

# Hearing Loss among Indigenous inmates in the NT

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## Summary

Recent hearing tests carried out among Indigenous inmates at Darwin and Alice Springs prisons have found that over 90% of indigenous inmates screened had a significant hearing loss. Northern Territory Correctional Services (NTCS) are planning to respond to this situation by implementing communications training for staff, introducing hand held amplification devices in key areas and screening all prisoners for hearing loss when they enter prison. The Northern Territory is the first jurisdiction to recognise and respond to the Hear Us senate inquiry.



## Background

Indigenous people have a known higher prevalence of hearing loss than other Australians. This is mainly the result of chronic ear disease among indigenous children growing up. It has been estimated that Indigenous children experience ear disease on average for almost 2.5 years during childhood compared for an average of 3 months for non Indigenous children. Middle ear disease is often a disease of disadvantage where factors such as crowded housing and limited access to health care ultimately leading to permanent adult hearing loss.

It is known that people living in remote Indigenous communities in the NT often experience severe ear disease related



to poor living conditions. It is also likely some inmates may have hearing loss after experiencing head injuries. The recent senate inquiry into Hearing Health Australia recommended that testing of Indigenous inmates hearing be introduced into all correctional facilities and amplification devices be used when they are needed. NTCS has responded to these recommendations by undertaking audiometric screening of hearing loss in a group of Indigenous and non Indigenous inmates. Hearing screenings of 140 indigenous inmates at both Darwin and Alice Springs prisons found over

**90% of inmates screened had a significant hearing loss.**

(92% of Darwin prison inmates and 95% of Alice Springs inmates). No significant hearing loss was found among a small group of non indigenous inmates whose hearing was screened. 85% had a mild to moderate hearing loss and 10% a severe hearing loss.

Inmates found to have a hearing loss were often not aware they had a loss but 76% of those with hearing loss described experiencing difficulties in hearing corrections staff. Some inmates with hearing loss also reported difficulties in being able to hear family, police, solicitors, magistrates and judges, as well as other inmates.

In response to these findings NT Corrections is responding in the following ways:

**Hearing screening** is being planned as a component of inmate induction medical checks.

**Training packages for all corrections staff** on communication strategies with inmates with hearing impairments is also being planned.

Another initiative is the introduction of **amplification devices** when there is a risk of poor communication with inmates who have hearing loss. All inmates with hearing loss who have had an opportunity to trial hand held amplification devices have been positive about the resulting improvements in understanding what others are saying. Corrections staffs have also been impressed by the improvements communications achieved when amplification devices have been used.

We have received significant positive feedback from many corrections staff about this program. It is anticipated that improvements

in **management** of inmates as well as improved Wellbeing among inmates and better **rehabilitation outcomes** can be achieved though addressing widespread hearing loss that has been identified among indigenous inmates in the Northern Territory. There are also important **crime prevention implications** of these findings.

The Northern Territory is the first Australian Jurisdiction to take these steps to address widespread hearing loss among Indigenous inmates.



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