

MEDIA RELEASE

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Youth Justice Bill a chance to support children towards more positive futures: Jesuit Social Services

With the Victorian Government's landmark Youth Justice Bill to be debated in Parliament from today, Jesuit Social Services has urged the state's political leaders to look at the evidence of what works in creating stronger and more cohesive communities and to commit to evidence-based reform that allows all children to flourish.

"The Youth Justice Bill is Victoria's first standalone Act for our youth justice system, and a really significant moment to determine how we respond to and support children who have contact with the youth justice system," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

"Since 1977, we have supported children and young people who have contact with the youth justice system. We see first-hand the harm that justice involvement has on a young person's ability to lead positive lives, and the disruption that disengagement from school, among other factors, has.

"For many years, we have provided input and feedback to Victoria's decision makers about the type of evidence-based reform that will support children to lead healthy and productive lives which ultimately means less crime and fewer victims."

Ms Edwards says that the Youth Justice Bill contains some positive measures, most notably to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years, but that a number of elements fall short of what Jesuit Social Services and its peers call for.

"Primary school aged children belong in the classroom, not in prison, so we strongly welcome this progressive and evidence-based reform which we and many of our colleagues have advocated for over many years," she says.

"However, raising the age to 12 means the job is only half done. The Victorian Government has committed to raising the age to 14 by 2027, but there is no provision for this second stage in the Bill, raising concerns that the decision may be changed, delayed or watered down over coming years.

"We firmly believe that the age of criminal responsibility must be 14, with no exceptions, in every state and territory across Australia. We hope to see the Youth Justice Bill amended to enshrine the commitment to raise the age to at least 14 and ensure that this vision is realised."

Ms Edwards says Jesuit Social Services also supports amendments which would see the trial of harmful and electronic monitoring scrapped, the removal of police powers to transport and detain children as young as 10, and changes to prohibit the detention of children in adult prisons.

"With some amendments, this Bill can reflect the evidence about how to best respond to children who have contact with the justice system, which will ultimately support all children to be their best selves and lead safe and positive lives."

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