such as murder and armed robbery, as well as minor infringements, including public drunkenness.

This outrage came to public prominence earlier this year, after a three-year investigation by Amnesty International. According to the international rights organisation, as of May 10, there were 89 children in the Brisbane city watch house. Three of the children were just 10 years old. A 16-year-old boy had been held at the facility for 43 days.

The "Four Corners" report was based on 200 case notes obtained by Amnesty International from the Office of the Public Guardian under the Right to Information laws. Amnesty International said the notes documented 2,655 individual violations of human rights law and domestic legislation since March 2018.

The notes documented a litany of abuses, dangerous incidents and medical emergencies. In three separate incidents, children had all or part of one of their fingers cut off by cell doors.

One young man was held in an isolation cell for 23 days. Many others had been held for up to two weeks. Under international law, holding someone in solitary confinement for longer than 15 days is deemed torture.

In another case, a 17-year-old girl injected herself with the tranquiliser Xanax laced with Ice. It is unclear

how she came to possess the drug. She was not provided with any medical treatment before she was released.

Children have been put in close proximity with dangerous and unstable adults. In one case, a teenage girl was placed in a same cell as two male sex offenders. In another, two children were kept in a cell in full view across from a convicted paedophile.

There have been multiple suicide attempts by teenagers inside the Brisbane watch house. Children with psychological issues have been subjected to degrading and inhumane treatment.

A young girl with a history of suicide attempts spent nine days in isolation in an observation cell wearing only a suicide gown. Another girl was forced to the ground, stripped of her clothing by several officers and forced into a suicide smock.

Police reportedly used the invasive "squat and cough" method of strip-searching children entering the facility.

A 12-year-old boy, who had been remanded in the Brisbane watch house on car-theft charges, told "Four Corners" the experience had been "scary." He said: "All the security guards, the staff, the other guys they were swearing at me, calling me little black things. I was the smallest in there, they put me in with a couple of other boys I didn't know, I couldn't fight, I would be bashed."

Natalie Siegel-Brown, Queensland's public guardian, reported that "kids are in there for the most minor of crimes... the vast majority of them have never been convicted... if the kids are lucky they get 15 minutes of exercise in a small concrete pen, with mesh over the roof."

Of all children in Queensland prisons, approximately 86 percent are on remand. Most of those detained in

Brisbane watch house are waiting for a court appearance.

Desperate to head off widespread anger over the revelations, Queensland Labor's Child Safety Minister Di Farmer announced \$300 million for the expansion of youth detention facilities across the state. In other words, Labor's response is more prisons.

In office since 2015, Labor has sought to justify the abusive regime by blaming it on overcrowding in youth detention centres. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, however, has documented a decline in youth crime nationally since 2009. This suggests that police are arresting children and teenagers in greater numbers on suspicion of minor offenses.

Young people who are forced into the prison system frequently suffer mental health problems, fueled by unemployment, family breakdown and alcohol and drug addiction.

This is part of a deepening social crisis. Working class youth face high levels of unemployment and underemployment, astronomical housing costs, large debts and tuition fees and, more broadly, a future of war, austerity and further cuts to social conditions.

Aboriginal people, the most oppressed section of the working class, are heavily over-represented throughout the prison population. Half the children detained at the Brisbane watch house this month were of Aboriginal descent. Aborigines are frequently deprived of decent healthcare and education, face systematic discrimination and suffer poverty rates far higher than the broader population.

An Aboriginal grandmother whose grandson was forcibly taken from her home in the regional mining town of Mount Isa, told "Four Corners" her grandson and his friends "can't walk from A to B without the police harassing them, I'm worried about my grandson, they mistreat him all the time."

Labor and Liberal-National governments alike have responded to the misery and anger caused by their pro-business policies by boosting police numbers. In October 2017, Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk announced that an additional 400 police officers would be hired by 2021, on top of an extra 300 between 2015 and 2017. The total throughout the state is already 11,800.

The latest exposure points to worsening abuses of children in detention. It comes three years after millions

of people in Australia and internationally were sickened by footage on another "Four Corners" program. It showed boys as young as 10 being assaulted, stripped naked, tear-gassed, held in solitary confinement for days on end, and shackled and hooded in "restraint chairs" in a juvenile detention centre in the Northern Territory (NT).

The federal Liberal-National government announced a royal commission in a bid to defuse international outrage over the incident. The royal commission called for Darwin's Don Dale juvenile prison to be closed, finding that youth detention centres in the NT "were not fit for accommodating, let alone rehabilitating, children and young people."

Like every other royal commission, it was a whitewash, which held nobody to account for the institutional abuse of young people, and did nothing to alter the conditions of those who remained imprisoned. The NT Labor government, in office since 2016, has kept the inhumane facility open.

Likewise, in the state of Victoria, after inmates damaged Melbourne's Parkville youth prison during unrest in 2016, the state Labor government illegally moved some of the detainees to Barwon Prison, a maximum-security adult jail. There they were capsicum-sprayed and faced extended periods of solitary confinement.

In 2017, the Labor government announced it was constructing the "the highest-security youth justice facility that Victoria has ever seen." This would have six-metre perimeter fencing and many of the same design features as a maximum-security adult prison.

These measures are a sharp expression of a broader turn to authoritarian forms of rule by the entire political establishment amid a deepening social and economic crisis, growing political discontent and the reemergence of major class struggles internationally.



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