



Petition

Registration No.	10
Title	Stop the expansion of Don Dale Youth Detention Centre and reverse the laws sending more children to prison
Presented on	21 September 2021
Presented by	Member for Mulka
Referred to	Minister for Territory Families and Urban Housing; and Public Account Committee
Assembly debate	If the Committee recommends the Petition be debated it will appear on the Notice Paper
Date referred	22 September 2021
Response due	22 March 2022
Response received	14 December 2021
Response presented	15 February 2022

Petition

To the Speaker and the Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory,

We the undersigned, ask that you stop the expansion of Don Dale Youth Detention Centre and reverse the laws that are sending more children to prison.

Don Dale is dangerous. Witnesses on the ground have told Amnesty International Australia that kids need to huddle in corners of their cells to avoid being rained on, and are being forced to stay in their cells for 9-hours a day due to short-staffing.

This time last year, there were only 14 kids in Don Dale on an average day. Now, there's 32 – and the centre is only set up to fit 25. Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre is also practically at capacity. Thanks to the Office of the Children's Commissioner in the Territory, we are able to keep a close eye on the increase in numbers each week, and it is staggering.

The government rammed through laws in May – with little-to-no consultation – that removed the presumption of bail for first time offenders and automatically revokes bail if conditions are breached. This means that unsentenced kids are being sent to Don Dale almost automatically, when under international law they should only ever be imprisoned as a last resort. In fact, 83% of kids in detention in the Northern Territory are unsentenced, on remand.

This is why prison population numbers are sky-rocketing, and prisons are overflowing. The Government's answer is to expand the prison, but they are wrong to do so.

Remember, the Royal Commission into youth justice in the Northern Territory recommended that Don Dale close, and be replaced with a smaller, therapeutic facility – in 2018.

Instead of spending millions on expanding prisons, the Government needs to do everything in its power to keep kids out of prison. Prison doesn't work. We know that time locked up increases the likelihood of young offenders reoffending and being repeatedly incarcerated in the youth and then adult prison systems.

Indigenous and community-led prevention and diversion programs that address the underlying causes of crime are more effective at reducing reoffending than prison. Instead of kids being harmed in Don Dale, they need to be sent to programs that help them re-engage with school or employment, address underlying trauma and health issues, and set them up to live a healthy, happy life.

Response

The Northern Territory Government is determined to reduce crime, keep the community safe and put victims first. Our youth justice system seeks to contribute to community safety, decrease offending and develop prosocial behaviours in young people in order to prevent and reduce re-offending.

Intervening early, preventing young people from engaging in crime, diverting young people from the cycle of crime and getting young offenders back on the right track remain the Government's priority. This Government has been instrumental in delivering significant investment in the youth justice system. We have introduced a Bail Support System, a Youth Outreach System and worked in partnership with regions to develop and implement Regional Youth Action Plans.

The *Youth Justice Legislation Amendment Act 2021*, which passed on 11 May 2021, was introduced in response to the commitment to keep Territorians and our communities safe by holding repeat offenders to account. The intent is to deliver swift and immediate responses to curtail young people's ongoing engagement in youth offending and, in doing so, support them to get back on track wherever possible.

These legislative amendments do not diminish the Government's commitment to responding to the findings of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. The *Youth Justice Legislation Amendment Act 2021* will be evaluated within 18 months of the legislative amendments having commenced.

The delivery of the new Darwin Youth Justice Centre is not an expansion of the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre. The new centre will deliver safe, contemporary facilities that enhance the quality of interactions between youth justice officers and young people through delivery of trauma informed services. The facilities will contribute to enhanced delivery of health, education and programs. Infrastructure works complement growth in the youth justice workforce and enhanced training for our youth justice officers.

Our immediate focus is on the development of a model of care for our youth justice centres, continuing to strengthen quality alternatives to detention, and consideration and implementation of the 10 Year Generational Strategy. Government respects the role of our community based providers who will be instrumental in continuing to grow the regional footprint, essential to supporting young people avoid escalation into the youth justice system.