



*'A last resort?'*

## Report of the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention

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### MENTAL HEALTH

Under the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, all children living in Australia – including children held in immigration detention – have a right to the 'highest attainable standard of health'. The Convention also states that children escaping conflict, torture or trauma have a right to special help to recover 'in an environment which fosters the health, self respect and dignity of the child.'

The Inquiry received a wide range of evidence which indicated that detention has a significantly detrimental impact on the mental health of some children. While children who were detained for short periods of time may not have been greatly affected, evidence from the primary records of mental health professionals who treated children in detention showed that the longer children were held in detention, the more their mental health deteriorated.

Whilst children in detention did receive some support and help from mental health professionals, many experts told the Inquiry that the detention environment made it virtually impossible to meet the mental health needs of children and their families. This was because the source of many of the problems was the detention environment itself.

The Inquiry heard numerous examples where State mental health and child protection agencies, as well as independent experts, repeatedly recommended that children be removed from detention to protect their mental health. By April 2002 most unaccompanied children were removed from detention centres following these recommendations – but the recommendations were not implemented for children in detention with their parents.

Mental health experts, many of whom had treated children in detention, told the Inquiry that child detainees had experienced, amongst other things, clinical depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and various anxiety disorders.

Children in detention exhibited symptoms including bed wetting, sleep walking and night terrors. At the severe end of the spectrum, some children became mute, refused to eat and drink, made suicide attempts and began to self-harm, such as by cutting themselves. Some children were not meeting their developmental milestones.

The Inquiry received evidence that the trauma children experienced before they arrived in Australia did not account for the extent of mental health problems they demonstrated in detention. The evidence was clear that immigration detention centres were not an environment where they could recover from past conflict and trauma.

Children, parents, child protection authorities and psychiatrists all agreed that children are deeply affected by witnessing violence in the detention centres, such as riots, fires, suicide attempts, incidents of self-harm and hunger strikes.

The Inquiry found that the Commonwealth failed to take all appropriate measures to protect and promote the mental health and development of children in detention over the period of the Inquiry and therefore breached the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

The failure to implement repeated recommendations by mental health professionals to release certain children with their parents amounted to cruel and inhumane treatment.