

Tasmanian Commission of Inquiry findings highlight need for better safeguarding of children in institutional settings

Systemic failures identified by the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings must be addressed to better safeguard children in the future, according to Australian Catholic University (ACU) child protection experts.

Associate Professor Tim Moore, who conducted extensive research for and provided evidence to the Commission of Inquiry in his role as Deputy Director of ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS), said the findings highlighted serious systemic problems, which put children's safety at risk.

"The findings have demonstrated that children and young people are often at risk of experiencing abuse in government-run institutions and that alongside organisational child safe measures, systems must be more collaborative and accountable for keeping children safe and responding when they have been harmed," he said.

"It's all well and good to be a child safe organisation, but unless there are system-wide safeguards in place, transparency, opportunities for issues to be raised and protections for whistleblowers, these failures will be repeated, and children will continue to be profoundly affected.

"The recommendations of this Inquiry must now be acted upon. We cannot leave children to suffer further risk."

ICPS Director Professor Daryl Higgins welcomed the Tasmanian Government's commitment to implementing the recommendations, but said it had a responsibility to proactively support those impacted by failures while in its care.

"When you've got a significant proportion of kids who experience sexual and physical abuse it's important to proactively reach out to these young people and say, 'What's happened to you? What help do you need?'" he said.

The ACU research, which was contributed to by ICPS founding director Professor Morag McArthur, found:

- Many young people experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in Tasmanian government or government-funded services and felt adults did not respond adequately to incidents.
- Children and young people in out of home care and youth detention had experiences of being physically, sexually, and emotionally abused by adults.
- Children in out of home care felt unsettled due to constant changes in placements, carers, workers, and peers which stopped them developing trusting relationships.
- Some young people experienced maltreatment by adults or peers including bullying, emotional and physical abuse, and sexual harassment.
- Participants felt ill-prepared to deal with incidents of abuse and manage online threats such as sexting and grooming.

- Despite many participants indicating they were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, none could identify ways organisations were ensuring their cultural safety.

Associate Professor Moore said the research, which involved interviews and focus groups with 59 people aged 10 to 18, also showed youth needed to be included in efforts to improve safety in institutional settings such as schools, hospitals, detention centres, and out of home care services.

“Participants in our study felt strongly that efforts to prevent harm and respond to abuse needs to be developed in partnership with children and young people if they are to be effective,” he said.

“There is a great opportunity here to collaboratively create child-safe systems to minimise risk, meet children’s safety needs and provide the vital care they need to grow and heal.”

Professor Higgins said the safety of children, whether they were in institutional or family settings, was everyone’s business and a national child maltreatment prevention summit was needed to better safeguard young people.

“A national summit to address and implement effective and targeted primary prevention strategies within families and in institutions is better than another inquiry into safeguarding failures,” he said.

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