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Isolation in detention has irreversible impact on young adults

James (not his real name) was a teenager when he was subjected to isolation in detention. For 22 hours a day, he was locked in his cell. For the other two hours he was permitted out of his cell with a small group of fellow prisoners.

When James left prison and returned to the community, he found things so challenging that he turned his bathroom into a makeshift cell, sleeping in the bathtub and preparing his food in the room. He returned to custody after a short period of time.

This distressing story is one of several featured in a new report by Jesuit Social Services, [*All alone: Young adults in the Victorian justice system*](#), which raises a number of concerns regarding the welfare and treatment of young adults aged 18 to 24 in Victorian prisons.

“The key aims of any effective criminal justice system must be to reduce offending and successfully rehabilitate people to achieve safer, more cohesive communities,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“But the use of isolation can severely undermine these objectives and can cause irreversible physical and mental harm.”

Ms Edwards is also concerned about the lack of transparency and reporting of the use of isolation.

“Because we work with people on their release from prison, we know that some spend months, even years, in isolation. They have little contact with staff and little to no access to programs or activities,” said Ms Edwards.

“The thought that some people could be released directly from isolation into the community and be expected to make a successful transition is staggering but this is what regularly happens.”

Ms Edwards says that brain development continues until at least the mid 20s and that young adults are particularly vulnerable to lasting damage.

While the report has a focus on isolation, it features a range of recommendations to improve outcomes for young adults in the prison system including:

- That the Victorian Government legislate for a presumption against the use of isolation, with isolation only permissible in rare cases where immediate safety to persons is a concern;
- That a minimum workforce qualification for all custodial prison staff be introduced;
- That the dual track system be expanded to include 21 to 24 year olds;
- That the Victorian Government invest in incorporating specialist youth units in adult prisons that house young adults aged 18 to 24 to meet their developmental needs.

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