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Watering down of landmark youth justice reform won't create stronger communities: Jesuit Social Services

The Victorian Government's decision to abandon plans to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 is deeply disappointing and at odds with international evidence and the recommendations of experts dedicated to improving outcomes for communities, reducing crime and supporting children to get their lives on track, says Jesuit Social Services.

"Our organisation has advocated for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised in every state and territory across the country for more than a decade – since we conducted research that found that children who are arrested before they turn 14 are three times more likely to re-offend as adults than children arrested after they turn 14," says Jesuit Social Services Acting CEO Stephen Ward.

"We welcomed the Victorian Government's commitment to become the first Australian state to raise the age of criminal responsibility, first from 10 to 12 years as part of the Youth Justice Bill which is currently progressing through Parliament, and then again from 12 to 14 years by 2027. Raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 is in line with international human rights standards and expert medical evidence around children's brain development," says Mr Ward.

"Today's announcement that the Victorian Government will no longer proceed with the second stage of this reform is very concerning. It means that more children will have unnecessary contact with the youth justice system when they need to be supported in the community to remain connected with education and family to give them the best chance to lead safe and healthy lives."

Jesuit Social Services urges the Victorian Government to also continue the work it has begun on an alternative service model to support Victorian children, which was announced when the commitment to raise the age to 14 was made.

"We all want strong and cohesive communities where children can flourish, resulting in less crime and fewer victims. Now, more than ever, we must look at the evidence of what works in preventing crime from occurring and steering children towards positive pathways. The Victorian Government must proceed with its alternative service model to keep marginalised children connected with important support services to help them thrive.

"While we are pleased that Victoria plans to raise the age from 10 to 12 this year, as part of the Youth Justice Bill which is currently progressing through Parliament, the job is only half done unless we commit to the second stage of the reform by raising the age to 14, with no exceptions. This will better meet the needs of children, their families, victims of crime and the broader community.

"This reform must be supported by an increased emphasis on restorative justice approaches for children who engage in anti-social behaviour to take responsibility for their actions and be steered towards positive pathways in the community."

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