



Media release

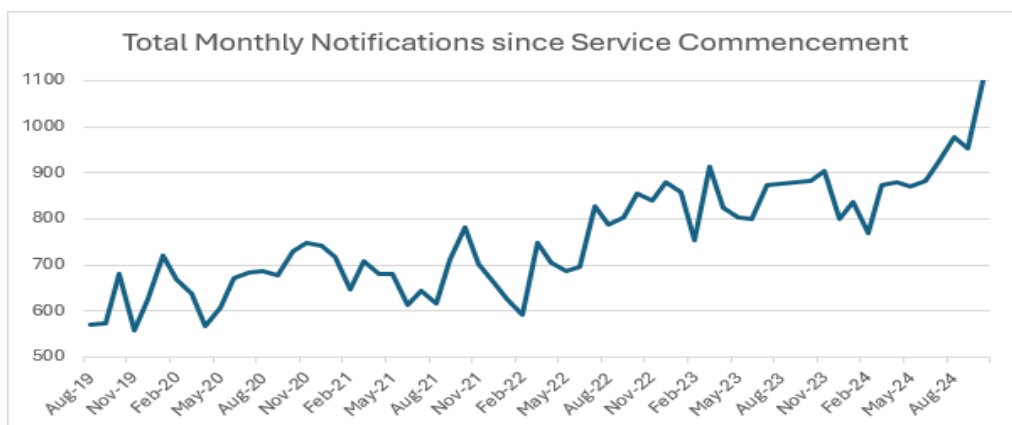
Custody notifications skyrocket

The North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) in October 2024 reported the highest number of calls to its custody notification service (CNS) since it commenced in 2019.

The CNS was established to reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody and in response to recommendations from the 1991 *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*. It provides an independent wellbeing check over the telephone, along with basic legal information and advice, to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person entering police custody. NAAJA’s CNS is currently funded by the Commonwealth’s National Indigenous Australians Agency but from 1 July 2025 funding responsibility for the service will transfer to the Northern Territory Government.

A NAAJA spokesperson said, “the custody notification service is a vital service that operates 24 hours a day, every day of the year, right across the Northern Territory. Without it, the risk of harm and deaths in police custody is increased greatly.”

NAAJA’s CNS is staffed by a team of support workers and lawyers that have received a total 48,381 custody notifications in the last five years. The demands on the service have skyrocketed with NAAJA reporting a 53% increase in custody notifications since 2020, with a record 1,100 notifications in October 2024—surpassing the previous monthly high of 978 in August 2024.



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This is another indicator of the strains on the justice and corrections system in the Northern Territory and another worrying sign for the targets under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people incarcerated.

“The Commonwealth recently announced additional funding to support NAAJA’s CNS and this is welcomed”, said a NAAJA spokesperson. “However, the Northern Territory is already experiencing overcrowded prisons and watch houses resulting in the transfer of prisoners between correctional facilities, and Aboriginal people are enduring prolonged waits in custody on remand before their matters come before the courts. Recent legislative changes, including the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility to 10 years, changing bail laws and re-criminalising public drunkenness, are set to worsen this situation, leading to a greater number of Aboriginal people in custody and further intensifying the demands on the CNS.”

NAAJA has reiterated its calls for a package of funding and policy changes to address the underlying causes of crime and greater support for the justice system, as well as better safeguards for Aboriginal people’s wellbeing in custody. (*Keep Aboriginal children out of jail*—NAAJA MR2024-01, 16 October 2024 and *NAAJA concerned about deteriorating prison conditions*—NAAJA MR2024-02, 30 October 2024).

Media contact

Comments in this media release other than direct quotes can be attributed to a NAAJA spokesperson.

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