

# Townsville charities battling ‘harmful, expensive and ineffective’ overuse of Qld’s prisons

Queensland over-relies on ‘harmful, expensive and ineffective’ prisons, a new report says. See what social workers on the ground say.

[Blair Jackson](#)

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Townsville Bulletin



Shine For Kids Townsville child and family co-ordinator Jess Clancy. Picture: Blair Jackson.

## Townsville

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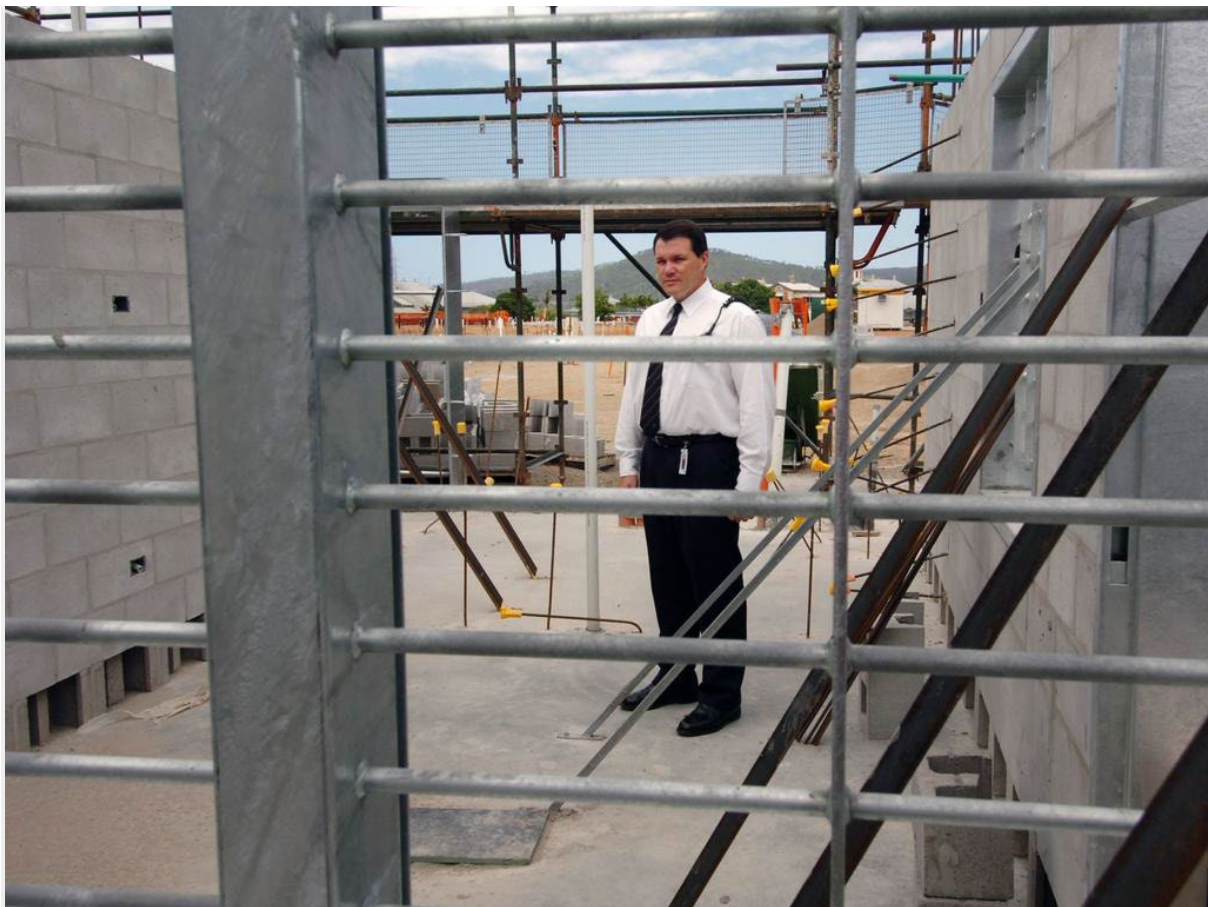
A host of Townsville organisations are highlighted as doing good work in a new report that argues “jailing is failing”.

Jess Clancy goes into Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre every Friday to help supervise playgroup, teach mothers to regulate their emotions and how to look after their kids.

There is one child under the age of five living with its mother at Townsville Correctional Centre at the moment, Ms Clancy said, and there had been up to six kids living there previously.

“I’ve had people say to me I’m being a better mum now in the correctional facility than out in the community,” she said.

“Having the parent with the kid in prison keeps them responsible for their child.”



Taken in 2006, then Townsville Correctional Centre general manager John Harrison standing in the new women's prison as it's being built. Picture: Evan Morgan.

A woman Ms Clancy works with was convicted of driving offences when fleeing domestic violence, and another woman just saw her baby twins for the first time since they were born a month ago.

There should not be new and bigger prisons built, instead more funding for programs like Shine for Kids', she said.

“A lot of people have gone into prison at the lowest point in their life. So now’s the time to give them programs and rehabilitation.”

Shine For Kids is one of a multitude of North Queensland and statewide organisations and programs highlighted in a report released on Tuesday.



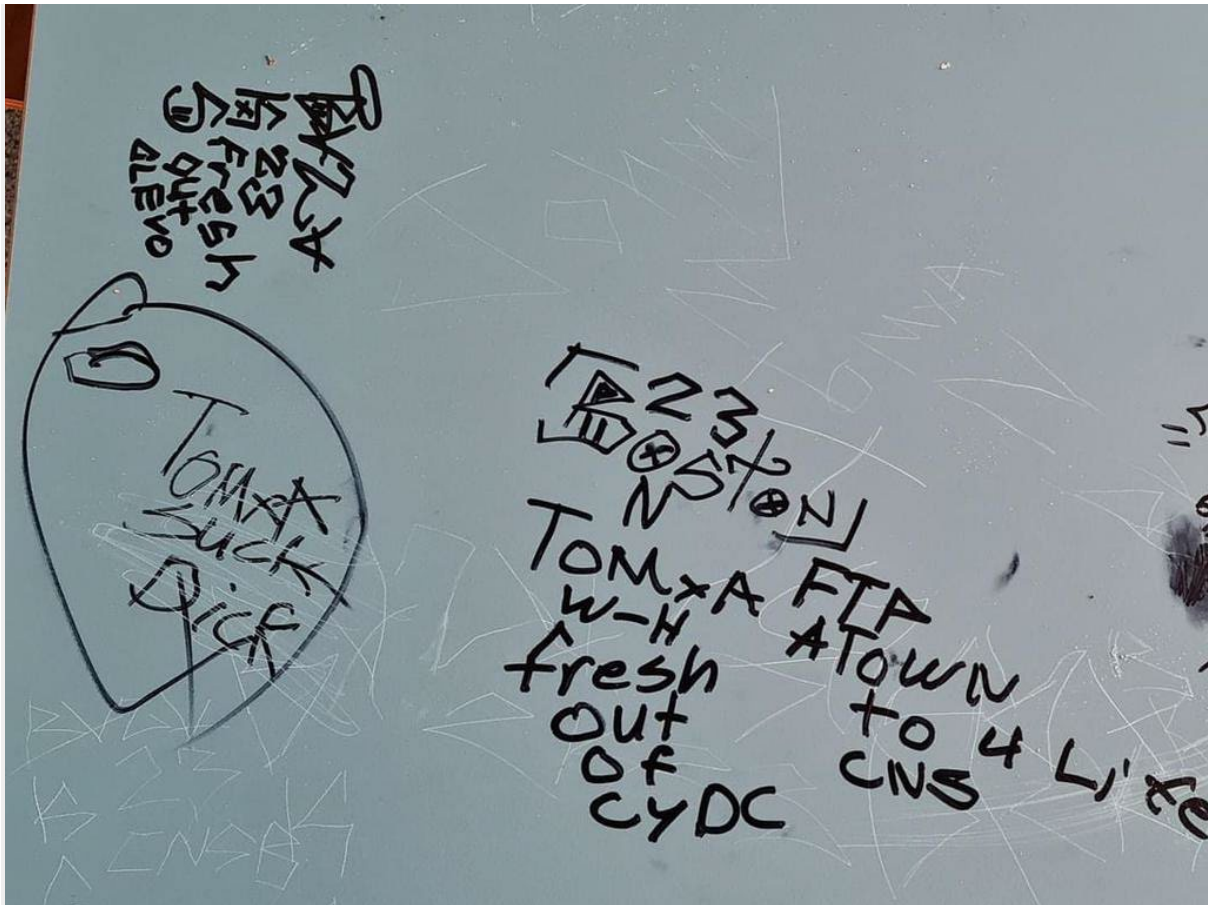
Townsville social worker Jess Clancy says some mothers tell her they become better parents in prison. Picture: Blair Jackson.

The report was commissioned by the Justice Reform Initiative, a group of esteemed judges and academics set up in 2020 to reduce Australia’s reliance on incarceration.

“Queensland relies on a system of incarceration for children and adults that is harmful, expensive and ineffective,” the report states.

“Prison does not work to reduce crime, it does not work to build safer communities and it does not work to address the social drivers of contact with the criminal justice system,” the report further states.





Graffiti written during a break-in at a shop in Cairns on April 30, 2023, appears to reference Cleveland Youth Detention Centre; “Fresh out of CYDC” and “Fresh out Clevo”. Picture: Rise and Bike (Facebook).

“The overuse of incarceration in Queensland has historically been driven by a politicised approach to justice policy, with both major parties frequently competing to promote a ‘tough on crime’ agenda.

Rachel Montgomery of the Red Cross conducts weekly first aid lessons for women in the Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre.

Ms Montgomery and a colleague have 26 special status volunteers in the prison, who clean the facility and have first aid training.

The training has led some women to jobs in the charity sector once they’ve been released, Ms Montgomery said.

However, the responsibility and pride of being a volunteer did not make prison less of a deterrent, she said.

“No way, because losing your freedom and losing control of your life is punishment enough”.

Katter's Australian Party deputy leader Nick Dametto said much of the report supported his party's relocation sentencing ideas.



Member for Hinchinbrook Nick Dametto wants child offenders away from the negative influences and vices they find in the cities with their regular peer groups and families. Picture: Brendan Radke.

Sending a young person to a remote station as a criminal sentence – relocation sentencing – was not included in the state government's recent youth justice reforms.

Prisons were set up to be “nasty places” and a deterrent but if a young person felt safer there than at home, then relocation sentencing should be considered, Mr Dametto said.

Queensland Government's Youth Residential Care Service, ‘resi-care’, was difficult because kids couldn't be forced to stay there, the Hinchinbrook MP said.

Queensland has the second highest rate of children's incarceration in Australia; 4.8 kids per 10,000 are incarcerated, lower only than the Northern Territory.

“On an average night in 2021-22, there were 267 children imprisoned in the state,” the report states.



Youths rioting on top of a building at Cleveland Youth Detention Centre in 2016. Picture: Domanii Cameron.

The number of adults locked up has gone up about 64 per cent in the past decade, to 9589 on an average night.

“This rise in the number of prisoners in Queensland has been driven by systematic failings and legislative and policy choices that funnel people unnecessarily into imprisonment, particularly people experiencing disadvantage,” the report states.

Patrons of the Justice Reform Initiative include Gail Mabo, multiple Supreme Court judges and other academics.

Shadow Attorney-General Tim Nicholls said the LNP had proposed “unshackling the judiciary” by removing the sentencing provision of detention as a last resort, and offering “gold standard” early intervention programs.

Attorney-General Yvette D'Ath said she reinstated successful court diversionary programs like the Murri Court, the Drug and Alcohol Court and Court Link.

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Since 2019 the government had invested \$500m to divert young people from crime and help stop reoffending.

"It's important for any justice system to strike a balance between community expectations when it comes to sentencing and offering evidence-based rehabilitation services," Ms D'Ath said.