

## Disturbing report on children in detention presents opportunity for change: JRS

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia says a report on children in detention highlights the extreme failure of the government's refugee and asylum policy, and presents an opportunity for long-overdue change.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention report was tabled in Parliament today. It found that the prolonged detention of children has severe negative impacts on their health and development, with 34 per cent of children detained in Australian centres displaying signs of serious mental illness that require a referral to a mental health professional. This compares with just two per cent in the general population.

"These findings are extremely disturbing and prove what human rights groups and mental health professionals have been telling the government for years: that detention is a dangerous place and is harmful to children," says Oliver White, Head of Policy and Advocacy at Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

"It's now well-documented, thanks to the AHRC's report, that children in detention are exposed to disturbing incidents such as assault and hunger strikes, that some of them have been subjected to sexual assault, and many resort to self-harm."

While the report acknowledges that mental health and wellbeing improves dramatically once a child is released, it also demonstrates that the harm caused is ongoing, sometimes affecting children into adulthood.

By detaining children in this way, Australia is breaching its international obligations under human rights law: Australia is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which clearly states that children should only be detained as a last resort and for the shortest period of time; they should not be detained arbitrarily; they should have the right to challenge their detention in a court of law; and the best interests of the child should always be taken into consideration.

While the government has made progress in relocating children held on Christmas Island to the Australian mainland, 330 children remain in detention – 211 in mainland facilities and 119 on Nauru. JRS says the report – the first of its kind undertaken in ten years – presents the government with an opportunity to acknowledge the flaws inherent in its refugee policy and to utilise existing alternatives that will align it with other, less punitive, countries.

"We welcome the fact that the majority of children have been released from detention, but those who remain are vulnerable to the conditions that have now been exposed by the AHRC's report," says Mr White.

Furthermore, there are no legal measures in place which prevent children from being detained for immigration purposes in the future. JRS urges the government to follow the example of the United Kingdom, where statute law prevents the minister from detaining a child beyond seven days.

"The government can no longer claim ignorance about the long-term psychological damage that detention causes to children, and we echo the AHRC's recommendation that the government end all mandatory detention with immediate effect," says Mr White.

"The findings of this report are important as they document the harm we have caused children who have come to this country seeking safety. This is an opportunity for us to take stock, reflect on what

we have done, change how we treat the world's most vulnerable people – and promise never do this again.”

### **For further information**

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### **Note to editors**

JRS Australia staff regularly visit asylum seekers held in a number of detention centres in the country, offering psychosocial and pastoral care to nearly 5,000 people in 2013. Teams also provides a small number of refugees in vulnerable circumstances with emergency and longer-term accommodation, and assists with legal aid, preparation for employment, healthcare, English lessons and financial management. Based on their close proximity to refugees, JRS supports initiatives and efforts for lasting policy change by both national refugee agencies and the International Detention Coalition (IDC).

Internationally JRS programmes are found in 50 countries, providing assistance to: refugees in camps and cities, individuals displaced within their own countries, asylum seekers in cities, and to those held in detention centres. The main areas of work are in the field of education, emergency assistance, healthcare, livelihood activities and social services.

At the end of 2013, JRS employed approximately 1,400 staff: lay, Jesuits and other religious to meet the education, health, social and other needs of nearly 950,000 refugees and IDPs, more than half of whom are women. Services are provided to refugees regardless of race, ethnic origin or religious beliefs.