

An Ignatius Learning Centre student works on their carpentry project

Ignatius Learning Centre

“I’ve been building a desk for my house, it’s really cool”

Christian* is a student at the Ignatius Learning Centre. For the first time in his life, he now looks forward to school every day.

“I didn’t like any teachers at my old school, but I don’t mind some of the teachers here, so that’s good and it’s cool. They know how to approach kids, it’s very different to the schools I’ve gone to before.

“It’s more personalised here than a normal school, so I have my own goals separate to other kids, and they work with you to help you reach them,” he says.

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Justice work helping people turn their lives around



Prison systems and debates about the best way to respond to people who commit crimes are rarely far from the headlines, and they have been in particular focus recently. There has been extensive media coverage about youth crime, with tough-on-crime policies on the agenda across different parts of the country.

Jesuit Social Services has worked with children, young people and adults who have contact with the criminal justice system for 47 years. We know that the majority of people who have contact with the system are themselves experiencing multiple and complex forms of disadvantage such as homelessness, disengagement from education or employment, substance abuse problems, or poor mental health.

When there is public and political debate about the justice system, it's important to take a step back and look at the evidence of what works. This means supporting people in the community wherever possible to address the underlying issues behind their offending

behaviour, enabling them to turn their lives around and become productive members of society and ultimately to only ever use detention as a last resort.

In this newsletter, you will read about some of our criminal justice programs that make a real difference. This includes our Ignatius Learning Centre, a therapeutic learning environment for 15 to 17 year old boys who have had contact with the youth justice system, and the story of Christian (not his real name), a student who is looking forward to attending school each day for the first time in his life.

You will also read about the work our Jesuit Community College is doing helping justice-involved participants to grow local produce that is donated to local food relief programs, and the Youth Justice Group Conferencing model we run in Victoria and the Northern Territory, which supports young people who have caused harm to take accountability and make amends for their actions.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility is a topic receiving a lot of interest at the moment. Victoria has committed to raise the age from 10 to 12 this year, and then to 14 by 2027. In this newsletter, you will read about ways you can support our advocacy to decision makers about this important, evidence-based reform.

As always, we value your support towards our vision of building a just society.

Julie M. Edwards

Julie Edwards
CEO, Jesuit Social Services

Ignatius Learning Centre

“I’ve been building a desk for my house, it’s really cool”

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Established in 2021, Jesuit Social Services’ Ignatius Learning Centre is a Catholic Specialist Secondary School for boys aged 15 to 17 in contact with the justice system. The school provides a therapeutic learning environment, drawing on our Jesuit heritage that encourages life-long learning.

Many students had previously given up on school or had associated education with negative experiences.

The school’s curriculum includes literacy, numeracy, work-related skills, industry skills, personal development skills, and Vocational Education and Training (VET) skills.

Students also connect with other Jesuit Social Services programs such as Jesuit Community College, the Ecological Justice Hub, and The Outdoor Experience. Work experience is also included in students’ curriculum.

Christian came to the school two years ago. He explains that as well as developing positive relationships with staff and students, he has gained practical skills and found support to connect with positive pathways beyond the classroom.

“They helped me to get certificates like my white card, and I’m about to start my TAFE course, so it’s been really good. My favourite classes are gym and carpentry. I’ve been building a desk for my house, I’ve done the plans at the moment. It’s really cool.”

Ignatius Learning Centre Principal, John Andrew, engaged with Christian over the past eight months, slowly building the momentum that led to him regularly attending school.

“It was just consistent, and it was not anything we actually offered him but more



A learning space inside the Ignatius Learning Centre

the relationship we built slowly over that time that got him there,” John says.

“He had his ups and downs in his time here, but he was really focused on getting his apprenticeship. For us, we kept following up with him and giving him unconditional encouragement.”

Christian’s story reflects the values that John feels are key to the success of the Ignatius Learning Centre over the past three years.

“Our focus is on building relationships with students so they feel really connected here. The other part of it is around their agency, allowing them to have control and voice over their next move rather than us telling them.”

– John Andrew

The Ignatius Learning Centre is proving that there are alternatives to detention for young people who are heading in a dangerous direction. Christian’s journey at the school shows what is possible with the right support, understanding and guidance.

** We’ve changed Christian’s name to protect his identity.*

ADVOCACY



Young people are worth a second chance

The age of criminal responsibility has been much debated recently. Victoria has committed to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 this year, and to 14 in 2027. The Northern Territory has raised it to 12, and the ACT is in the process of doing so. Other states are planning, considering, or rejecting it.

Police are voicing their concerns and the media is awash with stories of youth crime. Many people are unclear about what will happen, whether they should be worried, or how it will affect their communities.

At Jesuit Social Services, we have argued for many years that children do not belong in jail.

For years, we have been calling for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised to at least 14. We believe that children are worth a second chance.

Our response to community and police concerns is grounded in experience and evidence. We know that contact with the criminal justice system, especially incarceration, increases recidivism. Studies show that early contact with the justice system is the greatest predictor of repeated offending.

What should we do instead?

We need to raise the age of criminal responsibility throughout Australia.

The United Nations has declared 14 the absolute minimum age for criminal responsibility and countries like Germany, Italy, Japan and Vietnam have done this. In Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland and Greece, it's 15; in Argentina, 16; in Spain, 18. Australia is lagging behind.

We need a system resourced to address the root causes of offending.

We know that education, housing, health

care, mental health care, and financial security make involvement with the justice system less likely. We know, too, that children who have involvement with the justice system frequently have experienced trauma, neglect or abuse, family violence, mental health challenges, cognitive challenges or alcohol and other drug misuse.

We need to intervene early.

Evidence shows that the earlier we address signs of antisocial behaviour, the lower the chance of offending behaviour. Engaging early and intensively with families of children showing early signs of anti-social behaviour has been shown to provide the best basis for prevention.

We need therapeutic responses for children caught offending that will support them to thrive and stop offending.

The evidence demonstrates that children tend to grow out of offending behaviour with one in 10 children or less going on to become a chronic offender. Addressing their behaviour therapeutically, with a focus on engaging the family and school, produces better results than punishment.

If you believe that children belong at home and not in jail, now is the time to speak out.

Through our Worth A Second Chance campaign, supporters can take action including sending a letter to Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan urging the Victorian Government to raise the age to 14, with no exceptions, immediately.

For more information visit:

www.worthasecondchance.com.au.

Let children know that they are worth a second chance.



Youth Justice Group Conferencing

How conversation helped Billy reflect on harm caused

“It was like a wake-up call for me that I had to change, I needed to stop doing bad stuff and concentrate on my future,” said Billy*. He had taken part in Jesuit Social Services’ Youth Justice Group Conference program. The process encouraged him to take responsibility and to make amends for his offending.

After moving to Darwin with his step-uncle and being suspended from school, Billy got involved with an older group of young people and drinking.

One day when he was drinking with them, they decided to break into a house. While they were fleeing with a bike, computer and alcohol, the homeowner Rick* came home. In his attempt to escape, Billy assaulted him before jumping the back fence and running off. Later that evening he was arrested and charged with aggravated robbery.

Since Billy had little contact with the youth justice system, the Darwin Supreme Court made a referral for him to take part in a Youth Justice Group Conference. The court hoped this would help him to better understand the consequences of his actions on Rick, his family and his community, as well as to address some of the harm caused by the violent robbery.

Jesuit Social Services delivers Youth Justice Group Conferencing in the Northern Territory and Victoria. Each group conference is led by an independent convenor.

“By bringing people together in a Group Conference, we talk about what has happened, to help put things right and move forward,” explains Clare Horsfall, Senior Manager, Northern Territory.

“We see how young people come away with a deeper understanding of the harm they have caused and practical steps to avoid future offending.”

– Clare Horsfall

Rick declined to participate in the Group Conference and instead submitted a victim impact statement. As part of the Group Conference, a Victims of Crime Northern Territory representative used Rick’s words from a victim impact statement, sharing how the robbery and assault had affected him, the distress he and his family had suffered, and how they no longer felt safe in their home.

Youth Justice Group Conferencing

How conversation helped Billy reflect on harm caused

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Typical set up for a Youth Justice Group Conference – an informal setting that feels safe for all participants

Billy hadn't realised the extent of the harm he had caused Rick and his entire family.

Billy's lawyer shared the distress and regret Billy had been feeling since the offence and how he did not want to end up in jail. He has now seen what impact his behaviour had on people.

At the end of the two-hour Group Conference, a plan was made. Billy wrote an apology letter to Rick. The group also agreed that Billy would benefit from having positive role models. He was connected with a local community mentoring group, and a youth arts program to help foster healthy friendships.

Rick was told of the positive actions Billy had agreed to take to avoid getting in to trouble again.

"Our Group Conferencing program is a way of doing things differently," says Clare. "We need a justice system that has opportunities for young people to take responsibility but to also learn from their past mistakes."

** We changed Billy's and Rick's names to protect their identities.*

Garden Pathways Program

Growing skills and relationships in the garden

"I have grown as a person over the last 15 months, and I know doing this has helped me gain a lot of knowledge, not just about gardening but about myself," says Jim*, a participant in our Garden Pathways program."

I'm understanding strengths that I've always had but never really knew how strong they were."

Jesuit Community College, in partnership with the Department of Justice and Community Safety, runs the program to support men who are in contact with the justice system. Through it, participants serve their community work hours by growing produce that will be donated to local food relief programs.

In this way, participants acquire practical horticultural skills; they also build the skills that will help them find employment, boost their self-confidence, and open paths to further education, training and job opportunities.

"I now know more about my strengths, abilities and goals. I'm exploring my career and expanding my options," reflects Steve* – another man engaged with the project.



Homegrown vegetables donated by the participants



Harvest from our community garden

The men engage in communal activities such as food production and garden maintenance. The program helps them feel comfortable socialising with other people and speaking in front of groups. They resonate, too, with the knowledge of feeling productive and involved in a project bigger than themselves. In one year, participants grew and donated over \$5,000 worth of fresh veggies.

👉

“I know sometimes it’s particularly hard for men to make new friendships as adults. I’ve got participants here together for six hours a day, tending to the garden together, and I see them developing really nice and respectful relationships,”

- Carol, program trainer

Josephine, Community Partnerships Manager at Jesuit Community College, says that the garden aims to nurture an inclusive, non-judgemental and safe environment that will encourage participants to continue to develop the skills to help them find employment after finishing this program.

“We’ve designed the program to encourage participant learning and bypass negative past experiences of education. We don’t do any formal educational assessments and there are no prerequisites to be a part of this program.”

Garden Pathways provides opportunities for participants to overcome past obstacles, and to find their way to take positive, new directions.

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“I’m planning to get a job and get back on my feet again. I’m using better people skills, optimism, positivity, and patience,”

- Jim, program participant

** We changed Jim and Steve’s names to protect their identities.*




An Indigenous participant led the creation of this mural for the community garden

At Jesuit Social Services, the people we support are at the centre of everything we do.

These stories are just a few examples of the way we work. Seeing the whole person and sticking with them for the long term provides hope and stability in the lives of the people we support.

This winter, your support can help provide someone with a second chance and the opportunity to find a better future.



“I often think to myself, I wouldn’t be where I am without Jesuit Social Services. Everything’s changed. I love life. I live for the moment every day.”

– Jason, past justice program participant

Want to help Jesuit Social Services?

Together we can build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the wellbeing of disadvantaged people, families and communities.

I would like to make an ongoing monthly gift of:

\$ _____ (Please specify amount)

I would like to make a one-off donation of:

\$75 **\$150**

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