

Voices of Aboriginal Male Prisoners at the Metropolitan Remand Centre

The following is a submission from a group of 18 men within the Metropolitan Remand Centre. The following notes are what the men wished to be shared. The session was held on 7th October 2024.

“We’re here because we have to be here. But there is no tangible pathway out of prison for us. We might as well be born with a CRN (corrections reference number)”.

1. Things that need to change:

- The cost of phone calls
- The cost of toiletries
- Can't attend funerals
- You can't defend yourself in prison
- We need cultural packs

Art Programs

- Great but only 2 hours a week. And we have to pay for brushes and art supplies to be able to do art in our cells. Cost are outrageous.
- Art helps our mental health, it's our culture, it's the best thing for us. But it's restricted and we can't get in.
- You have to pay and we can't afford it.

Cultural day

- There are never any resources, never any money, no cultural food. No pictures or photos, other groups gets more.

Racism

- How we're treated by the screws.
- They'll just laugh
- They call us monkeys
- It happens more to us than others
- Screws taunted me to light myself on fire after I'd had a mental health episode where I had burnt myself.

Accountability / and Prison staff

- We can't react to any unfair or racist behavior from prison staff
- If we do we get penalized and punished
 - o They'll treat us worse
 - o They'll write bad notes in our case files
 - o They'll send us to the holding cells to be kept in isolation (one prisoner spoke about being forced in the isolation cell for over 35 days consecutively)
 - o They push us and push us and push us until we say or do the wrong thing , then they can punish up. It's a power trip.
 - o "It's like they try to make our life hard"
 - o We even had to fight hard to be able to attend this session with Yoorrook. The general staff tried to stop us coming but the ALO told them we were allowed.

The system is racist – It's across the board.

We have no faith in Prison staff to help us with anything

No point asking because we don't feel comfortable and we know they'll just laugh at us

We just accept that this is how things are

The screws think it's acceptable to treat us like this

They like to see us on methadone, walking around like zombies. It's easier for them that way.

They just take the piss out of us.

We're also targeted and treated differently because we're black fellas and Aboriginal. 100% we are treated differently. That's why there is so many deaths in custody. They don't give a shit about us.

The people that are meant to be helping us in support programs are usually ex screws themselves. They're not on our side.

They want us to kill ourselves. They degenerate us.

This morning they said "Good morning Deaken" which is the same as calling us dogs. It's the most offensive thing you can say to someone in prison and they know it and they do it all the time. Deaken is the area of the prison where pedophiles and murders are.

They dehumanize us and treat us like animals.

Health Care

- I've been asking for my teeth to get fixed for 12 months. I barely have any teeth but they never do anything about it.
- I've got insomnia and I've been asking for something to help me sleep but I don't get anything. They don't trust me. They think I'm just trying to trick them into giving me drugs.
- I've been trying to get access to rehab for over 6 months. Nothing every happens. No one accepts me. It takes so long that people fall back into drug issues

There is no pathway to reconnect with our families. It's so hard to do and there is zero support.

"The Australian government has got the most atrocious relationship with it's own people. Sorry doesn't mean shit if you keep doing the same thing. If you're sorry – you don't do it again"

Education:

There are two classes to do in prison – art or culture. They should be important to us. Kangan has the contract for both but they haven't actually employed any Aboriginal people to work in it. So we're being 'taught' about our culture by white fellas. It's a joke.

Supports for Aboriginal Men

- We don't even have and ALO (Aboriginal Liaison Officer) who is Aboriginal.
- MRC is much worse than other prisons. It's shit. We're much more restricted and bullied here than anywhere else.

What helps:

- Programs like Dardi munwurro, Ngwala, Wdamba and rehabs.
- Secure housing and employment opportunities
- Community based programs with strong outreach elements.

What doesn't help:

- Lack of housing, lack of jobs and a lack of groups and activities to attend. "When I've got nothing to keep me busy is when I get back in trouble. But usually there's not enough programs to support me when I get out".

Fights

- Whenever there is a problem, they target ATSI prisoners
- We've lost mates to this

- If you're white it doesn't happen
- They put us in solitary. In the slot. They "slot" so many of us all the time for the smallest thing.
- That's why we all feel like shit
- Some of our mates have been in the slot for over 3 weeks. All alone for that long. It's not right. And when they get out – they're not right in themselves anymore.
- I got barred from education for talking to much. C'mon.
- You also get give 'Regime' which means you're only allowed 2 hours outside our cell a day. 2 hours of sunlight. They rest you're locked us.
- "I got slotted for a week and then got given 28 of regime. We get treated differently to other cultures. I just lost my mother and I couldn't go to the funeral. They don't care. They don't give a shit."
- Even if we just walk around together we get targeted. We can't even sit and talk together without staff coming up and searching us and stressing us out.

Deaths in custody

- So many of us are dying in here. We keep losing brothers but now one gives a shit.

Domestic Violence

- The things that breaks up our families the most is cops splitting us from our kids. Its tearing us apart.

Transfers between prisons.

I've been transferred between prisons many times. Your CRN number follows you. And your account should also follow you. This includes any money they you have on your account that you can use to pay for things like canteen or toiletries or the phone. I had over \$100 on mine that my family has put in ... But when I got to MRC mine was empty. And when I complain I don't get anything or I get punished. It means I can't call my family or my partner and I can't buy canteen. It's cruel.