

United Nations 'appalled' at Indigenous youth detention and living conditions

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Indigenous Australians are living in "appalling" conditions and young Aborigines in detention are "essentially being punished for being poor", the United Nations has declared in a scathing report.

A 15-day tour of Indigenous communities and high-level meetings revealed an "alarming" lack of self-determination, inappropriate housing developments and "deeply disturbing" levels of racism.

People who have not experienced racism can't stand in the shoes of those who have, says Labor MP Linda Burney.

The UN's special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, condemned the "incredibly high" incarceration rate of Aboriginal people as a "major human rights concern".

She was most concerned about the arrest and imprisonment of young Aboriginal people for "petty" offences. In the Northern Territory, 95 per cent of youth detainees are Indigenous.



The UN's special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, is appalled at the conditions some Indigenous Australians live under.

"I've spoken to somebody who was arrested because he stole a [piece of] fruit. And another one who was sleeping in the trash bin and that was the reason they were arrested," Ms Tauli-Corpuz told a briefing in Canberra.

"Many of them have come from the child protection system, which means that the child protection systems are not working effectively.

"It is completely inappropriate to detain these children in punitive, rather than rehabilitative, conditions. They are essentially being punished for being poor and in most cases, prison will only aggravate the cycle of violence, poverty and crime."

The UN has previously recommended the age of criminal responsibility be lifted from 10 to 12. Ms Tauli-Corpuz said detention of Indigenous youth "has become so prevalent in certain communities that some parents see it as an achievement that none of their children has been taken into custody so far".

She was also "appalled" by run-down and overcrowded housing at Indigenous settlements in Darwin, likening the conditions to the developing world.

"There are some houses that don't even have toilets. There are many families in one house," she said. "This is really so dismal considering how rich Australia is."

The contractors who built the homes were non-Indigenous, she told the briefing, and subsequently "the design of the houses is not really culturally appropriate".

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion welcomed the draft report on Monday, but said it contained "some inaccuracies" regarding government funding of Indigenous programs.

The vast majority of Aboriginal people had jobs, attended school and were not involved in the criminal justice system, Mr Scullion said. He acknowledged some Indigenous Australians "need additional support" and said the Coalition was committed to providing it.

The inspection follows the Don Dale youth detention scandal and poor progress in this year's Closing the Gap report, which found that only one of seven key national targets was on track.

In her report, Ms Tauli-Corpuz said she was "disheartened" by the debate over section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, which reached its apex during her tour.

"I have found the prevalence of racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples deeply disturbing," she wrote, citing caricatures of Aborigines as criminals, welfare bludgers and bad parents.

"The debate on this issue is hugely damaging for the trust indigenous peoples have in government and sends the wrong signal to the public and the media that racial vilification is permissible."

Ms Tauli-Corpuz also weighed into the debate about constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians, urging the Turnbull government to explore a formal treaty and "not linger in limbo".