

Submission to the

Australian Human Rights Commission:

National Inquiry into Children in Immigration

Detention 2014

May 2014

Dear AHRC

Croakey is a public health blog. I am writing, as the moderator of the blog, to make this submission on behalf of a number of health professionals who contribute to Croakey.

The submission includes two articles published at Croakey:  
  
**How the federal government is grooming us to be complicit in child abuse**  
By psychiatrist Professor Alan Rosen  
<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/croakey/2014/03/02/how-the-federal-government-is-grooming-us-to-be-complicit-in-child-abuse/>

**What does the evidence tell us about the impact of immigration detention on children?**

By Jaelea Skehan and Gavin Hazel from the Hunter Institute of Mental Health   
<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/croakey/2014/03/02/what-does-the-evidence-tell-us-about-the-impact-of-immigration-detention-on-children/>

Thank you for considering this submission,  
**Melissa Sweet**

**How the federal government is grooming us to be complicit in child abuse**

In the article below, psychiatrist Professor Alan Rosen argues that the immigration detention of children amounts to systematic child abuse, and notes the irony of this occurring while inquiries are underway into institutional abuse of previous generations of children.

Instead of allowing ourselves to be lulled into complicity, he calls for a broad social movement of ordinary Australians to insist that this child abuse be stopped and its impact monitored.

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**Alan Rosen writes:**

There is often an unfortunate lag-phase in building the groundswell of public opinion against even the most blatant of human rights abuses, even against defenseless infants and children stuck for the longhaul in immigration detention.

It is now abhorrent to the majority of the Australian public that any form of slavery (eg sexual, domestic or workplace) should be possible in Australia, or that our governments stole generations of Aboriginal children in our name, and that similarly our governments and our most prominent religious and secular institutions allowed, turned a blind eye to, and in some cases virtually aided and abetted on-going devastating child abuse.

With most of these abuses, we only get around to abhorring them as a nation, and to doing anything coherent to stop them, or to then prevent them re-occurring, when they have been festering for generations.

At that stage we collectively cannot understand how we, or the preceding generations of us, could not have been fully aware of them, how we could have turned a blind eye and tolerated these abuses.

Some of these abuses have been perpetrated in secret, though the secret is usually not that well kept that the relevant administrations did not really know about it.

The governments and administrations at the time also knew what was being done was wrong – so much so that they often felt the need to systematically suppress and gloss over the extent of that truth.

Our national community often had more than a glimmering of this suppression or glossing over of this “secret”, and we could have objected if we really wanted to, but we were lulled into thinking that, whatever these administrations were doing, was occurring in the national interest, and into allowing it all to happen.

Similarly, this is the case with the yet-to-fully-emerge scandal of children in immigration detention, now exacerbated by marooning them on islands concentrated together with a mob of frustrated and angry strangers for an uncertain but seemingly interminable period of their short lives.

We know it is wrong and destructive. We have strong evidence of the terrible trauma damage and mental illness consequences of allowing our governments to perpetrate this on kids, as the [studies by Zachary Steel](http://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=r-KUTdEAAAAJ&hl=en) and others had proven during the last round of child detention under the Howard government.

There is now no excuse of government ignorance about the damage, and this makes the present treatment of children even more immoral than previously.

However, manufactured fear of the descending hordes has a long tradition in Australia. It began with the fear of the “yellow peril” which persuaded us that we needed the “White Australia” policy. It was a gravitational theory, which implied that the only definitive way to stem and correct this inevitable downward flow, was to tip the world up the other way so they would all flow back again.

But here we go again. The same abusive elements are all there.

On the recycled pretext of xenophobic fear of the gravitationally descending hordes, we the public are being lulled into determining our national interest on the basis of so-called “security priorities”, which are the result of the artificial and magnified manufacture of this fear.

We are being groomed again by our government to participate and to be complicit in this abuse of children in immigration detention, ironically even while we are running national and state judicial commissions on the systematic abuse of children.

Such lulling and grooming leads us to collective denial, or to becoming psychically numbed to the pain experienced by the abused kids, and dire consequences of such abuses as they grow up, if they do, which would otherwise evoke our pity, indignation, and our strong condemnation.

Our national government is being secretive about its actions and about the extent and consequences of these abuses, both on the high seas and on the ground. It is determined to suppress all information about the fate of these children. It will not allow any oversight or monitoring by independent experts eg independent psychiatric professionals, either on Nauru (where there are 20 unaccompanied minors and some families with kids) or Manus Island (where there are no kids so far) or elsewhere to report on how these kids and other young people are faring.

The Australian Government’s offshore detention system is already generating deaths. Who knows? Before long, some of these already traumatised kids may be witnessing or getting caught up in terrifying riots and allegedly brutal attacks by police militia and locals on detention centre inmates in Nauru, like young adult escapees are presently experiencing on Manus Island.

So how can we wake ourselves from this recurrent bad dream, seeing it for what it is, systematic child abuse, carried out in our name, in broad daylight, insisting to our government that it should be in our line of sight, independently and accurately monitored and stopped?

We need to remind ourselves that:

1. It is possible to recognize human rights abuses while they are growing or at their height, and insisting that they be stopped, rather than always being on the back foot, tolerating them or being lulled into complicity, realizing belatedly that they are abhorrent, and then investigating and apologizing for them in retrospect, or a generation or two later.

2. If there was a collective and government will to do so, independent professional expert monitoring of the conditions in which these kids are being detained could be initiated within days and reported upon promptly, and then could be monitored continuously.

3. Empty the detention centres of unaccompanied kids and families with kids and process their applications from the community.  Inevitably it will be have to be done anyway, as when the pressure built up on John Howard’s government, partially because it was splitting over this issue. So why arouse even more hostility in, further traumatise and alienate kids, the majority of whom will have to be absorbed into Australian society in the long run?

4. The dominant rhetoric is that the majority of the electorate has been buying into has been fear generated by governments, which have been confounding and merging the security agenda with the law and order agenda, the xenophobia, overpopulation and the ‘taking our jobs” agendas… all done to cynically buy them a few more votes which can really count in swinging seats.

This paints a dismal view of the Australian public and its attitudes and is dismaying and even silencing many weary formerly vocal advocates for asylum seekers and their children, who are wondering if they should just give up on the national spirit in disgust and despair.

However, there is another strong strand of the Australian national character and psyche. This is the equally traditional, fine Australian character which believes strongly on giving all people a fair go, in social justice for all, in warmly welcoming newcomers to our communities, and in protecting vulnerable kids and families from needless suffering and wanton exploitation.

This parallel Australian tradition is far from dominant in this debate, however. Though somewhat ragged, suppressed, dormant and almost half-buried at present, nonetheless, it is still really there, available and capable of revival by a coherent broad social movement of ordinary Australian citizens.

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**What does the evidence tell us about the impact of immigration detention on children?**

**Jaelea Skehan and Gavin Hazel from the Hunter Institute of Mental Health write:**

On 3 February 2014 the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Professor Gillian Triggs, launched an inquiry into children in closed immigration detention.

The purpose of this inquiry is to investigate the ways in which life in immigration detention affects the health, well-being and development of children.

In mental health, we are often trying to find answers to things we don’t know. But there are some things we do know.

We know that a healthy start to life is important for a child’s health and wellbeing and their health and wellbeing into adult life. We know that a focus on the determinants of health and mental health can foster safer and healthier families and communities.

While many of us working in mental health may not have been directly exposed to facilities where children are detained, the evidence about what enhances, and what puts at risk, the mental health and wellbeing of children is important to consider in light of this review.

What do we know about early childhood development?

The quality of an individual’s life in childhood and adolescence has a significant impact on emotional, social and psychological development and lays the foundations for further development in these areas.

A number of early life conditions are associated with social and emotional wellbeing later in life, including:

Health factors: Good maternal health during pregnancy, safe childbirth, freedom from chronic or severe illness in infancy and early childhood;

A positive family environment – one that is safe and free from violence, one that promotes secure attachment to parents and/or caregivers;

Access to high quality family support and childcare when this is needed; and Achievement of age-appropriate social and emotional competencies.

Other key social determinants of health and social and emotional wellbeing include basic freedoms of speech, religion, and residence; social inclusion; a peaceful living environment; economic and housing security; access to adequate health services; social support; and education.

Evidence suggests that happy and healthy children are more likely to develop into healthy and resilient adults in later life. Children who experience a poorer start in life are more likely to develop behavioural, learning or mental health problems in childhood or adolescence and these can remain with them throughout their lives (Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

What do we know about child and adolescent social and emotional wellbeing within the context of detention?

The presence of a stable and supportive environment within the home is a protective factor for the social and emotional wellbeing of young people. When families are separated across detention facilities in Australia, the fundamental dynamics of the family are disrupted, which has an unavoidable impact on the child’s wellbeing.

Attachment theory holds that a consistent and loving relationship with a primary caregiver is essential to optimal development during the younger years, and that the absence of or disruption to such a relationship can cause significant developmental issues in later life (Bowlby 1969; 1973; 1980). These issues are further compounded for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, who experience the loss of a parental/caregiving figure for emotional and psychological support.

A number of studies identify a strong relationship between the experience and/or exacerbation of mental and physical health issues among children and adolescents in immigration detention; in particular, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm, suicidal ideation, depression and anxiety (Bull et al., 2012; Dudley, 2003; Dudley et al., 2012; Mares & Jureidini, 2004; Silove et al., 2007; Steel et al., 2004); and a link between the length of detention and severity/comorbidity of psychiatric disorders (Bull et al., 2012; Green & Eagar, 2010; Mares and Jureidini, 2004; Procter, De Leo & Newman, 2012; Steel et al., 2004).

Some final considerations

The evidence reviewed would suggest that at a minimum, the immigration detention system is unable to support the promotion of protective factors that are important for the wellbeing of all children.

This includes, but is not limited to, access to education, health, recreation, and supportive relationships. The evidence, although limited, would also suggest that there are concerning rates of severe mental illness, as well as self-harm and suicidal ideation among children and young people in these settings.

While policies around those seeking asylum and detention are not straightforward and as a nation we may not know the best way forward to address all competing objectives, paramount to our collective thinking and response must be consideration of the impact policies and approaches have on children. Specifically, the mental health and wellbeing of children.

• This summary was written by Jaelea Skehan (Director) and Gavin Hazel (Program Manager, Child and Youth) at the Hunter Institute of Mental Health.

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