



National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention

SUMMARIES OF CASE EXAMPLES

SAFETY

In January 2002 when there were 281 children detained at Woomera, there was a major hunger strike and protest. Seven children were involved in lip-sewing.

Children who were detained at both Curtin and Woomera told the Inquiry that they had been affected by tear gas. Nearly every family interviewed by the Inquiry at Woomera in June 2002 reported that children were affected by tear gas during the Easter 2002 riots. (p322-323)

In late 2001, an 11 year old unaccompanied boy who had been detained at Woomera for 6 months was assaulted by ACM officers. While this may have been an isolated incident, it demonstrates that Woomera was not a safe environment for young unaccompanied children. (p339)

During 2001, a six year old child stopped eating, drinking, talking and sleeping after seeing an adult detainee attempt suicide. He was hospitalised on at least eight occasions due to post-traumatic stress disorder during 2001 before being released on a bridging visa. (pp343-348)

MENTAL HEALTH

A 2003 psychiatric study of 20 children detained in a remote centre found that all were suffering from psychiatric illness and that they had tenfold increase in psychiatric illness over the period of detention. (pp391-392)

In May 2002, a psychiatrist diagnosed a 13 year old boy and an 11 year old girl as both suffering from major depressive disorder. The detention environment was a major contributing factor. These children had been in detention for over a year. (pp403-404)

At Woomera, between January and July 2002, there were 50 reports of self-harm regarding 22 children. The most frequent incidents occurred with children aged between 10 and 12 years. In no other environment in Australia would children this young self-harm so extensively. (pp409-411)

There is a child still detained in Baxter who has been seriously mentally ill since May 2002. This boy has regularly self-harmed. His father is extremely psychiatrically unwell. There have been approximately 20 independent recommendations that he be released from detention with his family on mental health grounds. This boy is still in detention. This is cruel and inhuman treatment. (p432-438)

The father of a family detained at Woomera for over three years told psychiatrists that when he was arrested and tortured in Iran the military had threatened to bring his children in to watch. He said 'This is what is happening now in Australia.' This man's wife and two teenage daughters all suffered major depression while in detention. (pp438-442)

Between April 2002 and July 2002, a 14 year old boy detained at Woomera attempted to hang himself three times, climbed into the razor wire on four occasions, slashed his arms twice and went on hunger strikes twice. This boy's mother was hospitalised due to her own mental illness during this whole period. This boy remains in detention. (pp442-444)

DISABILITIES

A child with severe cerebral palsy was detained for two years in the remote centre of Curtin, and for one year at Baxter before being released. This mother had such difficulty caring for him in the harsh environment of Curtin that in March 2002, after 16 months of detention, she handed him over to ACM. Once she got the help she needed, she resumed care of her child. This child was wheeled around in a baby stroller for seven months, because a suitable wheelchair was not provided. (pp545, 549)

A family of three children with an intellectual disability were detained at Port Hedland for nearly three years, and then at Villawood for several months before they were released. It took two years for these children's disability to be diagnosed. (pp534-537)

EDUCATION

In Woomera during 2001, when hundreds of children were detained there, children only received between one and three hours of education each day. There were not enough buildings and not enough staff to provide anything remotely resembling an appropriate curriculum to those children. (p610)

Although most children were attending external schools by the beginning of 2003, some children never had this opportunity. In one family of adolescent children detained at Curtin and then at Baxter, the children were not allowed to attend external schools, first because their English was too poor and then because they were over 16. This would never happen to children in the Australian community. (pp641-642)

UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

In 2001, an eight year old unaccompanied boy was detained at Woomera for four months before he was released into the community on a bridging visa. This boy had six different foster families over the four months. It took the Department six weeks to arrange for the state child welfare agency to assess the child, and although they recommended his release at the end of August it took a further two months for him to be released from Woomera.

In January 2002, a significant number of unaccompanied children were involved in hunger strikes, lip sewing, and threatened suicide if they were not released from detention. All of these children had been detained for between 6-12 months. This dramatic action demonstrates that

Woomera is no place for children. Five unaccompanied children were transferred to foster home detention on 24 January, four on 27 January, and five more on 8 February. The Department clearly did not make the best interests of these children a priority until the situation was critical. (pp751-756)

In January 2002, a 14 year old unaccompanied child detained at Woomera threw himself against a wall, threatened to kill himself at least three times, went on a hunger strike and ingested shampoo. This child was transferred from the detention centre into foster care at the end of January 2002, but this dramatic action shows that detention centres such as Woomera are no place for children. (pp751-756)