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Youth Justice Bill a mixed bag of reforms, emphasis must be on evidence-based solutions: Jesuit Social Services

The Victorian Government's long-awaited Youth Justice Bill, recently introduced into Parliament, contains a comprehensive suite of reforms. While some of these will support vulnerable children onto more positive pathways, others are not aligned with evidence about how to best respond to people who have contact with the justice system, says Jesuit Social Services.

"The Youth Justice Bill is the state's first standalone Act for our youth justice system, and Jesuit Social Services has provided input and feedback to Victoria's decision makers over many years about our vision for an evidence-based youth justice system. Our vision is one that prioritises prevention and diversion to give children and young people the best opportunity to flourish," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

"What has been introduced into Parliament is a mixed bag of reforms - some positive initiatives which we have long advocated for, and some that we are really concerned about and may result in more young people being exposed to the harms of the prison system."

Ms Edwards says the organisation particularly welcomes steps to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years, with a commitment to further raise it to 14 by 2027.

"Raising the age of criminal responsibility is the right thing to do when we consider international human rights standards and expert medical evidence around children's brain development. Children belong in the classroom, not in prison, and ultimately this evidence-based reform will give more children the opportunity to stay connected with school, family and the community while supported to turn their lives around.

"We are ready and willing to support the implementation of this important reform, and urge the Victorian Government to raise the age to 14, with no exceptions, as soon as possible."

Ms Edwards also welcomes an increased emphasis on diversion, to hold children accountable for their actions away from the justice system, and more capacity for magistrates to issue community service and supervision orders.

"At the same time, we're concerned about a trial of electronic monitoring with little evidence this prevents re-offending, provisions to transfer children as young as 16 to adult prisons and what we see as further erosion of Victoria's unique dual track system.

"Keeping children in the community wherever possible, and supporting them in age-appropriate and evidence-based ways when they do get into trouble, is the best way to create stronger, safer and more cohesive communities for us all."

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