For the attention of the Australian Human Rights Commission,

We are writing in regard to the *Children in Detention Inquiry*. We have recently completed a longitudinal study concerning the mental health and wellbeing of migrant and refugee children in Australia (aged 5 to 12 years), focusing on their experiences in the education system. Several of the participants in the observational component of the study were children with refugee backgrounds, some of whom had been previously held in detention centres. We write this submission in relation to the findings from our own research as well as our knowledge of the academic literature and research in this area by addressing two of the terms of reference.

**The impact of the length of detention on children (For example, is there any difference in the ways in which a child responds to immigration detention after 1 week, 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year? Please give examples.)**

While our research did not specifically examine the length of detention on children’s wellbeing, it was clear that detention in general had significant negative impacts upon children’s mental health, their ability to form peer relationships, and their ability to participate in their education upon resettlement in Australia. Children who had been in detention were observed to experience issues in relation to overall mental health and wellbeing, and were witnessed to be withdrawn and to perform behaviours consist with psychological trauma, including self-soothing behaviours such as sitting in a corner and rocking. These findings suggest justifiable reason for considerable concern about the impact of detention. This is consistent with other psychological literature in this area which indicates that detention has ongoing, negative impacts upon development and psychological wellbeing (e.g., Steel et al., 2004; Thomas & Lau, 2002).
The separation of families across detention facilities in Australia

While we cannot speak to whether any children were held in different detention facilities than their family members, children in the study who were separated from family members typically showed higher levels of distress and frequently spoke of missing their family and worrying about their wellbeing, which in turn impacted their own wellbeing. In addition, children in this position appeared to be exposed to the mental health issues of their parents resulting from the uncertainty of separation, supported previous research concerning the potential intergenerational nature of psychological trauma (Daud, Skoglund, & Rydelius, 2005).

To summarise, our preliminary findings indicate that children who have been held in detention centres demonstrate psychological distress above the levels seen in children who are refugees but have not been held in detention centres. As such, and supporting other research, our own research findings suggest that detention impacts negatively upon mental health and wellbeing for young people with refugee backgrounds.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Clemence Due
Dr Damien W. Riggs
Professor Martha Augoustinos
References

