

OpenVoiceNews

Transparent. Unbiased. Yours.

NT Youth Incarceration Raises Human Rights Concerns

August 16, 2025

— Categories: Human Rights



Download IPFS

Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians Malarndirri McCarthy has raised concerns with Northern Territory Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro over the reintroduction of spit hoods in youth detention centres and the broader issue of youth incarceration. The discussions took place on Wednesday, amid ongoing national and international attention to the treatment of First Nations children in the Northern Territory.

“Earlier this week, I met with the Northern Territory chief minister; in those discussions, I made very clear the concerns I have regarding First Nations youths in watch houses and the reintroduction of spit hoods,” McCarthy said in a statement. “As minister for Indigenous Australians, I will continue working with my ministerial colleagues to keep state and territories accountable for their commitments to close the gap on justice outcomes.”

Finocchiaro described the meeting as “productive,” highlighting the Territory government’s priorities, including reducing crime, rebuilding the economy, and restoring community standards. “Today’s NT Police statistics confirm our approach is working, with 605 fewer victims of crime in just the past six months,” she said.

The Northern Territory government, led by the Country Liberal Party, holds 17 out of 25 parliamentary seats. Earlier this month, it passed legislation amending the Youth Justice Act. Among the changes was the reintroduction of spit hoods in youth detention centres, a practice previously banned following a royal commission into juvenile justice and child protection. The amendments also modified detention policies, expanded the scope of reasonable force for Youth Justice Officers, and adjusted the prioritization of youth diversion programs for certain offences.

These changes have prompted concern from Indigenous leaders and human rights organisations, who argue that they risk increasing incarceration rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets is to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous young people in the criminal justice system by at least 30% by 2031.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has flagged that the legislation may be discriminatory. A formal complaint has been lodged with the United Nations by human rights lawyers and Indigenous leaders. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Katie Kiss noted that children’s contact with the justice system is linked to systemic racism and intergenerational trauma, as well as factors such as poverty, homelessness, disability, health and mental health challenges, and exposure to domestic and family violence.

McCarthy also raised these issues during a meeting of federal, state, and territory attorneys general in Sydney on Friday. “I highlighted the escalating numbers of First Nations people in prisons across the country, in particular our youth, and reiterated that deaths in custody

have to stop,” she said. She urged state and territory governments to take measures aligned with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Finocchiaro emphasised that the Territory government’s policies have already reduced crime. She cited a 4.7% decrease in overall victims of crime over six months, including 375 fewer house break-ins and 503 fewer property offences compared with the same period in 2024. “Our plan to reduce crime is working, but my team and I know there is much more work to do, and we are getting on with the job,” she said.

She added that the government will continue working with police, courts, and corrections to strengthen laws, improve enforcement, support victims, and expedite justice. “Community safety will always come first under our CLP government,” Finocchiaro said, noting that reforms contrast with policies under the previous Labor administration.

The debate over youth justice in the Northern Territory highlights the tension between public safety measures and human rights obligations, particularly concerning the treatment of Indigenous children in detention.