

Don Dale detainees escaped after litany of security blunders, review finds

Report reveals it was 45 minutes before staff become aware of Josiah Binsaris and Trey Mawson's escape



Josiah Binsaris and Trey Mawson fled the Don Dale detention centre and allegedly went on a crime spree for several days before being arrested. Photograph: Jonny Weeks for the Guardian

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A litany of failures, including incorrect security classifications and a T-shirt left hanging as a “beacon” over razor wire, aided the escape of two Don Dale juvenile detainees, a review has found.

The review, released by the Northern Territory government on Friday, followed the escape of 17-year-olds Josiah Binsaris and Trey Mawson, who fled the centre on Wednesday 8 April and allegedly went on a crime spree for several days before being arrested.

The Territory Families department would not provide details of the escape at the time, saying only that the two boys had absconded after they were moved inside from the yard before an approaching electrical storm.

Friday's report revealed that it was 45 minutes before staff became aware of their escape and called police.

Investigators found the detainees used a table leg to open a dorm window and flatten razor wire at the base of a perimeter fence. Grass between the inner and outer perimeter fences had been allowed to grow to head height, providing cover, and eight perimeter cameras were broken.

The boys climbed over a section of fence which had a shirt hanging from it, left there during a previous escape in March. Contractors were scheduled to remove it on 11 April. A staff member called the shirt “a beacon” to detainees, the review said.

Investigators also heard the security classification system did not “sufficiently consider a detainee’s needs”, such as cognitive and other issues, and did not take into account the past behaviour of detainees, including any history of escapes.

Josiah had previously escaped custody several times. At the time of the escape both he and Trey were classified as medium security but were housed in a low-security wing. Josiah had been moved to low security on the approval of the superintendent, Victor Williams, but without any formal risk assessment or reasons being documented.

It was apparent to investigators that Williams and case managers were unfamiliar with a directive that orders that detainees with a history of escapes are ineligible for low or medium-security housing. Williams has subsequently been transferred away from the role of superintendent and placed on leave.

Jeanette Kerr, the chief executive of Territory Families, said the facility’s day-to-day operation had been Williams’s responsibility.

“There was never a change in process, never a change in policy,” Kerr said. “Simply these young people were not classified or housed according to the policy.”

Kerr had previously said she had not visited the centre between the March escape and Josiah and Trey absconding. But on Sunday she conceded she had in fact visited the centre four times in the fortnight leading up to the escape but did not notice any of the issues herself, the ABC reported.

The families minister, Dale Wakefield, said the review revealed “systemic flaws and poor decision making” and said all recommendations would be implemented.

“We are very clear we need to do a range of things with the physical environment, making sure we have skilled staff on the spot and also in making sure we have the right electronic surveillance,” she said.

Wakefield said Labor had inherited a “broken system”.

The NT government has sought to improve the security and safety features of the detention centre without overspending on something that is likely to be decommissioned in coming years.

It is waiting for the royal commission into youth detention to deliver its recommendations in August before building a new centre.

The boys' escape followed a long run of juveniles and adults absconding from NT custody over many years.

Josiah was arrested a week later after allegedly trying to run a police car off a remote stretch of the Stuart Highway. An alleged accomplice was seriously injured when the separate car he was driving rolled over during a police chase over several hundred kilometres.

Trey had been found earlier that morning, hiding in scrub near Borroloola.

At the time Territory Families told Guardian Australia there had been just two successful escapes from Don Dale in two years. Repeated requests for the number of escape attempts from Don Dale went unanswered.