

# Strange silence in a juvenile facility

I turned to my escort as we walked together through the desolate central yard of Frank Baxter. It wasn't the 2 metre plus razor wire fence or the CCTV cameras in such abundance to make even Orwell shiver I found the most unsettling. It's what was not there that threw me. Sound. Aside from the odd crackling of a guard's radio or clanking of heavy steel on steel as doors were locked behind us, there was none. Not a whisper. Dead silence.

"So the centre's not full?" I asked the juvenile justice worker who was taking me to the secure classroom where I was to help an NGO deliver a workshop, assuming the lack of noise corresponded to a lack of inmates. "Actually, we've been operating at full capacity for some time now."

Opened in 1999, Frank Baxter is NSW's largest and most secure male juvenile facility. There's no higher security classification. This was the first of six visits to the centre before last week's riot. As I wondered how a centre could be supposedly full, yet the only life

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visible a few weeds pushing through the steel and concrete, out of my periphery from the direction of the squat Besser block accommodation units, came a procession of 18 boys all clad in standard issue green tracksuits walking two by two.

Soon they arrived with their guards to where I was already waiting as my escort fumbled for the right key to unlock the training room. The boys seized upon the slightest gap in what was otherwise a tightly controlled routine to take a breather. Legislation prevented me from being told their individual crimes. But I was given a general overview. Terrorism, murder, sexual assault right through to more minor offences, but committed repeatedly enough to earn them a place here.

But as I watched these boys with

one another, I was struck at how they interacted like almost any other group of teenage boys do.

Despite the gravity of some of their crimes, only a very small number are of the stereotype the public thinks fills these places. The psychopath. A future Ivan Milat. The vast majority are just otherwise normal kids, who in the lead up to their incarceration have had the most abnormal experiences inflicted upon them.

Lives often so littered with tragedy and neglect, that being locked in a maximum security facility where they are served three meals a day and given schooling may be the pinnacle of their childhood to date.

Telling them they should just wake up to themselves and pull up their socks is akin to dumping them on the banks of a swollen river and telling them to make their way across. Except they can't swim, there is no boat and the water is brimming with sharks.

It's justified that a community expects that those who commit violent crimes are held

accountable. But given that all of these kids will eventually be released, every step prior to their return among us must be used to ensure their chance of causing any more harm is reduced. Neglecting their rehabilitation while inside does a lot to ensure they don't escape a merry-go-round of recidivism and destruction.

It is the dedicated frontline staff in facilities like Frank Baxter who are the change agents for these young people. But for too long, these staff who are paramount in whether a young inmate's stint behind the wire is either rehabilitative or destructive, have had their pleas for help ignored.

A lack of specialist offender units, escalating assaults and resultant poor morale within the centre they say must be addressed. If these kids are there because of broken environments, what is going to happen if our answer to juvenile crime is to subject them to even further dysfunction while inside?

James Fry is a community worker and writer.