



## **Victorian Pre-Budget Submission 2023-24**

March 2023



**Jesuit**  
**Social Services**  
Building a Just Society

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*We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of all the lands on which Jesuit Social Services operates and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We express our gratitude for First Nations people’s love and care of people, community, land and all life.*

## Jesuit Social Services: Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services has been working for 45 years delivering support and advocating for improved policies, legislation and resources to achieve strong, cohesive and vibrant communities where every individual can flourish and reach their full potential.

We are a social change organisation working with some of the most marginalised individuals, families and communities, often experiencing multiple and complex challenges. Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference. Our services span Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory.

Our services and advocacy focus on these areas:

- **Place-based approaches and ecological justice** – advocacy and research around the systemic change needed to achieve a ‘just transition’ towards a sustainable future, and supporting community members to lead more sustainable lives through place-based approaches to social and ecological problems.
- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system.
- **Education, training and employment** – people with barriers to education and sustainable employment.
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with multiple and complex needs including mental illness, trauma, homelessness and bereavement.
- **Gender Justice** – leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, and new approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe.
- **Settlement and community building** – recently arrived immigrants and refugees, and disadvantaged communities.

Research, advocacy and policy are coordinated across all program and major interest areas of Jesuit Social Services. Our advocacy is grounded in the knowledge, expertise and experiences of program staff and participants, and academic research and evidence. We seek to influence policies, practices, legislation and budget investment to positively influence people’s lives and improve approaches to address long-term social challenges. We do this by working collaboratively with governments, businesses, the community sector, and communities themselves to build coalitions and alliances around key issues, and building strong relationships with key decision-makers and the community.

Our Learning and Practice Development Unit builds the capacity of our services through staff development, training and evaluation, and articulating and disseminating information on best practice approaches to working with participants and communities across our programs.

## Introduction

Jesuit Social Services' vision is to build a just society. We believe everyone must have access to the opportunities and resources they need to flourish. However, many people in Victoria experience significant and persistent disadvantage that manifests in disengagement from school, as well as joblessness, homelessness, substance misuse, family violence, contact with the justice system, mental ill-health, and trauma. These are complex challenges, especially because they intersect, interact, and are often intergenerational.

The COVID-19 pandemic is continuing to disproportionately impact those who are already marginalised and magnifying many of these challenges. This is evident in the heightened risk from COVID-19 faced by people in prison and immigration detention, people without safe and secure housing, victim-survivors of family violence, people with chronic medical conditions, and those unemployed or in insecure employment. Further, some of the current economic impacts from COVID-19 we are seeing, is causing vulnerability to those who previously had not experienced these risks, including through unaffordable housing and the rising costs of living. At Jesuit Social Services, we believe everyone is better off in a society where no-one is left behind.

Victoria's growing prison population continues to be of particular concern to Jesuit Social Services, in particular the approach to building more prisons rather than investing in alternatives. In preparing this next Victorian Budget, we urge the Government to ensure Victoria's adult and youth justice systems are centred on prevention, early intervention and restorative justice.

**The 2023-24 Victorian Budget comes at an important and critical time to respond to the further marginalisation of vulnerable communities as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the disproportionate and place-based impacts of climate change, as well as an opportunity for vital reform within the criminal justice space.**

Drawing on 45 years of advocacy and action, this pre-budget submission provides recommendations across a range of interconnected social policy areas. Jesuit Social Services calls on the Government to devote resources towards reducing inequity, prejudice and exclusion, and ensuring people on the margins are given every opportunity to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

## Summary of recommendations

### 1. Place-based approaches to social and ecological justice

- Identify locations of complex disadvantage, through Dropping off the Edge research, and develop long-term, place-based and systemic approaches in these locations that centre community decision making and address factors that lead to inequity and disadvantage.
- Fund further research into entrenched and persistent disadvantage that builds on existing work, seeks to understand broader aspects of health and wellbeing, and supports social infrastructure.
- Establish a Community Sector Climate Change Adaptation Fund and corresponding Action Plan to support community service organisations to trial and implement climate change adaptation and mitigation activities.
- Build broader community resilience to climate change by resourcing the establishment and coordination of place-based, cross-sector, resilience coalitions to work in partnership with local governments and the community sector to strengthen adaptation planning and policies.

### 2. Justice and crime prevention

#### *Youth justice*

- Provide resources to undertake youth justice legislative reform towards:
  - The Victorian Government delivering its promise to raising the age of criminal responsibility from the age of 10 years, for the criminal age to be raised to minimum 14 years old, and partnering with key stakeholders to develop a therapeutic response for this age group.
  - Repealing the presumption against dual track; extending the age of dual track to 25; and tailoring approaches for young adults aged 18-25 in contact with the justice system.
  - Reducing remand numbers for children and young people and ensuring custody is only ever used as a last resort for this age group.
- Allocating resources to address the overrepresentation of children in out-of-home care, CALD children and Aboriginal children by:
  - Providing therapeutic, diversionary, and restorative-based supports, including restorative justice conferencing, to children in out-of-home care.
  - Funding community-led and culturally safe approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people.
- Diverting children and young people from the justice system by:
  - Further investing in diversionary programs, specifically focusing on ensuring children remain engaged or are re-engaged with education.
  - Making Youth Justice Group Conferencing opt-out rather than opt-in and expand it so that it is available across the continuum of justice system involvement.
- Reducing harm arising from youth detention by:
  - Embedding evidence-based, trauma-informed and culturally safe programs for children and young people under youth justice supervision that repair relationships and address underlying trauma.
  - Strengthening the youth justice workforce by investing in training all correctional staff to use therapeutic and restorative approaches when working with children and young people.
  - Retain Parkville to reduce young people from becoming isolated from their families by ensuring easier access of visitations, as well as to ensure there are distinct precincts to support 18-25 year olds as well as special units for girls and young people with complex mental health.

- Enabling better transitions from youth detention to the community by:
  - Expanding transitional and supportive housing programs, such as Perry House and Next Steps, to offer 24/7 supports to young people in the criminal justice system who do not have access to safe and secure housing to enable them to thrive and remain in the community .e.g. young people exiting custody, on parole or on a community justice order.
  - Further resourcing YJCSS so that it can provide support to every young person exiting youth detention.

### **Adult justice**

- Undertake adult justice legislative reform and developing state-wide, community-based alternatives to custody by:
  - Delivering on the government’s announcements to repealing regressive bail laws under the Bail Amendment (Stage one) Act 2017 and the Bail Amendment (Stage two) Act 2018 which have made it harder to get bail
  - Reintroducing home detention orders and suspended sentences, and legislating against short-term prison sentences.
- Embed restorative justice practices across the Victorian adult justice system, including making group conferencing available to adults.
- Implement strategies to divert people with an ABI and/or intellectual disability from the prison system at every opportunity and respond with more appropriate community-based services and programs.
- Work with the Commonwealth Government to provide ongoing access to the NDIS and MBS, and to reduce the waiting period for the Disability Support Pension for people exiting prison
- Embed a gender-responsive approach, including by:
  - Commit to exploring evidence-informed alternatives to different models of incarceration that do not enforce rigid masculinity, and will break the cycle of violence.
  - Developing a gender ratio for the workforce in women's correctional facilities to ensure women receive gender-informed support.
  - Ensuring that the gender-specific needs of women in prison in Victoria’s custodial system are met, particularly in the context of reception; transportation; physical and mental wellbeing; education, employment and program treatment; security; pregnancy and parenting.
  - A presumption against a custodial sentence aimed at keeping women out of prison.
- Enable better transitions from the adult justice system to the community by:
  - Further investing in more therapeutic, culturally safe interventions focused on personal development through personal and vocational skill building, housing support, counselling and reintegration support for adults pre- and post-release.
  - Providing funding to embed community health nurses in transitional support programs permanently.
  - Providing long-term funding to the [Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility](#) initiative and scaling it up across Victoria so that no one exits prison into homelessness.
  - Investing in a dedicated transitional, supported housing model based on the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility for women and other at-risk groups of people exiting the justice system.
- Coordinate the establishment of National Protective Mechanisms to provide independent oversight of youth detention and prisons in Victoria.

- Work with independent oversight bodies to ban the use of isolation in youth justice facilities and to significantly reduce the use of isolation and solitary confinement in adult prisons.

### **3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the justice system**

- Fully implement the recommendations of Our Youth, Our Way inquiry into Aboriginal over-incarceration in Victoria.
- Fund Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to design, lead and deliver programs involved in the justice system across the continuum; those aimed at early intervention; train all staff in cultural safety; and employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander case managers.
- Increase the availability of programs for Aboriginal women involved in the justice system.

### **4. Supporting education, training and employment**

- Permanently extend access to Navigator to children from 10 years of age to enable the program to intervene earlier and provide critical support to children and families experiencing vulnerability.
- Help more people facing barriers to employment by:
  - continuing both the Jobs Victoria Employment Services initiative and Jobs Victoria Advocates Program beyond June 2023, when funding is due to expire; and
  - expanding programs such as the Jobs Victoria Employment Services and Reconnect 2021.
- Provide additional funding for JVES CALD Professional programs and programs for CALD jobseekers looking to enter other professions such as construction labouring.
- Provide additional funding for Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) pre-accredited training to further reach and engage at risk people as diversion from the justice system.
- Continue investment in achieving the social procurement requirements in all government contracts.

### **5. Safe, secure and sustainable housing**

- Build at least 60,000 public and community homes available by 2032 with linked support and strengthen protections.
- Invest in supported housing options including outreach and wrap around supports for people with a range of needs, including:
  - young people exiting out-of-home care and custodial settings;
  - victim-survivors of family violence;
  - people with mental health, substance use issues and experiences of trauma; and
  - people with disabilities.
- Provide equitable access to energy-efficient housing, including by retrofitting existing social housing that is over ten years old with energy efficient upgrades.
- Develop initiatives to support people with multiple and complex needs to sustain private tenancies.

### **6. Gender justice**

- Building on our Man Box research, support scale up of the Adolescent Man Box survey to inform the roll-out of the respectful relationships curriculum using longitudinal data on underlying attitudes related to stereotypical masculine norms and associated behaviours such as the use of violence.
- Prioritise prevention and early intervention by providing long-term funding to programs that prevent violence, including by:
  - Drawing on our Modelling Respect and Equality program and Unpacking the Man Box workshops, scale up workforce capacity building training for role models, working with men

and boys in a range of settings such as schools, youth justice facilities, prisons and community health services to prevent the use of violence.

- Continuing to invest in and rigorously evaluate pilot programs to engage at-risk young people with the view to developing scalable early intervention programs.
- Resource research and program design to better understand concerning sexual behaviours among children, and the sexual abuse of children, such as through Jesuit Social Services' pilot project in collaboration with the University of Melbourne, the Worried About Sex and Pornography.
- Commit to recurrent funding for adolescent family violence programs aligned with restorative principles, in collaboration with the Children's Courts and Police, including Jesuit Social Services' RESTORE and Family Assisted Adolescent Response programs.
- Provide core funding to support The Men's Project continue to build strong partnerships within the prevention of violence sector, create and share knowledge, and develop an evidence base of approaches to supporting healthier masculinities that go beyond awareness-raising to outcomes that prevent the use of violence.

## **7. Strengthen mental health and suicide prevention supports**

- Provide recurrent funding for assertive outreach and activity-based programs with 'soft entry points' for marginalised young people with mental health and other complex problems.
- Invest in integrated alcohol and other drug and mental health supports.
- Provide secure, long-term funding for state-wide suicide prevention and bereavement services, including Support After Suicide provided by Jesuit Social Services. This should also include increased access to suicide bereavement services for people in regional and rural areas.

## **8. The National Disability Insurance Scheme**

- Strengthen the interface between the NDIS and state-based services to ensure that issues experienced by people with multiple and complex needs are addressed congruently.
- Adequately fund specialised holistic care services, such as Perry House, as a separate stream that provides services for people with complex needs and prevents them from falling through the gaps.

## **9. Settlement and community building**

- Improve culturally safe access to the service system for newly arrived people, particularly for education, mental health, alcohol and other drugs and family violence.
- Fund early intervention, culturally safe education re engagement programs specific for CALD learners such as Jesuit Social Services' Homework Club.
- Further invest in and call on public service agencies and corporate organisations to consider shared social impact initiatives to support under and unemployed skilled professionals from migrant and refugee backgrounds into employment, such as the Corporate Diversity Partnerships program.



## 1. Place-based approaches to social and ecological justice

In 2021, Jesuit Social Services' latest *Dropping Off the Edge* report was released—the fifth edition of research spanning over 20 years, which maps disadvantage by location. This report, made possible with funding from our donors, philanthropy and the Victorian government, creates an index of place-based disadvantage across Australia, identifying where entrenched and persistent disadvantage is located and demonstrating the complex web of challenges faced by those communities.

Recognising that environmental challenges pose particular risks to the communities that Jesuit Social Services works with, for over a decade we have been bringing an ecological perspective to our practice, policy and organisational identity. Jesuit Social Services has embraced social and ecological justice, encompassing both human and environmental equity. In 2021, for the first time, our *Dropping off the Edge* research included environmental indicators alongside social, economic, education and health measures and includes eight case studies of communities across six states and territories to understand the lived experience of disadvantage. The findings show that communities that experience persistent disadvantage often also experience disproportionate environmental injustice, represented through such factors as higher levels of air pollution,<sup>1</sup> exposure to heat stress,<sup>2</sup> and poorer access to green open spaces.<sup>3</sup>

The [Centre for Just Places](#) was established by Jesuit Social Services in 2021, with significant seed funding from Gandel Foundation and the Victorian Government, to support and enable place-based approaches to social and ecological justice through research, collaboration, engagement and knowledge exchange. Place-based approaches can be understood as innovative ways to address disadvantage and inequity, strengthen resilience to crises in place, and build thriving and resilient communities. In 2021-22, Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places led a consortium of research partners examining literature, evidence and practice to understand what features enable the success of place-based approaches and how to best support them – information essential to improving the wellbeing of communities into the future. These reports, [What works for place-based approaches in Victoria](#), will inform the continued paradigm shift across government, funders, organisations and innovators working to address inequities and build the capacities of communities. A key finding was that sustainable, flexible and adequate resourcing is a critical enabler of effective place-based approaches.

Jesuit Social Services recognises the urgency required in addressing the impacts of climate change in already disadvantaged communities, as well as the critical role of community service organisations (CSOs) in building resilience to the social and health impacts of climate change. Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places has been delivering a range of climate adaptation and resilience initiatives and workshops across metropolitan Melbourne (see for example our [Collaborative Action Plan for climate justice in Melbourne's west](#)). In doing so, the Centre aims to build place-based climate resilience coalitions and strengthen collaboration between CSOs and local governments to build resilience to extreme weather and protect the health and wellbeing of those most at-risk.

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<sup>1</sup> Tanton, R., Dare, L., Miranti, R., Vidyattama, Y., Yule, A. and McCabe, M. (2021), *Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne. Indicator 32. Pg 236.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Indicator 34. Pg 236.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Indicators 33 and 35. Pg 236.

### **We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Identify locations of complex disadvantage, through Dropping Off the Edge research, and develop long-term, place-based and systemic approaches in these locations that centre community decision making and address factors that lead to inequity and disadvantage.
- Fund further research into entrenched and persistent disadvantage that builds on existing work, seeks to understand broader aspects of health and wellbeing, and supports social infrastructure.
- Establish a Community Sector Climate Change Adaptation Fund and corresponding Action Plan to support community service organisations to trial and implement climate change adaptation and mitigation activities.
- Build broader community resilience to climate change by resourcing the establishment and coordination of place-based, cross-sector, resilience coalitions to work in partnership with local governments and the community sector to strengthen adaptation planning and policies.

## **2. Justice and crime prevention**

### **2.1 Youth Justice**

Too often for young people, an encounter with the justice system can exacerbate challenging behaviour rather than facilitate positive change and outcomes. Our vision is for a justice system that meets the needs and is responsive to everyone, including people who have contact with, or are a risk of having contact with, the justice system, as well as staff, victims of crime, families and the broader community. It sees incarceration used only as a last resort and, where it is used, rehabilitation is the priority. Where detention is the only option, small, home-like and community-based settings which have an overarching emphasis on education and re-socialisation are critical to supporting young people to reintegrate into the community.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility serves as a critical prevention measure by diverting children away from contact with the criminal justice system. Intervening early and diverting children from detention to prevent trajectories to the adult justice system must form a critical part of this vision.

#### **2.1.1 Youth justice legislative reform**

A serious concern of Jesuit Social Services is the very young age that a proportion of vulnerable children currently enter the criminal justice system. We very much welcome the recent commitment made by the Victorian Government to raise the criminal age of responsibility from the age of 10 by April 2023.<sup>4</sup> We call on the government to raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years rather than only 12 years of age, in line with *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. We know that these children are among the most vulnerable in our community and that when detained younger than 14 are more likely, compared to those at older ages, to have sustained and frequent contact with the criminal justice system throughout their life.<sup>5</sup> Our paper, [Raising The Age of Criminal Responsibility: There is a Better Way](#), shows this is better for these children and for society as a whole. As per the Victorian

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<sup>4</sup> Kolovos, B., & Bucci, N. (2023, February 16). Daniel Andrews threatens to go it alone to raise the age of criminal responsibility in Victoria, *The Guardian*. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>5</sup> Jesuit Social Services (2013). *Thinking Outside: Alternatives to remand for children*. Jesuit Social Services (2013). *Thinking Outside: Alternatives to remand for children*; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013). *Young people aged 10–14 in the youth justice system 2011– 2012*. ([Weblink](#))

Government’s Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children strategy, in order to achieve long-term positive outcomes, children, young people and families need to be supported through prevention and early intervention, early in life. Once the age of criminal responsibility is raised, it is imperative that these children and young people are supported outside of the criminal justice system, including through approaches of therapeutic, trauma-informed support as well as restorative justice. It is vital that the Victorian Government allocates resources and funding towards providing effective programs to ensure that these vulnerable children and young people do not continue to ‘fall through the cracks’. We would welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with the government on developing such programs.

Jesuit Social Services is particularly concerned about the increase of children and young people being held on remand, who are unsentenced. Numbers of this cohort more than doubled between 2010 and 2019.<sup>6</sup> It has been well established that contact with police and being remanded into custody contribute to the likelihood of a child or young person continuing on a trajectory into the criminal justice system, significantly impacting the child’s future. As a priority, government resources should instead be allocated to keeping children out of prison, and for children and young people to remain with their families and within communities where possible. We call on the Victorian Government to reduce remand numbers for children and young people and to more broadly ensure that custody is only ever used as a last resort.

### ***2.1.2 The overrepresentation of CALD children in the justice system***

As acknowledged in the [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–30](#), almost 40 per cent of children in custody identify as being from CALD communities, mainly Māori, Pacific Islander and South Sudanese.<sup>7</sup> The number of children held on remand in Victoria mirrors these findings, where 12 per cent of children on remand are from Sudanese communities and 12 per cent from New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika communities.<sup>8</sup> There are many factors leading to the overrepresentation of CALD children and young people in the justice system, including poor settlement experiences, family breakdown, financial and housing challenges, mental health issues, unemployment and experiences of racism and discrimination.<sup>9</sup> We therefore urge the Victorian Government to increase funding towards community-led and culturally safe approaches to address the over-representation of CALD children and young people in the youth justice system.

### ***2.1.3 Education programs that divert children from the justice system***

A large number of young people Jesuit Social Services work with have been disengaged from education, sometimes for years.<sup>10</sup> Young people in contact with the justice system need tailored programs, that acknowledge the difficulties and trauma they have experienced, to help them reengage in educational environments. In responding to this, Jesuit Social Services delivers case management and intensive outreach to young learners aged 12 to 17 as part of the [Navigator](#) initiative. This program has been successful in increasing the number of at-risk young people remain connected to school and engaged in

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<sup>6</sup> Sentencing Advisory Council. (2020). Children Held on Remand in Victoria: A Report on Sentencing Outcomes. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>7</sup> Victorian Government. (2020). Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>8</sup> Sentencing Advisory Council. (2020). Children Held on Remand in Victoria: A Report on Sentencing Outcomes. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>9</sup> Shepherd, S., & Masuka, G. (2020). Working With At-Risk Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Young People in Australia: Risk Factors, Programming, and Service Delivery. Criminal Justice Policy Review. DOI: [10.1177/0887403420929416](#); Wylie, L., Van Meyel, R., Harder, H., & Sukhera, J. (2018). Assessing trauma in a transcultural context: Challenges in mental health care with immigrants and refugees. Public Health Reviews, 39(1). DOI: [10.1186/s40985-018-0102-y](#)

<sup>10</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety. (2020). Youth Parole Board Annual Report. ([Weblink](#))

learning. In addition, in early 2021, Jesuit Social Services established the [Ignatius Learning Centre](#) – a small, specialist secondary school for boys aged 15-17 years who are in contact with the justice system and at risk of spending time in prison. Jesuit Social Services would like to see greater investment in, and use of, diversion to educational programs such as the Ignatius Learning Centre. As noted by the Victorian Government’s *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020 – 2030*, this provides an opportunity to address youth crime. We strongly believe that a targeted approach to keeping children engaged or supporting them to reengage with education is a key preventative measure against justice system involvement.

#### CASE STUDY: Navigator

Steven is a Koori kid who’s had a difficult life.

He’s had some conflict in his family, and when he was young he felt like no one understood him. He has a diagnosed learning disability, but he isn’t receiving any extra help at school, and his confidence is low. Steven’s mother is supportive and attentive, and has tried hard to get him extra support in the classroom – but Steven never got the individualised learning plan that would have helped.

Steven came to Jesuit Social Services’ Navigator program, which helps young people aged 12 to 17 who are disengaged from school to reconnect with education or training. In the year before he engaged with Navigator, he had only attended three days of school.

Steven’s Navigator case worker, Nathan, linked Steven with culturally safe services, and helped him enrol in a flexible learning centre. There, he got the individual learning plan he wasn’t able to get at his mainstream school, and had better access to support for his unique and individual needs.

Two years on, Steven is now attending school regularly – around 80 per cent of his school timetable. His confidence has grown to the point where he applied for casual work, and he has taken on work experience through his school.

#### **2.1.4 Working restoratively with children and young people**

In Victoria, Jesuit Social Services has delivered the Youth Justice Group Conferencing program for 20 years, enabling dialogue between children who have offended, their victims and others impacted by harm caused to the wider community. The program is grounded in the foundational principles of restorative justice.<sup>11</sup> Evidence shows that restorative practices are more effective in reducing re-offending and making our communities safer.<sup>12</sup>

In early 2022, the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science at Swinburne University of Technology released their findings from an [evaluation on the effectiveness of the Victorian Government’s Youth Justice Group Conferencing program](#).<sup>13</sup> The evaluation found group conferencing was associated with

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<sup>11</sup> Australian Association for Restorative Justice. (n.d.). What is Restorative Justice and what are Restorative Practices? Retrieved February 21 2022. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>12</sup> Jesuit Social Services (2019). #JusticeSolutions New Zealand Tour. ([Weblink](#)); and Larsen, J. (2014). Restorative justice in the Australian criminal justice system. AIC Reports: Research and Public Policy Series 127. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>13</sup> Bonett, R.J.W., Lloyd, C.D., & Ogloff, J.R.P. (2022). Group Conferencing Effects on Youth Recidivism and Elements of Effective Conferences. Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne Australia.

substantive reductions in the likelihood of ongoing recidivism (between 24 and 40 per cent reduced likelihood).<sup>14</sup> The research also considered offending trajectories of young people who participated in the program, and found that they were much less likely to continue offending, even after the first recidivism event.<sup>15</sup> Conferences without victim in attendance were found to be just as effective in reducing recidivism as conferences attended by a primary victim.<sup>16</sup> Jesuit Social Services would like to see Youth Justice Group Conferencing made the default response for children who come into contact with the justice system in Victoria.

Additionally, Jesuit Social Services wishes to emphasise the importance of restorative practices such as Youth Justice Group Conferencing in enabling engagement with and support for victims of crime. The [2010 KPMG evaluation of group conferencing](#) found that by participating in a conference, victims were able to resolve unanswered questions, including reasons behind the young person's offending.<sup>17</sup> Currently, Victoria Police officers are responsible for initiating contact with victims; however, this is not always possible within their busy workloads. Shifting responsibility for this function, along with providing dedicated funding, to the Department of Justice Victims of Crime Agency would support more victims to participate in conferencing. More broadly, we would like to see greater engagement and support for victims of crime across the entire justice system.

### ***2.1.5 Enabling better transitions and the importance of supported housing for young people with multiple and complex needs***

Young people leaving custody often experience homelessness, poor mental health, and high rates of illicit drug use.<sup>18</sup> We believe that ongoing, coordinated and youth-focused practice can improve outcomes for young people, and the community. There is also a need for supported pathways to community mental health services for young people leaving custodial detention where required. The Government must improve intensive support when young people exit prison, using a step-down model to connect with housing, education, training and support in the community.

The Victorian Youth Justice Community Support Service (YJCSS) provides a positive example of this approach. YJCSS helps prevent re-offending by focusing on a young person's development, preparing them for adulthood and re-connecting them with the community. Concerningly, we have found that only one third of young people involved with Youth Justice, including both community supervision and custody, have access to YJCSS. Additional investment in YJCSS is required to provide support to every young person exiting youth detention. Jesuit Social Services believes that being able to work holistically with a young person, their family and their community is an essential aspect of rehabilitation. Investment in YJCSS would provide for this level of engagement. We need sensible responses to youth offending that takes a long-term perspective. From the minute a young person enters detention, we need to engage them in structured and meaningful rehabilitative programs that facilitate a positive return to the community.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> KPMG (2010). Review of the Youth Justice Group Conferencing Program: Final Report. Melbourne: Department of Human Services, p. 39. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>18</sup> AIHW (2019). The Health of Prisoners 2018. ([Weblink](#)); Jesuit Social Services (2018). All Alone: Young adults in the Victorian justice system. ([Weblink](#)); Victorian Ombudsman (2015). Investigation into the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Prisoners in Victoria. ([Weblink](#))

For many years, Jesuit Social Services has provided supported housing for justice system-involved young people through our Perry House and Next Steps programs. Perry House provides a residential-based living skills program for justice system-involved young people with an intellectual disability at risk of, or are experiencing, homelessness and require support. Next Steps, which was recognised by the 2017 Victorian Homelessness Achievement Awards, is a supported housing program for 16 to 24 year olds involved with the justice system. With the increased provision of safe and stable housing as a foundation, we can tackle the issues contributing to a person's offending behaviour, develop solid skills that put people on a more positive pathway, and monitor their progress – daily where necessary – to deliver sustainable and lasting change.

**We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Provide resources to undertake youth justice legislative reform towards:
  - The Victorian Government delivering its promise to raising the age of criminal responsibility from the age of 10 years, for the criminal age to be raised to minimum 14 years old, and partnering with key stakeholders to develop a therapeutic response for this age group.
  - Repealing the presumption against dual track; extending the age of dual track to 25; and tailoring approaches for young adults aged 18-25 in contact with the justice system.
  - Reducing remand numbers for children and young people and ensuring custody is only ever used as a last resort for this age group.
- Allocate resources to address the overrepresentation of children in out-of-home care, CALD children and Aboriginal children by:
  - Additional therapeutic, diversionary, and restorative-based supports, including restorative justice conferencing, to children in out-of-home care.
  - Funding community-led and culturally safe approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people.
- Divert children and young people from the justice system by:
  - Further investing in diversionary programs, specifically focusing on ensuring children remain engaged or are re-engaged with education.
  - Making Youth Justice Group Conferencing opt-out rather than opt-in and expand it so that it is available across the continuum of justice system involvement.
- Reduce harm arising from youth detention by:
  - Embedding evidence-based, trauma-informed and culturally safe programs for children and young people under youth justice supervision that repair relationships and address underlying trauma.
  - Strengthening the youth justice workforce by investing in training all correctional staff to use therapeutic and restorative approaches when working with children and young people.
  - Retain Parkville to reduce young people from becoming isolated from their families by ensuring easier access of visitations, as well as to ensure there are distinct precincts to support 18-25 year olds as well as special units for girls and young people with complex mental health.
- Enable better transitions from youth detention to the community by:
  - Expanding transitional and supportive housing programs, such as Perry House and Next Steps, to offer 24/7 supports to young people in the criminal justice system who do not have access to safe and secure housing to enable them to thrive and remain in the community .e.g. young people exiting custody, on parole or on a community justice order.
  - Further resourcing YJCSS so that it can provide support to every young person exiting youth detention.

## **2.2 Adult Justice**

Victoria's growing prison population continues to be of great concern to Jesuit Social Services, particularly the approach to building more prisons rather than investing in alternatives. A humane justice system is one that is based on the principles of prevention, early intervention and restorative justice. It sees incarceration used only as a last resort and, where it is used, rehabilitation is the priority. The primary goal of any effective criminal justice system should be rehabilitation, encompassing skilled therapeutic interventions that repair relationships, address underlying trauma and support a person's reintegration into the community. Unfortunately, the system is not delivering these outcomes – currently 37 per cent of adults who exit the prison system in Victoria return within two years.<sup>19</sup>

### **2.2.1 Alternatives to prison**

In order to significantly reduce the number of people in prison, promote rehabilitation and reserve prison as a last resort, alternative sentencing options must be considered, including orders such as home detention and suspended sentences. These create a graduated sentencing hierarchy, reserving prison for the most serious, violent offences, and ensures legislation is evidence informed by prevention of reoffending. Certain conditions around these orders provide safeguards to ensure their effectiveness. For instance, certain individuals would be better candidates for non-custodial sentences, such as those with nonviolent offending histories who are at low-risk of reoffending.

We call on the Victorian Government to develop state-wide alternatives to custody for people with short prison sentences (for example, 18 months or less) and to consider legislating for a presumption against short-term prison sentences. For many people in prison, short-term sentences do not promote rehabilitation, rather they have devastating and disproportionate life impacts, to the extent they are considered an unjust sentence.<sup>20</sup> A presumption against short prison sentences combined with robust, viable and state-wide alternatives to custody would prevent people from becoming entrenched in the criminal justice system and reduce the number of people in Victorian prisons. It is essential that any alternatives to custody include wrap-around supports for offenders to address the underlying circumstances influencing their offending. Alternative strategies should increase investment in individuals being maintained in employment – or if unemployed, supported to gain employment. While holding offenders accountable for their offending behaviour, the justice system should focus on maintaining economic participation as both a cost-effective strategy and one that avoids the contamination effect of imprisonment.

Following the Coghlan Bail Review in 2017, the Andrews Government enacted the Bail Amendment (Stage One) Act 2017 and the Bail Amendment (Stage Two) Act 2018 which resulted in unprecedented numbers of people on remand. We welcome the government's recent announcements to reform Victoria's bail laws,<sup>21</sup> and urge the government to specifically repeal changes introduced under the Bail Amendment (Stage one) Act 2017 and the Bail Amendment (Stage two) Act 2018 which have made it more difficult to access bail and reintroduce home detention and suspended sentences.

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<sup>19</sup> Productivity Commission. (2022). Report on Government Services 2022. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>20</sup> Parliament of Victoria. (2022), Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System Final Report. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Andrews promises Victorian bail law reform after inquest into Veronica Nelson's death (2022, January 31). *The Guardian*. ([Weblink](#))

### **2.2.2 Restorative justice for adults**

Restorative justice views crime as more than breaking the law – it recognises that when someone commits a crime it causes harm to multiple people, their relationships and the wider community. Restorative justice focuses on repairing this harm. It brings people together – the offender, the victim and others affected – to acknowledge the harm, consider how best to repair the harm, and prevent similar harm in the future. Restorative programs such as Youth Justice Group Conferencing provide a means of responding to harm with healing by creating opportunities for dialogue between individuals and groups, with benefits for victims, offenders and the wider community. In Victoria, Jesuit Social Services has delivered the [Youth Justice Group Conferencing program](#) since 2003, which is grounded in the principles of restorative justice.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the success of Youth Justice Group Conferencing, there is no such program available for adult offenders. Jesuit Social Services calls for the government to embed restorative justice practices across the Victorian criminal justice system. This would include restorative justice group conferencing made available in the adult justice system across the sentencing continuum (i.e. at diversion, pre-sentence upon a finding of guilt, and at the post-sentence stage). This must be accompanied by support for adults in the community, such as via existing programs like ReConnect. We would welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with the Government in developing and delivering this initiative.

### **2.2.3 Women in the criminal justice system**

From 2010 to 2019, the number of women in Victorian prisons increased by a staggering 44 per cent.<sup>23</sup> Jesuit Social Services is very concerned with this increase and the unique vulnerabilities women in prisons face. This includes higher rates of being family violence victim-survivors as well as physical and sexual abuse prior to imprisonment, mental health concerns and disability, drug and alcohol misuse and holding parenting and family responsibilities.<sup>24</sup>

We would particularly like to highlight that women who are in prison are more likely to be parents, with around 68 per cent of women reported having dependent children.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, many women who are in prison are the primary caregivers to their children.<sup>26</sup> In many cases these children are also subject to being in the Child Protection system and placed in out-of-home care, creating an additional financial and programmatic burden on the State. This dynamic is a well-known feature for the cycle of inter-generational poverty and income insecurity created by imprisonment of women; exposure to out-of-home care is known to lead to worse outcomes for children and young people, including higher rates in unemployment, poverty, education, and mental and physical health.<sup>27</sup> This also has severe implications for the intergenerational cycle of justice involvement. The Sentencing Advisory Council's report into 'Crossover Kids' highlighted the link between a child's placement in out-of-home care and the associated

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<sup>22</sup> Jesuit Social Services (2019). #JusticeSolutions New Zealand Tour. ([Weblink](#)); and Larsen, J. (2014). Restorative justice in the Australian criminal justice system. AIC Reports: Research and Public

<sup>23</sup> Corrections Victoria. (2021). Monthly prisoner and Offender Statistics. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs And Crime. (2008). Handbook for Prison Managers and Policymakers on Women and Imprisonment. Criminal Justice Handbook Series. New York: United Nations. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>25</sup> Walker, S., Sutherland, P. & Millsted, M. (2019). Characteristics and offending of women in prison in Victoria 2012-2018. Crime Statistics Agency, Melbourne.

<sup>26</sup> Corrections, Prisons & Parole (Victorian Government). (2023). Pregnancy and Childcare. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>27</sup> Community Affairs References committee (Commonwealth of Australia). (2015). Chapter 4 - Outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care, Senate Enquiry, Report: Out of Home Care, pp. 103-105. ([Weblink](#))



risk to becoming caught up in the justice system.<sup>28</sup> On average, a child whose mother has been to prison is six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves.<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that Aboriginal children are already significantly overrepresented in the child protection system and the incarceration of Aboriginal mothers is only likely to exacerbate this.<sup>30</sup> Women's imprisonment, therefore, has a large and significant effect on children, families and communities, not only on the individual alone. We therefore call for an investment into a reformed approach of presumption against a custodial sentence aimed at keeping women out of prison.

Furthermore, the male-centric model that many prisons operate under, coupled with a disproportionate gender ratio with male staff in female prisons, greatly hinders the capacity for incarcerated women to rehabilitate and reintegrate.<sup>31</sup> The establishment of a gender balance of corrections staff across all levels, seniority and roles is critical to ensuring that women feel safe, supported and secure while incarcerated. Further, pre- and post- release supports must be responsive to the specific needs of women in contact with the justice system and culturally safe.

#### ***2.2.4 Men in the criminal justice system***

At present, 94 per cent of people in prison in Victoria are male.<sup>32</sup> Our experience demonstrates that prisons are ineffective at addressing attitudes and beliefs that underlie harmful and violent behaviours perpetrated by men because they tend to focus more on punishment rather than rehabilitation. Our research, *The Man Box: A study on being a young man in Australia*, found that men who endorsed rigid and narrow ideas of masculinity (such as acting tough, always sorting out problems on their own and supporting the use of violence to get respect) were 14 times more likely to have used physical violence in the past month.<sup>33</sup> These men were also twice as likely to have had thoughts of suicide in the last two weeks and were more likely to report feeling down, depressed and hopeless. As it stands, prisons are at-risk of reinforcing these Man Box norms, thereby increasing risks to our community and men themselves. Based on our 'Man Box' research we recommend a gender-responsive approach to men in prison, especially in relation to addressing underlying attitudes and behaviours, mental health problems and suicidal ideation among men who have perpetrated harmful behaviours such as violence and family violence.

#### ***2.2.5 Access to healthcare in the criminal justice system***

Healthcare provision in custody should be equivalent to that provided to the wider community. At present, Medicare Benefit Scheme (MBS), the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) as well as the NDIS do not cover people in custody across Australia. Jesuit Social Services notes with concern the signing of a new contract for healthcare provision in Victorian prisons with a multi-national for profit company – GEO Group Inc - noting its poor record for human rights abuses, poor standards of care and questionable

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<sup>28</sup> Sentencing Advisory Council (2020). *Crossover Kids: Vulnerable Children in the Youth Justice System, Report 2: Children at the Intersection of Child Protection and Youth Justice across Victoria*. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>29</sup> Cox, M. (2009). *The relationships between episodes of parental incarceration and students' psycho-social and educational outcomes: An analysis of risk factors*. Temple University.

<sup>30</sup> Commission for Children and Young People (2021). *Our youth, our way: inquiry into the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system*. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>31</sup> Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic.), & Cerveri, P. (2005). *Request for a systemic review of discrimination against women in Victorian prisons*. Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic.) Incorporated.

<sup>32</sup> Corrections Victoria (2021). *Monthly prisoner and Offender Statistics*. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>33</sup> The Men's Project & Flood, M. (2018). *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in Australia*. Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne. ([Weblink](#))

business practices.<sup>34</sup> Jesuit Social Services is of the view that it is morally wrong to engage for-profit providers such as GEO and others who are providing poor quality of care services to the most disadvantaged in the community (prisoners) and that such services should be provided within the public health system. Jesuit Social Services welcomes the announcements made by the Victorian government that the healthcare services in female prisons will be taken over by state government-run organisations - Western Health and Dhelkaya Health from July 2023.<sup>35</sup> We believe that this should be further extended to all prisons, including for adult male prisons and youth detention centres. Ensuring access to health schemes of MBS, PBS and NDIS would open the way to supplementing the range of health services available to people in prison and would enable continuity of care for people entering and exiting custody. It has also been argued that the cost of these exemptions would be very small in the context of the overall cost of MBS.<sup>36</sup>

The prevalence of disabilities among people in the prison system highlights the need for NDIS support to be available to people while in custody. Until NDIS is extended to Victorian prisons, we call for the Victorian Government to meet the needs of people with disabilities who are in contact with the criminal justice system when NDIS does not provide this support. This includes facilitating communication between the criminal justice system and NDIS where there is the possibility of funding from NDIS (such as for a prosthetic), allocating greater resources towards disability services, as well as providing reasonable accommodation of specific and individual needs while in prison. Importantly, the criminal justice system must ensure that when a person with a disability is exiting custody that they are connected to accessing NDIS as soon as possible.<sup>37</sup> It is critical that the Victorian Government implement strategies to divert people with an ABI and/or intellectual disability from the prison system at every opportunity and respond with more appropriate community-based services and programs.

### ***2.2.6 Enabling better transitions from the justice system to the community***

More than half (54 per cent) of people exiting prison expect to be homeless upon release, with 44 per cent planning to stay in short-term or emergency accommodation.<sup>38</sup> People exiting prison are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community, yet the limited support available to them means they often cycle through the justice system again and again. Jesuit Social Services sees the real difficulties people experience as they transition from prison back to the community and struggle to navigate health, housing and welfare services that often lack the resources and expertise to meet their needs.

In Victoria, growing waitlists for programs in the face of rising rates of imprisonment mean that people in prison are missing out on critical pre-release support.<sup>39</sup> We urgently need further investment in therapeutic, culturally safe interventions focused on personal development, vocational skill building, housing support, counselling and reintegration support for adults pre- and post-release, and particularly

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<sup>34</sup> AFSG (2022). The GEO Group Inc. ([Weblink](#)); Dunstan, J. (2023a, January 12). Calls for overhaul as Victoria continues to outsource prison health care to private companies. ABC News. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>35</sup> Dunstan, J. (2023b, January 20). Public health bodies to take over care in Victorian women's prisons. ABC News. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>36</sup> Plueckhahn, T. M., Kinner, S. A., Sutherland, G., & Butler, T. G. (2015). Are some more equal than others? Challenging the basis for prisoners' exclusion from Medicare. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 203(9), 359-361. DOI: [10.5694/mja15.00588](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja15.00588)

<sup>37</sup> NDIS (2022). Who funds the supports you need when you're in custody? ([Weblink](#))

<sup>38</sup> AIHW (2019). The health of Australia's prisoners 2018. Cat. no. PHE 246. Canberra: AIHW. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>39</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office. (2020). Ravenhall Prison: Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Prisoners. ([Weblink](#))

for those who have experienced periods of isolation during their time in custody, thereby reducing recidivism and its costs.<sup>40</sup>

In 2020, Jesuit Social Services partnered with the Victorian Government to launch the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility for men exiting prison. Several residents at Maribyrnong have demonstrated that with the right supports they are able to settle into community life, look for work and plan for their future. The provision of support for people leaving prison is critical to reducing reoffending and building safe communities. We commend the Victorian Government on its commitment to ensuring this innovative program can continue until June 2023 and call for it to be funded on a long-term basis. Many people, however, continue to exit prison into homelessness. We therefore call for investment to implement a dedicated transitional, supported housing model. This would involve agencies working in partnership to provide intensive ‘wrap around’ responses, drawing on strong working relationships with Corrections Victoria, prison staff, Community Corrections, specialist government and community sector providers, and Aboriginal and culture specific services across housing, education and employment, alcohol and other drugs, health and mental health services.

**We call on the Victorian government to:**

- Undertake adult justice legislative reform and developing state-wide, community-based alternatives to custody by:
  - Delivering on the government’s announcements to repealing regressive bail laws under the Bail Amendment (Stage one) Act 2017 and the Bail Amendment (Stage two) Act 2018 which have made it harder to get bail
  - Reintroducing home detention orders and suspended sentences, and legislating against short-term prison sentences.
- Embed restorative justice practices across the Victorian adult justice system, including making group conferencing available to adults.
- Implement strategies to divert people with an ABI and/or intellectual disability from the prison system at every opportunity and respond with more appropriate community-based services and programs.
- Work with the Commonwealth Government to provide ongoing access to the NDIS and MBS, and to reduce the waiting period for the Disability Support Pension for people exiting prison
- Embed a gender-responsive approach by:
  - Commit to exploring evidence-informed alternatives to different models of incarceration that do not enforce rigid masculinity, and will break the cycle of violence.
  - Developing a gender ratio for the workforce in women's correctional facilities to ensure women receive gender-informed support.
  - Ensuring that the gender-specific needs of women in prison in Victoria’s custodial system are met, particularly in the context of reception; transportation; physical and mental wellbeing; education, employment and program treatment; security; pregnancy and parenting.
  - A presumption against a custodial sentence aimed at keeping women out of prison.
- Enable better transitions from the adult justice system to the community by:

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<sup>40</sup> Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (2014). Recidivism rates and the impact of treatment programs. ([Weblink](#)); Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019). The health of Australia’s prisoners 2018. Cat. no. PHE 246. Canberra: AIHW. ([Weblink](#))

- Further investing in more therapeutic, culturally safe interventions focused on personal development through personal and vocational skill building, housing support, counselling and reintegration support for adults pre- and post-release.
- Providing funding to embed community health nurses in transitional support programs permanently.
- Providing long-term funding to the [Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility](#) initiative and scaling it up across Victoria so that no one exits prison into homelessness.
- Investing in a dedicated transitional, supported housing model based on the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility for women and other at-risk groups of people exiting the justice system.
- Coordinate the establishment of National Protective Mechanisms to provide independent oversight of youth detention and prisons in Victoria.
- Work with independent oversight bodies to ban the use of isolation in youth justice facilities and to significantly reduce the use of isolation and solitary confinement in adult prisons.

### 3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the justice system

In Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities continue to experience the impacts of colonisation, systemic racism and intergenerational trauma.<sup>41</sup> The consequences of this can be seen through the overincarceration of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system.<sup>42</sup> Of particular concern is the overrepresentation of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal children and young people in prisons. Jesuit Social Services is concerned that Aboriginal women are the fastest growing prison population in Victoria – the number of Aboriginal women entering prison in Victoria more than tripled between 2012 and 2019, and currently sits at 38 per cent of women that are incarcerated in Victoria.<sup>43</sup> Aboriginal children and young people adults are also overrepresented in the justice system – at March 2021, they were almost 14 times more likely to be imprisoned than adults in the general population.<sup>44</sup>

Recognising the disproportionate impacts of some of the current legislation in Victoria of the criminal justice system on Aboriginal people, including the existing state’s bail laws. We echo Coroner Simon McGregor’s recommendations for the need to change the bail laws following the Inquest into the death of Gunditjmara, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta woman Veronica Nelson, and once again welcome the recent announcements by the Victorian government to reform Victoria’s bail laws.<sup>45</sup>

Recognising that Aboriginal communities and families can experience multiple and intersecting disadvantages including poverty, contact with the child protection system, victim survivors of family violence, housing insecurity and mental health concerns. This can cause further disadvantage and create increased risk of being in contact with the criminal justice system. For instance, the *report Our Way, Our Youth* discussed that children’s exposure to poverty can drive children to stealing basic essentials, such

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<sup>41</sup> Note: Hereafter we use the term ‘Aboriginal’ to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, clans and Traditional Owner groups of this land.

<sup>42</sup> Sentencing Advisory Council (2022). Victoria's Indigenous Imprisonment Rates. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>43</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Government) (2022). Corrective Services September 2022. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>44</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Government) (2022). Corrective Services September 2022. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>45</sup> Ore, A. (2022, January 31). Daniel Andrews promises Victorian bail law reform after inquest into Veronica Nelson’s death, The Guardian. ([Weblink](#))

as food.<sup>46</sup> We acknowledge and support the important findings and recommendations of *Our Way, Our Youth*, the Systemic inquiry into the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria's youth justice system by the Commission for Children and Young People.

We acknowledge the important work of the Victorian Government and First People's Assembly of Victoria in establishing the Truth and Justice Commission work towards a treaty in Victoria. We acknowledge the important work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission in Victoria's first formal truth-telling process. We are also encouraged by the Victorian Government's release of the Wirkara Kulpa Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy, which aims to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children under youth justice supervision by 2031. Findings include raising the age of criminalisation in Victoria to 14 years, to reduce the disproportionate impacts and overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in prison.<sup>47</sup> However, more efforts are urgently needed.

Responding to the long-standing overincarceration of Aboriginal people in the justice system requires a long-term whole-of-government approach built on strong and trusting relationships with Aboriginal organisations. Jesuit Social Services therefore calls on the Victorian Government to commit to reducing the significant over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system by adequately resourcing Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to strengthen their capacity to work with Aboriginal people involved in the criminal justice system. This should involve a range of initiatives, from capacity building projects in Aboriginal communities, to providing a continuum of supports for Aboriginal people involved with the justice system from pre-release to post-release. These supports must be built on trusted, consistent, culturally safe approaches and incorporate therapeutic, whole-of-family ways of working. There also needs to be an increase in the availability of programs specifically targeted at Aboriginal women involved in the justice system.

**We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Fully implement the recommendations of *Our Youth, Our Way* inquiry into Aboriginal over-incarceration in Victoria.
- Fund Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to design, lead and deliver programs involved in the justice system across the continuum; those aimed at early intervention; train all staff in cultural safety; and employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander case managers.
- Increasing the availability of programs for Aboriginal women involved in the justice system.

#### **4. Supporting education, training and employment**

Education, training and employment play key and powerful roles in addressing many of the overlapping issues facing people experiencing vulnerability in our community. Many of our participants desperately want to work however face several difficulties, such as a lack of experience or education, mental health issues, or struggles with substance misuse or ill-health. None of these factors should sentence someone

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<sup>46</sup> *Our Youth, Our Way* (2021, p. 264). Inquiry into the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system. Commission for Children and Young People. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>47</sup> Dunstan, J. (2022, February 17). Victoria under pressure to raise criminal age as Aboriginal youth justice strategy unveiled, ABC News. ([Weblink](#))

to a lifetime of unemployment. The promotion of education, lifelong learning and capacity building is fundamental to the work of Jesuit Social Services.

#### ***4.1 Maintaining engagement with primary and secondary education***

Disengagement from education can often be the first sign that a young person has started on a trajectory into antisocial behaviour.<sup>48</sup> Jesuit Social Services delivers casework and support to disadvantaged young learners as part of the Victorian Government's Navigator initiative. Through [Navigator](#) disengaged learners aged between 12 and 17 are supported to return to education or training. This includes the development of individualised learning and cultural plans, and restorative practice including therapeutic and practical support.

Re-engaging vulnerable young people in educational, learning and employment pathways gives them the foundational skills and opportunities they need to flourish. Jesuit Social Services welcomes funding from last year's budget for a pilot to extend the Navigator program to children aged 10 and 11. However, we continue to call on the government to permanently extend access to Navigator enabling earlier intervention to support vulnerable children transitioning from primary school to high school. We also echo VCOSS's call to expand the eligibility threshold of Navigator to 40 per cent of missed classes (currently 70 per cent) to ensure students are re-engaged with education much earlier.<sup>49</sup>

#### ***4.2 Education, training and employment pathways***

People facing barriers to employment often need assistance to upgrade their skills and their readiness for work. For example, individuals who have lost work at an older age and been unable to secure new employment; left school early or arrived as refugees; experience poor mental health; or who have been involved in the justice system - can all experience significant barriers to securing employment.

We commend the Victorian Government for its Jobs Victoria Employment Services (JVES) initiative, which provides a direct pathway into employment for people seeking work. Jesuit Social Services partners with the Victorian Government to deliver JVES and since July 2021, we have placed nearly 900 participants into work and have seen what intensive support of this kind can achieve. The initiative compliments the Government's significant investment in infrastructure by taking advantage of the skills people have to offer and providing opportunities for employment. The ReConnect 2021 (formerly Skills First ReConnect) initiative represents another critical support for people who have left school early, enabling them to re-enter education and training and improve and enhance their vocational skills. It has enabled many hundreds of people to undertake training. We call on the Victorian Government to continue important initiatives such as JVES and Jobs Advocate beyond June 2023, when funding is due to expire for both. Further investment is also needed in programs such as Reconnect 2021 and Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) pre-accredited training to identify, engage and support people with low levels of educational attainment into education, training and employment pathways.

Our Corporate Diversity Partnership, has us supporting people from CALD backgrounds with professional skills into their chosen profession for the first time. We have partneres with major corporations to create

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<sup>48</sup> McCarter, S., Venkitasubramanian, K., & Bradshaw, K. (2019). Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline: Examining micro-and macro-level variables that affect school disengagement and subsequent felonies. *Journal of Social Service Research*.

<sup>49</sup> VCOSS. (2022). Victorian Election Platform 2022. Victorian Council of Social Service. ([Weblink](#))

a number of new workplace inclusion programs. Our partners have included Melbourne Water, CBUS, SuperConcepts, the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), Yarra Valley Water and John Holland.

#### **CASE STUDY: Jves**

Ali\* was working as an interpreter for the Australian and New Zealand armies in Iraq. When the Australian Army was preparing to leave, it offered to sponsor Ali and his mother to resettle in Australia. They were granted permanent residency in March 2021.

Several months on, Ali was growing frustrated and anxious. He hadn't been able to find a job. Securing work was his main priority, so that he could support himself and his mother as they began their new life in Australia. A friend recommended Jesuit Social Services' Jobs Victoria Employment Services (JVES) program, which provides a direct pathway into employment for people seeking work.

Ali was flexible about what roles he was prepared to take on. JVES staff helped him create several different versions of his resume, to assist with the variety of roles he was applying for. Through one of our JVES Employment Brokers a suitable role came in – working with asylum seekers. JVES staff worked with Ali to help him apply quickly.

Ali got the job. Staff helped him navigate Melbourne's public transport system and figure out the best route to get to work. Ali has started work and is loving his role. He says that his new colleagues are kind and supportive. Ali is in weekly contact with his Employment Mentor who ensures that any issues or barriers that may arise are addressed quickly.

\* participant name was changed to protect privacy

#### **4.3 Continue social procurement requirements in all government contracts**

Jesuit Social Services urges the Victorian Government to re-affirm its commitment to increasing the employment of all Victorians, especially people experiencing significant barriers to employment. This can be done through the continuation of social procurement requirements in all major government contracts to incentivise the employment of people experiencing disadvantage.

#### **We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Permanently extend access to Navigator to children from 10 years of age to enable the program to intervene earlier and provide critical support to children and families experiencing vulnerability.
- Help more people facing barriers to employment by:
  - continuing both the Jobs Victoria Employment Services initiative and Jobs Victoria Advocates Program beyond June 2023, when funding is due to expire; and
  - expanding programs such as the Jobs Victoria Employment Services and Reconnect 2021.
- Provide additional funding for JVES CALD Professional programs and programs for CALD jobseekers looking to enter other professions such as construction labouring.
- Provide additional funding for Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) pre-accredited training to further reach and engage at risk people as diversion from the justice system.
- Continue investment in achieving the social procurement requirements in all government contracts.

## 5. Safe, secure and sustainable housing

Every person has the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes the right to safe, secure and sustainable housing. Jesuit Social Services works with many people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, inappropriate or unsafe housing, housing instability and stress, and other forms of disadvantage in their lives. We know that safe and stable housing is crucial for the positive health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Safe, secure and affordable housing is essential in enabling people to avoid or get out of poverty, to get their lives back on track and pursue aspirations such as engaging in education, and finding and retaining employment. However, barriers for all Victorians to have access to safe and secure housing continues to be a point of concern, particularly those on low-incomes and in disadvantaged areas. Nearly 40 per cent of all Australian specialist homelessness services in 2020-21 were in Victoria.<sup>50</sup>

Young people leaving out-of-home care are a particularly vulnerable group. Recent research found that around 60 per cent of young people who left care in Victoria in 2013-14 became homeless by 2018, with complex mental health and substance misuse being the most significant predictor of homelessness.<sup>51</sup> A range of housing options must be available to meet the different needs of people facing or at risk of homelessness.

A serious economic impact of COVID-19 we are currently seeing is the rising and unaffordable price of private rental properties, and low private rental vacancies.<sup>52</sup> As of September 2022, the rental vacancy rate was only 0.9 per cent nationally and 1.3 per cent in Victoria.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, this is causing financial distress and housing insecurity for many who previously were not experiencing these vulnerabilities. Further, it is exacerbating risks and creating further barriers to secure housing for those who are already experiencing vulnerabilities, including low-income earners and people with multiple and complex needs.<sup>54</sup> This highlights the need for further investments of more social housing, as well as measures (such as rental capping) and supports towards reducing barriers of private rental unaffordability.

### **5.1 Increase safe, sustainable public housing**

Jesuit Social Services commends the Victorian Government on progressing key housing reforms, such as the Big Housing Build, delivering 9,300 new social housing properties over four years, despite the challenges of COVID-19.

While we welcome this investment, Victoria will still have far less social housing proportionally than other Australian states and territories.<sup>55</sup> We believe safe and sustainable public housing must be a vital component of Victoria's social housing system. This requires long term sustained investment that will

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<sup>50</sup> Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (Australian Government) (2021). Specialist homelessness services 2020–21: Victoria. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>51</sup> Chikwava F., O'Donnell M., Ferrante A., Pakpahan E., & Cordier R. (2022). Patterns of homelessness and housing instability and the relationship with mental health disorders among young people transitioning from out-of-home care: Retrospective cohort study using linked administrative data. PLOS ONE 17(9): e0274196.

<sup>52</sup> AHURi (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute). (2022). Brief: Why does Australia have a rental crisis, and what can be done about it? ([Weblink](#))

<sup>53</sup> SQM Research. (2023). Residential Vacancy Rates. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>54</sup> Baker E., Daniel L., Beer A., Rowley S., Stone W., Bentley R., Caines R., & Sansom G. (2022). Final Report no. 389: The impact of the pandemic on the Australian rental sector. AHURi. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>55</sup> Council to Homeless Persons (2022). A plan to end homelessness in Victoria. ([Weblink](#))



increase the supply of public housing in the years to come. We therefore support VCOSS' Victorian Election Platform recommendation to build at least 60,000 more public and community homes by 2032.<sup>56</sup> It is unviable to rely on the private and community housing markets to adequately provide affordable and suitable housing, including for those with multiple and complex needs. In our experience, a complexity of unaddressed needs can often mean people cannot afford and are unable to be housed in social housing. Therefore, the construction of adequate public housing to meet current and future demand should be prioritised. This must be coupled with investment in supported housing, including assertive outreach and wrap around supports, that enable people with complex needs to stabilise their lives and pursue aspirations such as engaging in education, and finding and retaining employment.

### ***5.2 Provide access to safe, energy efficient and sustainable housing***

It is crucial that pre-existing inequities in housing are not exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. As we collectively face increasingly harsh climatic conditions, the lack of energy efficient, sustainable housing for some members of our community is an inequality that, if unaddressed, will exacerbate existing health inequities and undermine social cohesion. We welcome the Victorian Government's recent commitment to ensuring that all newly constructed homes are rated seven stars under the 10-star Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme. However, as found by Sustainability Victoria, the average energy performance of existing homes in Victoria is only 1.8 stars.<sup>57</sup> This is well below the requirement for new dwellings. Significant energy savings and reductions in emissions could be achieved by undertaking energy efficient upgrades on Victoria's existing housing stock.<sup>58</sup> For example, upgrades could reduce average household gas use by 58 per cent.<sup>59</sup> We support VCOSS' call to transform housing in Victoria by 2035 to ensure that all people living in Victoria, regardless of whether they rent, live in social housing or own their own home, have access to climate safe and energy-efficient housing.<sup>60</sup>

The Victorian Government can achieve this by expanding the Social Housing Energy Efficiency Program to include all government-owned housing.<sup>61</sup> This will have flow on health, social and environmental benefits as well as boosting the construction workforce.

### ***5.3 Supporting rental tenancies for people with multiple and complex needs***

People with multiple and complex needs may experience a number of barriers to maintaining private tenancies such as substance misuse, prior experiences of trauma or mental illness. In light of this, the Victorian Government should play a greater role in developing initiatives to support people with complex challenges to sustain private rental tenancies. For example, our Link Youth Justice Housing Program provides a crucial after-hours support service to engage participants during the highest risk time for reoffending when they are also most likely to experience crisis and breakdown in their relationships and tenancies. The program secures and sustains participants' access to private rentals by head leasing through partner agency VincentCare and then subletting to a participant. Rent is subsidised, making it equivalent to public housing (i.e. 25 per cent of the young person's income), to make it affordable. Such partnerships provide effective models that could readily be expanded.

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<sup>56</sup> VCOSS. (2022). Victorian Election Platform 2022, Victorian Council of Social Service. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>57</sup> Sustainability Victoria. (2015). Energy Efficiency Upgrade Potential of Existing Victorian Houses.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> VCOSS. (2022). Fair and fast action for a safer climate – submission. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>61</sup> VCOSS. (2022). Victorian Election Platform 2022. Victorian Council of Social Service. ([Weblink](#))

### **We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Build at least 60,000 public and community homes available by 2032 with linked support and strengthen protections.
- Invest in supported housing options including outreach and wrap around supports for people with a range of needs, including:
  - young people exiting out-of-home care and custodial settings;
  - victim-survivors of family violence;
  - people with mental health, substance use issues and experiences of trauma; and
  - people with disabilities.
- Provide equitable access to energy-efficient housing, including by retrofitting existing social housing that is over ten years old with energy efficient upgrades.
- Develop initiatives to support people with multiple and complex needs to sustain private tenancies.

## **6. Gender justice**

We want men and boys to live respectful, accountable and fulfilling lives free from violence and other harmful behaviour. Boys and men are over-represented in indicators of harmful behaviours with devastating impacts for women, children, communities and boys and men themselves: the perpetration of violence and other crimes, in suicide rates, expulsions in our schools, incarceration and in various measures of social and economic exclusion and disadvantage.

Following the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Government is well positioned to achieve many elements of its ambition to rebuild the family violence system. However, greater emphasis needs to be placed on engaging with boys and men on issues of masculinities to prevent violence. However, significant gaps remain and, through The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services has taken steps to better understand and respond to male violence and other harmful behaviours. Through identifying and understanding the underlying causes of violence and challenging behaviours, such as through our ['Man Box' research](#) which surveyed men and boys on their beliefs about sex, gender and violence, we are seeking to move from crisis to prevention and early intervention.

Victoria continues to lead efforts to prevent violence. Further, in response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Government committed to implementing the Rights Resilience and Respectful Relationships curriculum (RRRR). As part of continuing to implement these important policy frameworks, we call on the Victorian Government to make investments to build the foundations required to sustain prevention of violence work that focusses on men and boys. Through providing adequate core funding, The Men's Project can engage and collaborate with existing structures and networks, such as local governments, women's health and primary prevention of violence sectors, to engage and support men and boys to promote healthier masculinities. This will allow for the development of strong partnerships, knowledge creation and exchange, and development of evidence informed approaches to creating healthier masculinities that go beyond awareness-raising to outcomes that prevent the use of violence. Building on our Man Box research, we also call on the Government to support scale up of the Adolescent Man Box survey to inform the roll-out of the respectful relationships curriculum using data on the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys including as it relates to the underlying drivers of violence.

### **6.1 Preventing violence before it starts**

Through our work with schools and workplaces, The Men’s Project promotes positive and healthy masculinities to reduce violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men. [Our work in schools](#), supported by the Department of Education and Training, is consistent with and seeks to support implementation of the RRRR curriculum and offers a strengths-based, healthier masculinities education model designed to support young people to be their best selves. We deliver our Unpacking the Man Box workshops in schools to encourage conversations amongst students, teaching staff, and the wider school communities about the negative consequences associated with gender stereotypes and the tools and resources to foster healthier forms of masculinities, respectful relationships, and positive wellbeing. These sessions have also been adapted to other contexts including workplaces, early childhood education, justice and maternal and child health settings. We deliver the workshops to a range of participants, namely social workers, well-being staff, teachers, students, faith leaders and parents. Our [MoRE \(Modelling Respect and Equality\)](#) program helps role models to be agents of change in their schools, clubs and communities. The Men’s Project has also invested in the design of a program to decrease the incidence of harmful attitudes and behaviours among at-risk 12 to 18 year olds.

#### **MoRE**

*“Thank you immensely for the privilege of being part of Modelling Respect and Equality. It leaves its mark on me – indelibly. It shapes how I train educators in Respectful Relationships because I have experienced personal growth and new awareness of and optimism around what may be possible!”*

Gary – Modelling Respect and Equality participant

Drawing on our Modelling Respect and Equality program and Unpacking the Man Box workshops, we call on the government to scale up workforce capacity building through training community role models, working with men and boys in a range of settings such as schools, youth justice facilities, prisons and health services to prevent the use of violence.

### **6.2 Building and delivering effective early interventions**

A collaborative and multi-agency approach is critical to intervening early and addressing the root causes of violence and other harmful behaviours. This is why Jesuit Social Services has worked with police, organisations representing victim-survivors, researchers, practitioners and the private sector to develop our pilot of [Stop it Now! Australia](#) to prevent child sexual abuse. Stop it Now! is a helpline for people worried about their own or someone else’s inappropriate thoughts and behaviours towards children. Additionally, in collaboration with the University of Melbourne, Jesuit Social Services has engaged in a research project, the [Worried about Sex and Pornography Project \(WASAPP\)](#), for young people concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviours. This research is seeking to understand the developmental trajectories of children and young people to inform the contents of an effective online help tool. The next stage is to secure funding and build and trial a WASAPP online help tool. We call on the government to prioritise early intervention, by providing long-term program funding for initiatives for at-risk boys and young men. We call on the government to continue to invest in and rigorously evaluate pilot programs to engage at-risk young people with the view to developing scalable early intervention programs.

### ***6.3 Restorative approaches to adolescent family violence***

The Royal Commission into Family Violence identified a limited understanding of adolescent family violence across the youth services, family services and justice sectors. It also highlighted a lack of systemic response and interventions available to adolescents who use violence in the home. In acknowledging this need, Jesuit Social Services has developed innovative approaches to adolescent family violence by drawing on our extensive experience in delivering restorative justice programs. These interventions relate directly to a number of the Royal Commission's recommendations (123 – 128).

In 2018, Jesuit Social Services partnered with the Children's Court of Victoria to deliver RESTORE – a restorative justice pilot for adolescent family violence. RESTORE offered a family group conference process for civil cases and assisted the family member victims and adolescent perpetrators to address the harm caused by family violence and prevent further harm being caused. The pilot has now finished, with the University of Melbourne conducting an evaluation which will be completed this year. Anecdotal feedback indicates that RESTORE is meeting an identified gap in service delivery to young people and their families. In collaboration with Victoria Police, we have also developed the Family Assisted Adolescent Response model. Focussing on improving the crisis and follow-up response to police call-outs to adolescent family violence, the model embeds additional support from social workers working alongside police during callouts and in the 72 hours post incident. Additional funding is now required to ensure these programs continue.

### ***6.4 Scaling up the sector engaging boys and men***

Both the evidence-base and associated practice of addressing the underlying drivers of violence is relatively new, and to deliver on the Victorian Government's priorities in relation to rebuilding the family violence system, the sector engaging men and boys needs to be scaled up. The Men's Project is now a leading voice and actor in the primary prevention of violence and early intervention fields. Building on existing commitments and a strong foundation of policies such as the second Free From Violence Action Plan, we call on the Government to scale up the work seeking to engage men and boys to prevent violence. This work should be informed by investment in rigorous evaluation.

#### **We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Building on our Man Box research, support scale up of the Adolescent Man Box survey to inform the roll-out of the respectful relationships curriculum using longitudinal data on underlying attitudes related to stereotypical masculine norms and associated behaviours such as the use of violence.
- Prioritise prevention and early intervention by providing long-term funding to programs that prevent violence, including by:
  - Drawing on our Modelling Respect and Equality program and Unpacking the Man Box workshops, scale up workforce capacity building training for role models, working with men and boys in a range of settings such as schools, youth justice facilities, prisons and community health services to prevent the use of violence.
  - Continuing to invest in and rigorously evaluate pilot programs to engage at-risk young people with the view to developing scalable early intervention programs.
- Resource research and program design to better understand concerning sexual behaviours among children, and the sexual abuse of children, such as through Jesuit Social Services' pilot project in collaboration with the University of Melbourne, the Worried About Sex and Pornography.

- Commit to recurrent funding for adolescent family violence programs aligned with restorative principles, in collaboration with the Children’s Courts and Police, including Jesuit Social Services’ RESTORE and Family Assisted Adolescent Response programs.
- Provide core funding to support The Men’s Project continue to build strong partnerships within the prevention of violence sector, create and share knowledge, and develop an evidence base of approaches to supporting healthier masculinities that go beyond awareness-raising to outcomes that prevent the use of violence.

## **7. Strengthen mental health and suicide prevention supports**

At Jesuit Social Services, we see the challenges faced by many Victorians with mental illness and their families. Equally, we see the life changing impacts when people with mental ill-health are given the support they need. We therefore commend the Victorian Government’ significant investment in last year’s budget to better support the mental health and wellbeing of Victorians. This, in addition to the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Act is critical in transforming Victoria’s mental health system, consistent with the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System.

### ***7.1 Soft entry-points and assertive outreach***

Young people experiencing mental illness, substance misuse and associated difficulties often struggle to engage with the formal mental health service system. Therefore, non-clinical and relational models of assertive outreach are crucial in engaging young people who may be difficult to reach. Young people require flexible, assertive and responsive programs that are able to connect with them beyond the geographical limitations of current clinical approaches. Since 1996, Jesuit Social Services’ programs such as [Connexions](#) and the [Artful Dodgers Studios](#) have helped thousands of young people deal with mental illness, substance misuse and associated difficulties. Connexions offers a relationship-based approach to intake and assessment, and uses assertive outreach to engage young people dealing with concurrent issues of mental illness and substance abuse. The Artful Dodgers Studios provide a ‘soft entry’ via creative projects to engage young people with mental illness who aren’t ready for formal participation with social or health workers. Through allocating resources to develop programs like these, we can help break the cycle, first by creating a space where young people are welcomed, by forming relationships, and by then linking them into other services.

### ***7.2 Integrated dual diagnosis services***

We strongly support the development of a new statewide service for people living with mental illness and substance use or addiction, as recommended by the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. As highlighted in [our submission to the Royal Commission](#), it is crucial that the co-occurring issues experienced by some people are not treated in isolation. In particular, specialist expertise and integrated care (often through multi-disciplinary teams) are needed to concurrently address both mental health and alcohol and drug use, in recognition of how the co-occurrence of these issues can impact upon a person’s health. We look forward to seeing the state-wide initiative implemented by the end of 2025, as recommended by the Royal Commission.

### ***7.3 Suicide prevention and bereavement supports***

The Royal Commission found that people bereaved by suicide are at an increased risk of suicide, developing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and PTSD and are more likely to withdraw

from employment, education and community life.<sup>62</sup> These impacts can be severe and lifelong, and specialist bereavement counselling is critical to mitigating such outcomes.

For almost 20 years, Jesuit Social Services has delivered Support After Suicide throughout Melbourne and regional Victoria, providing timely service for people bereaved by suicide. The program provides critical supports to people after a death of a loved one to suicide through specialist counselling, group programs and online support to people bereaved by suicide (including children and young people), and secondary consultation to professional education and other professional organisations working with people bereaved by suicide. Support After Suicide is an integral part of the first response to suicide in Victoria with Victoria Police making referrals directly to the program. It provides direct support to more than 1000 people bereaved by suicide each year. It is one of the few services in Victoria to support those bereaved by suicide.

Support After Suicide has never received funding from the Victorian Government. It is currently funded by the Commonwealth Government to June 2023, with no long-term certainty. This puts Victorians at risk of missing out on timely service, including high numbers of people referred by Victoria Police. Additionally, while Support After Suicide operates in regional areas (the Macedon Ranges and Geelong), its ability to provide robust services, in spite of increased demand, is restricted due to limited funding. In Jesuit Social Services' view, there are not enough services available in metropolitan Melbourne, with even fewer services in rural and regional areas for people bereaved by suicide. The Royal Commission outlined that all Victorians bereaved by suicide should have access to evidence-informed postvention bereavement services. We support this, and believe resources need to be given towards a sustainable funding model to ensure that all Victorians have access to effective services to help them navigate the complex grief and trauma associated with the suicide of a loved one. We believe this should include access to specialist counselling services and group support. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government in this model's development.

#### Support After Suicide

*"I had a notion of depression before but after the suicide you really start to experience it yourself. It was so important to get reassurance that these feelings were ok, that I was going to be ok. It is such an important distinction between feeling depressed and sad because I had lost my son, but not feeling so depressed and sad that I would end up like my son. I cannot imagine where I would be without the service."*

Support After Suicide participant

#### **We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Provide recurrent funding for assertive outreach and activity-based programs with 'soft entry points' for marginalised young people with mental health and other complex problems.
- Invest in integrated alcohol and other drug and mental health supports.
- Provide secure, long-term funding for state-wide suicide prevention and bereavement services, including Support After Suicide provided by Jesuit Social Services. This should also include increased access to suicide bereavement services for people in regional and rural areas.

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<sup>62</sup> State of Victoria. (2021). Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, final report. ([Weblink](#))

## 8. The National Disability Insurance Scheme

At Jesuit Social Services, we work with people who have complex needs, including mild-to-moderate intellectual or cognitive disabilities, psychosocial disabilities and acquired brain injuries (ABI). Our participants often experience a range of co-occurring and interrelated issues including homelessness, mental illness, substance misuse, involvement with child protection and the justice systems, and experiences of trauma, including family violence.<sup>63</sup> We also respond to specific populations including people with intellectual disabilities, people with acquired brain injury (ABI), people in the youth and adult justice systems and vulnerable young people. In doing so, we offer disability supports, services and accommodation.

Jesuit Social Services' NDIS programs work actively with NDIS participants, their care teams and support networks to achieve their personal goals and build capacity. Through provision of both Specialist and Level 2 Support Coordination, we support NDIS participants to understand and implement their NDIS plans, build personal capacity to make choices, and reduce barriers to accessing supports. Many of the people we support have complex needs and are working with other service providers, including justice and youth services.

### 8.1 Perry House

Perry House is a Specialist Forensic Disability Accommodation service providing up to two years of 24-hour supported accommodation for young men aged 17-25 who have complex mental health and neurological needs, have been involved with the justice system and are at risk of homelessness. These young people have often experienced grief, trauma and abuse, inhibiting their development of emotional management or coping skills. As such, they require specialist trauma informed support to address these needs and develop appropriate skills. To deliver this service, Jesuit Social Services was block funded for many years by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH). More recently however, with the move to the NDIS, Perry House has been transitioned to a blended funding model. Jesuit Social Services has experienced numerous challenges with this transition. These include:

- Participant NDIS plans are inadequate when they move into Perry House and do not meet client needs.
- Lengthy change of circumstance and review processes are impacting negatively on participant outcomes and ability to access NDIS funding.
- Jesuit Social Services have had to self-fund a NDIS Business Manger position to assist with the transition process and to plan for financial viability within the NDIS.
- The inability to yet claim any NDIS funding for services delivered at Perry House under the blended model.

The transition to a blended funding model has been time consuming, resource heavy and not cost effective; using time and resources that would be better spent improving outcomes for young people. We advocate for a funding model for Perry House that adequately resources the operating cost of service given the complex needs of participants. We call on the government to fully fund specialised holistic care services, such as Perry House, as a separate stream that adequately provides services for people with complex needs and prevents them from falling through the gaps.

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<sup>63</sup> For example, an annual survey conducted of 145 young people in custody in Victoria on June 2021, found that 20 per cent of young people had an active cognitive difficulty diagnosed or documented by a professional. Source: State of Victoria (2021). Youth Parole Board Annual Report 2020–21. Department of Justice and Community Safety

## Perry House

*“Generally speaking, young people who come into Perry House haven’t felt as if they’ve been validated in the community. There’s an unfamiliarity of being in an environment where they’re valued as people,” he says.*

*“We work through that psychological and emotional barrier first and foremost, getting participants to recognise that the support we provide is not transactional, and that the stability we provide gives them an opportunity to move forward in life.”*

Jesuit Social Services’ Manager of Housing Programs, Kane Apelu

### **8.2 Strengthen the interface of the NDIS and state-based service systems**

It is our experience that the people who have intersecting, complex needs feel caught in the middle of several systems and grow increasingly frustrated and disengaged from these systems over time. The Disability Royal Commission also heard accounts of the detrimental effect of the NDIS on existing partnerships between health and disability services, and the need for more coordination between them. Often disagreements between services over responsibilities and costs come at a residual cost of participants’ wellbeing, as they are asked to retell past difficulties and traumas to satisfy various stakeholders. This in turn leads to additional costs to the services themselves as they may be required to respond to a participant’s increasing unmet needs across justice, health, education and other mainstream domains. It is crucial that the co-occurring issues experienced by people with multiple needs are not compartmentalised and dealt with in isolation by the various systems that are funding and supporting them. Jesuit Social Services calls on the Victorian government to work in conjunction with the Commonwealth Government to strengthen the interface between the NDIS and state-based service systems.

#### **We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Strengthen the interface between the NDIS and state-based services to ensure that issues experienced by people with multiple and complex needs are addressed congruently.
- Adequately fund specialised holistic care services, such as Perry House, as a separate stream that provides services for people with complex needs and prevents them from falling through the gaps.

## **9. Settlement and community building**

Through settlement and community building programs, Jesuit Social Services provides practical support to newly arrived families and young people from CALD backgrounds. These settlement supports are funded by the Commonwealth for five years; however, we know that many newly arrived people undergo non-linear journeys towards successful resettlement, which can take much longer. In our experience, newly arrived participants face a number of difficulties to navigating and accessing state-based supports such as education, Primary Health Networks or family violence supports. Victoria’s service system more broadly must take a cultural lens and improve its accessibility so that newly arrived



people can more readily access the supports they need to resettle and feel at home in our wider community.

### **9.1 Investing in culturally appropriate education and employment**

For almost 20 years, Jesuit Social Services has provided an after-school Homework Club to students in the Flemington region of inner-city Melbourne. Each week, we support dozens of students from CALD backgrounds and from primary school age through to VCE at the Flemington high-rise public housing estate. Our [Homework Club](#) has helped thousands of students, and in 2018, it was the winner of the Outstanding Community-run Out-of-School-Hours Learning Support Program at the Centre for Multicultural Youth's MY Education Awards. Homework Club is a protective, early intervention program that ensures children and young people from CALD backgrounds are engaged in education. More Government resources are needed for educational programs focusing on young people from CALD and newly arrived backgrounds to enable them to continue to connect, learn and flourish.

We also recommend a targeted effort is needed to assist people from CALD backgrounds with professional qualifications that are not recognised in Australia to find employment. For example, our Corporate Diversity Partnership program includes partnering with major corporations to create a number of new workplace inclusion programs, enabling us to support people from CALD backgrounds with professional skills into their chosen profession for the first time. Our partners have included Melbourne Water, CBUS, SuperConcepts, the Australian Taxation Office, Yarra Valley Water and John Holland. Further investment in programs such as these is needed to support under and unemployed skilled professionals from migrant and refugee backgrounds into employment.

#### **Homework Club**

*"Families sometimes struggle to find the time to help their kids to work through their homework, so having [other channels] is really important and it's something that's also really rewarding for the tutors, which is my experience as well"*

Jonathan, Homework Club volunteer

#### **We call on the Victorian Government to:**

- Improve culturally safe access to the service system for newly arrived people, particularly for education, mental health, alcohol and other drugs and family violence.
- Fund early intervention, culturally safe education re engagement programs specific for CALD learners such as Jesuit Social Services' Homework Club.
- Further invest in and call on public service agencies and corporate organisations to consider shared social impact initiatives to support under and unemployed skilled professionals from migrant and refugee backgrounds into employment, such as the Corporate Diversity Partnerships program.