

## **NT Government condemned for sky-rocketing number of Aboriginal children behind bars**

1 December 2021

Change the Record, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) and the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC) have condemned the Northern Territory Government for the skyrocketing number of children it has criminalised and imprisoned - including a ten-year-old child.

Census data released this week shows that the Gunner Government has almost doubled the number of young people it is locking away behind bars. Almost 100% of those children are Aboriginal.

Today it was confirmed that for the first time since the NT Royal Commission into the abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal children in the Don Dale youth detention centre, a ten-year-old child was arrested and held for three days unsentenced in a police watch house.

This follows the NT Government introducing some of the most punitive youth justice laws in the country without advising or consulting with local Aboriginal legal services.

### **Cheryl Axleby, Co-Chair of Change the Record:**

“The Northern Territory Government is stealing our children’s future. The Chief Minister and Attorney General talk about closing the gap, but in reality they are playing politics with our children’s lives and risk us losing a whole generation of our young people to their archaic, dangerous criminal legal system. It is thanks to the Northern Territory Government’s appalling youth justice laws that the number of our kids behind bars has almost doubled. If the Northern Territory Government is to have any hope of meeting its closing the gap targets, it must change course and raise the age to at least 14 years old.”

### **Priscilla Atkins, Chair of NATSILS:**

“To learn that there has been a 10 year old child in a police watch house in the N.T is absolutely heartbreaking. The Royal Commission was supposed to reform this broken system, yet due to discriminatory and punitive policies, more and more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids are

being dragged into prisons and separated from their families and communities.

Along with raising the age to at least 14 years old, the N.T government needs to work with Aboriginal organisations to create pathways away from jail to support our young people to succeed. Aboriginal-led solutions work.”

**Ruth Barson, Legal Director at the Human Rights Law Centre:**

“The Gunner Government was elected on a promise to close Don Dale and put an end to the horrific abuses that led to the Country Liberal Party being hauled before a Royal Commission. Rather than protecting children by making good on these promises, the NT Labor Government has done the exact opposite by continuing to lock up primary school aged children at record rates. The Gunner Government must now do the right thing by raising the age to at least 14 and closing Don Dale once and for all.”