



Speech By  
**Peter Russo**  
MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

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## JUSTICE, INTEGRITY AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

### Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (3.16 pm): I rise to speak on report No. 18 of the Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee titled *Oversight of the Queensland Ombudsman* for the 2023-24 financial year. I want to thank the committee members and stakeholders who participated in the public hearing on 19 February. The evidence we heard was both sobering and urgent. It shone a light on the growing pressures within our correctional and youth justice systems—pressures that demand our immediate and sustained attention.

The testimony presented by Mr Reilly, the Queensland Ombudsman and Inspector of Detention Services, was particularly compelling. He stated—

A key issue for Queensland's high-security prisons is that they are overcrowded. What is happening in the men's high-security prisons is that they are so overcrowded that the men are only getting out of their cells for three or four hours a day. They use a system called modified unit routines, where basically one half of each accommodation unit comes out in the morning and then they go back in and the other half come out in the afternoon. That is a very low number of hours for prisoners to be out each day in those secure facilities. That is a real concern in the adult prison environment.

This paints a stark picture of what overcrowding really means in practice—drastically reduced out-of-cell hours, restricted access to rehabilitation programs and heightened tensions inside already high-pressure environments. When facilities are pushed beyond capacity, not only is security compromised but also the very purpose of imprisonment—rehabilitation and reintegration—is undermined. We must take Mr Reilly's warnings seriously. Tackling overcrowding requires both infrastructure investment and robust alternatives to incarceration, including diversionary programs and community-based supports.

Equally concerning was the evidence on youth detention centres. As Mr Reilly explained—

In youth detention centres, a key issue that was identified is the issue of staff shortages and how that drives children having to stay in their rooms for long periods with all the problems that creates. My understanding is that that is still a problem in Cleveland from our most recent inspection, which is the second inspection of Cleveland. That is still a problem. There are other issues in youth detention centres. That is probably one of the main ones that I think I can comment on at this stage.

This testimony highlights the ongoing and systemic nature of the staffing crisis.

Chronic staff shortages are leaving young people without consistent supervision, case management or access to education and mental health supports. This shortage places immense strain on existing staff, leading to burnout, increased sick leave and high turnover, creating a vicious cycle that undermines stability. The impact on young people is profound. Without stable staffing, centres resort to lockdowns, limited time out of rooms and curtailed programs. This is not conducive to rehabilitation and risks entrenching disadvantage and recidivism among our youth. We owe it to our young people, many of whom come from highly vulnerable backgrounds, to provide safe environments where rehabilitation and personal growth are possible. Addressing staffing issues requires better recruitment strategies, improved training, fair pay and a commitment to staff wellbeing.

Today's challenges are not insurmountable, but they are urgent. We must act on the evidence presented at the public hearing by investing in alternatives to custody, reducing prison overcrowding and strengthening workforce planning and conditions in youth detention centres and by ensuring our justice system reflects our shared values of fairness, safety and rehabilitation. This is not just about infrastructure or staffing ratios; it is about the kind of society we want to build—one where accountability, rehabilitation and community safety go hand in hand. I thank all who provided evidence at the 19 February 2025 public hearing, including Mr Reilly, who shared his insights on youth detention. This testimony has given us a road map for reform. Let us not waste this opportunity to act decisively.