



**Jesuit  
Social Services**  
Building a Just Society

# Federal Pre-Budget Submission 2026-27

December 2025

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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 their love and care of people, community, land and all life.*

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

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation working to build a just society where all people can thrive. For almost 50 years we have accompanied some of the most disadvantaged members of the community, delivering support services and advocating for improved legislation, policy and resources to achieve strong, cohesive and vibrant communities. We are a national organisation with a significant footprint in Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory.

Jesuit Social Services' service delivery and advocacy focus on:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – working with people involved with the justice system
- **Gender Justice** – providing leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, and building new approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe
- **Education, training and employment** – working with people who face barriers to sustainable employment
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – supporting people with multiple and complex needs including mental illness, trauma, homelessness and bereavement
- **Settlement and community building** – supporting recently arrived immigrants, people seeking asylum and refugees, and communities experiencing disadvantage

- **Climate and ecological justice** – mobilising place-based practices, policies and actions that can be taken by governments, individuals, organisations and the community services sector to build a climate resilient and ecologically just society.

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, as well as 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, business and the community sector 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, as well as articulating and disseminating information on best practice approaches to working with participants and communities across our programs.

# Introduction

In this Budget, the Government has an opportunity to build on the strengths of communities and families to deliver a significant shift in the way our country addresses inequality. Every day, Jesuit Social Services works with people and communities dealing with complex disadvantage and violence, grappling with the impacts of climate change, and navigating complex government systems. We also see how resilient and adaptive individuals and communities can be, given the right enablers and opportunities. A meaningful investment by the Government in evidence-based prevention and early intervention can harness this resilience to break cycles of entrenched disadvantage, prevent harm, and reduce social and economic costs.

At a time when the federal budget is under significant strain and many Australians are struggling with the cost of living, government expenditure must be targeted to deliver strong outcomes for the Australian people. Prevention and early intervention offer a dual benefit for governments, particularly in a tight fiscal environment. They improve outcomes for individuals and communities while reducing demand for tertiary services, with the Productivity Commission recently reporting that effective prevention can return investment after six years.<sup>1</sup>

The challenges facing Australia are clear:

- a crisis of men's violence against women, children, trans and gender diverse people;
- rising rates of harmful sexual behaviours among young people and an epidemic of child sexual abuse;
- justice policies which entrench people in the criminal justice system and fail to meaningfully improve community safety;

- a widening of the gap between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians in many areas – demonstrated by worsening progress across the majority of Closing the Gap targets;
- the impacts of climate change, including extreme heat, which are compounding structural disadvantage, inequities and harms;
- a significant cohort of people trapped in long term unemployment; and
- a mental health and disability support system struggling under the weight of demand and failing to meet the needs of many people it is intended to support.

The solutions to many of these challenges are known, but require a shift in the way government systems and programs respond and are funded.

This budget submission provides a number of system-level recommendations that will support efforts to intervene earlier and break cycles of disadvantage. It also proposes specific initiatives that Jesuit Social Services is well-placed and ready to deliver, and which can help move the needle for those in our society experiencing acute disadvantage.

By investing upstream and intervening to break cycles of violence and disadvantage, the Government can prevent harm before it occurs, reduce the demands on crisis-driven and overburdened systems, and build the foundations for a more just, safe and inclusive Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission (2025). *Delivering quality care more efficiently: Interim report*. ([Weblink](#))

# Summary of recommendations

## Recommendation 1

Provide \$3 million for *Unpacking the Adolescent Man Box: Embedding Research in Policy and Practice* which would establish a three-year program of work to translate the findings from our Adolescent Man Box research into practical strategies. This includes:

- Jesuit Social Services and Monash University partnering with organisations that engage with adolescent boys (e.g. schools, community organisations, sporting clubs, online platforms) to design, implement and evaluate a range of interventions to address key areas of concern identified in the Adolescent Man Box report.
- Delivery of a range of outputs, such as pilot interventions with specific cohorts; online learning modules for adults working with young people; public education campaign materials; self-help modules for young people; and thematic policy and practice briefs.

## Recommendation 2

Extend funding for Healthy MaTE grants (including Active Respect) for at least an additional 18 months to December 2027, to allow further evaluation outcomes to be provided before making decisions on the long term future of the program.

## Recommendation 3

Provide funding to pilot and evaluate new, innovative approaches to working with boys and young men that are informed by data and evidence on the factors linked to an increased risk of perpetrating violence.

## Recommendation 4

Provide funding to scale the delivery of early intervention initiatives which have been rigorously evaluated and demonstrate positive outcomes, with flexibility to tailor and co-design program elements in response to community and cultural context.

## Recommendation 5

Develop and deliver a dedicated five-year National Action Plan for children and young people who have been victims of violence or abuse, which embeds system accountability to their needs and perspectives and guides investment in services to support healing and recovery.

## Recommendation 6

Play a leadership role in designing and fully funding a range of targeted, trauma informed services for children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse, guided by the National Action Plan detailed in **Recommendation 5**.

## Recommendation 7

Building on data collected as part of Jesuit Social Services' Adolescent Man Box research, as well as our work with UNSW to understand child sexual abuse perpetration, invest in the collection of more high quality data on the extent of perpetration of violence against women, children, and trans and gender diverse people, as well as its dynamics and drivers. This research should explore risk and protective factors across different population groups, places and settings, with the aim of informing targeted prevention strategies and early intervention efforts to prevent men's violence.

## Recommendation 8

Establish a dedicated evaluation fund to enable community service organisations to increase the standard of their program evaluations, including moving towards randomised controlled trials. Evaluation findings should be shared publicly and used to inform policy and investment, and drive evidence-based expansion of programs that demonstrate positive outcomes.

### **Recommendation 9**

Provide \$2 million across 2.5 years to pilot and evaluate *What's ok? Australia*, a first-of-its-kind national anonymous and free online early intervention service focused on reducing problematic and harmful sexual behaviours among young people.

### **Recommendation 10**

Provide funding to support the development and implementation of online deterrence initiatives that seek to prevent child sexual abuse such as the CSAM Deterrence Centre, established by Jesuit Social Services and the University of Tasmania. Funding the CSAM Deterrence Centre for three years would cost \$1.5 million.

### **Recommendation 11**

Working through the Standing Council of Attorneys-General, lead the development of a set of national standards for restorative justice, including the use of restorative justice in youth diversion, and make funding available to states and territories through a co-investment model for restorative justice initiatives that align with the agreed national standards to incentivise adoption.

### **Recommendation 12**

Invest in early intervention and diversion initiatives and alternatives to criminal legal system interventions for children and young people, and cohorts who are overrepresented in the justice system. Initiatives could be directly funded by the Federal Government, or through matched investment by states and territories, with funding available to jurisdictions that adopt evidence-based approaches and establish more diversion programs and pathways out of the justice system.

### **Recommendation 13**

Provide funding to replicate the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility model in priority locations, or adapt it for different cohorts (e.g. women, First Nations people, young people aged 18–25), to reduce the number of people exiting prison into homelessness.

### **Recommendation 14**

Deliver tied funding to state and territory governments for supported housing programs for people exiting prison, for example through the Housing Australia Future Fund.

### **Recommendation 15**

Establish a series of social impact investing housing projects, for example under the Commonwealth Outcomes Fund, for people with complex needs including justice system contact.

### **Recommendation 16:**

Establish a First Nations Self-Determination and Strengthening Fund for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). The fund would enable smaller or emerging ACCOs to work in partnership with a more established organisation to strengthen their capacity and capability to design, lead, deliver and govern services and programs that meet the needs of communities.

### **Recommendation 17**

Create a dedicated 'Community-led resilience and adaptation' stream within the Disaster Ready Fund for community service organisations, First Nations organisations and local partnerships to lead or support community-led, place-based adaptation efforts, with reduced co-contribution requirements.

### **Recommendation 18**

Establish a series of place-based climate adaptation and resilience partnerships in 8-12 regions with high levels of vulnerability to climate change, to enable the co-design of local adaptation priorities with community service organisations, First Nations organisations and local governments and support community-led, place-based climate adaptation.

### **Recommendation 19**

Proceed with fundamental reform of the Workforce Australia system, guided by recommendations in the Workforce Australia report, with a high level blueprint for reform to be agreed and announced in the 2026-27 Budget.

### Recommendation 20

Work with states and territories to develop, fund and evaluate a series of employment services trials focused on highly disadvantaged jobseekers and their families (such as Jesuit Social Services' proposal outlined in Recommendation 21), leveraging proven models to support increased access to employment for people who encounter significant barriers to employment, to inform reform of the Workforce Australia system.

### Recommendation 21

Provide \$5.1 million over three years for Jesuit Social Services to develop, pilot and evaluate a new approach to employment services with people engaged with the criminal justice system. The trial will target this priority cohort in two Melbourne Employment Service Areas who are being under-served by mainstream providers under the current system.

### Recommendation 22

Lift the lowest income support payments (including Youth Allowance, JobSeeker Payment and Parenting Payment Single) to a benchmark level of adequacy, taking account of essential living costs, relativities with other income support payments and wages.

### Recommendation 23

Continue current funding arrangements for suicide prevention and postvention services until the new National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement is in place, including by extending the National Agreement and the Targeted Regional Initiatives for Suicide Prevention program until June 2027. This extension of the National Agreement to June 2027 should be subject to removal of the requirement for jurisdictions that have postvention services in their bilateral schedule to use one specific postvention service provider/ service model (i.e. StandBy).

### Recommendation 24

Ensure the next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement:

- a. provides secure and increased funding for equitable, comprehensive and responsive suicide postvention support, to reach a greater number of people bereaved by suicide, including those in regional and remote communities
- b. does not prescribe a service model or service provider, but allow all states and territories to deliver evidence-based, best-practice postvention services that meet the needs of their communities
- c. better integrates funding for postvention support from the Commonwealth and state governments.

### Recommendation 25

Urgently, and ahead of the next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement, work with states and territories to resolve roles and responsibilities for the funding and provision of psychosocial supports, and prioritise commissioning services to address the unmet need for psychosocial supports outside the NDIS.

# Working with boys and young men to prevent violence

Australia's [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#) (the National Plan) sets out a vision to end gender-based violence in one generation. The need for urgent and concerted action is clear. [The Man Box 2024](#) research, which we completed in partnership with Respect Victoria, shows that a shockingly high percentage of men – 28 per cent – have perpetrated at least one form of sexual or physical violence against a current or former partner.<sup>2</sup>

The National Plan clearly recognises the need to prevent violence before it occurs. Effective prevention and early intervention can disrupt intergenerational cycles of violence and set young people on a path to living safer, more secure lives.

## Working with boys and young men at risk of using violence

Through [The Men's Project](#), Jesuit Social Services develops and delivers innovative and evidence-informed approaches to prevent men's violence.

We draw on research, practice wisdom, and the experiences of program participants, to ensure interventions meet the needs of the target cohort.

Our recently published [Adolescent Man Box](#) research shows that adolescent boys who strongly agree with rigid masculine norms (the 'Adolescent Man Box' rules) are far more likely than their peers to cause harm to others. Nearly two in five boys (39%) with the strongest agreement with Adolescent Man Box rules reported that they had used bullying, physical violence or sexual harassment in the past month, compared with 7% of boys with the lowest agreement. This finding aligns with the drivers of gender-based violence set out in the National Plan, in particular 'dominant forms of masculinity and rigid gender stereotyping', and points to the importance of addressing harmful gender norms when intervening early with young people at risk of using violence.

### The Adolescent Man Box

The Adolescent Man Box Report, launched on 6 November 2025, provides the first national evidence linking rigid gender norms to poor mental health, violence, harassment and online harms among adolescents. This landmark research – based on a survey of 1,400 young people aged 14-18 years – found that around 60% of boys and 60% of girls think most people in Australia expect teenage boys to be manly, confident and strong at all times.

The research also found an association between personal agreement with the need to be manly and a range of harmful behaviours. Of boys who most strongly agree with the need to conform to rigid masculine norms:

- 39% had engaged in bullying, physical violence or sexual harassment in the past month;
- 35% said if someone rejects them, they usually try to get back at them;
- 42% believe that it's normal to continually check who their partner is communicating with;
- 27% said their friends would probably use AI to create fake nude images; and
- a concerning 82% see harmful acts happening to a female when watching pornography.

These boys are also more likely to have experienced violence themselves, have poorer mental health, and are less likely to seek support.

2 The Men's Project & Flood, M. (2024). *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia*. ([Weblink](#))

Insights from the Adolescent Man Box research can support the design and delivery of practical strategies that will reduce harm, strengthen respectful relationships, and build safer futures for young Australians. In partnership with Monash University, Jesuit Social Services has developed a budget proposal *Unpacking the Adolescent Man Box: Embedding research in policy and practice*, seeking \$3 million over three years to translate the findings of the research into strategies and practical resources that can be deployed in a range of settings.

The project aims to build the capacity of organisations working with young people to incorporate learnings from the research and strengthen efforts to prevent and address harms impacting adolescents. It focuses on key challenges not sufficiently addressed as

part of existing violence prevention and early intervention efforts, including:

- increasing help seeking behaviours
- supporting healthier responses to rejection
- increasing awareness of the risks/harms of pornography and how to manage problematic use
- addressing digital surveillance and coercive control
- eliminating image-based abuse and its social acceptance

Understanding the cohort of boys and young men who most strongly adhere to the Adolescent Man Box rules, and are at greatest risk of using violence, means we are better able to deliver targeted, evidence-based interventions that disrupt cycles of violence.

### Recommendation 1

Provide \$3 million for *Unpacking the Adolescent Man Box: Embedding Research in Policy and Practice* which would establish a three-year program of work to translate the findings from our Adolescent Man Box research into practical strategies. This includes:

- Jesuit Social Services and Monash University partnering with organisations that engage with adolescent boys (e.g. schools, community organisations, sporting clubs, online platforms) to design, implement and evaluate a range of interventions to address key areas of concern identified in the Adolescent Man Box report.
- Delivery of a range of outputs, such as pilot interventions with specific cohorts; online learning modules for adults working with young people; public education campaign materials; self-help modules for young people; and thematic policy and practice briefs.

## Supporting innovative early intervention approaches to preventing men's violence

To achieve the National Plan's vision of ending gender-based violence in one generation, government funding is needed to pilot and evaluate innovative approaches to preventing men's violence. These should be informed by what data and evidence suggest are the factors linked to an increased risk of perpetrating violence, and what works to address these factors.

The Department of Social Services' Healthy MaTE grant has supported Jesuit Social Services to pilot [Active Respect](#) in partnership with Football Victoria and The Y. Active Respect is designed to equip school-aged boys with the skills to prevent violence through positive role modelling and healthier behaviours – on and off the pitch. In 2025 and 2026, we will partner with 30 Victorian football clubs to provide six months of free training and support to coaches and team members, to build stronger peer relationships and foster respectful, inclusive behaviour. Drawing on our Man Box research, the

training explores the pressures boys and men face to conform to certain behaviours, how these pressures affect mental health, and their links to issues like sexual harassment and violence against women.

Funding for Active Respect is scheduled to end in June 2026, just over two years from when funding was first awarded (in April 2024). This provides a limited window for the collection of evidence, resulting in minimal ability to demonstrate the impact of the program. We recommend extending the Healthy MaTE grant for at least 18 months to allow time for meaningful evaluation and to demonstrate impacts before longer term funding decisions are made.

More broadly, investment in early intervention work with boys and young men should be increased, including through piloting and evaluating new approaches to preventing violence. Funding models must include clear pathways for pilots that demonstrate positive outcomes to secure ongoing funding and to scale up delivery where appropriate.

### Recommendation 2

Extend funding for Healthy MaTE grants (including Active Respect) for at least an additional 18 months to December 2027, to allow further evaluation outcomes to be provided before making decisions on the long term future of the program.

### Recommendation 3

Provide funding to pilot and evaluate new, innovative approaches to working with boys and young men that are informed by data and evidence on the factors linked to an increased risk of perpetrating violence.

### Recommendation 4

Provide funding to scale the delivery of early intervention initiatives which have been rigorously evaluated and demonstrate positive outcomes, with flexibility to tailor and co-design program elements in response to community and cultural context.

## Services to promote healing and recovery for young victim-survivors and prevent future offending

Children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse need to be engaged as victim-survivors in their own right and are deserving of services that promote healing and recovery. Therapeutic interventions can help prevent adverse outcomes across the life course, including mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, substance use and intergenerational violence.

Services to promote healing and recovery can also help to reduce the risk of future perpetration of violence. We know from our own program data and experience that a high proportion of people involved with the criminal justice system are themselves victims of family violence and/or child abuse. In 2023–24, 74% of participants in our adult justice programs and 53% of participants in our youth justice programs reported being a victim-survivor of family violence at some stage in their lives (a figure that is likely underreported).<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of the reported experience was exposure to violence in childhood. Further, research from Jesuit Social Services in partnership with the University of New South Wales (UNSW) found that men with sexual feelings who had offended against children were more than six times as likely to have been sexually abused as a child than men with no sexual feelings or offending against children.<sup>4</sup>

Childhood trauma does not inevitably lead to subsequent offending, nor are we excusing the use of violence. But failing to acknowledge the links between victimisation and perpetration means we are missing crucial opportunities to intervene earlier with young people who are at higher risk of perpetrating harm. Early intervention with young people must incorporate recovery and healing for those young people who are also victim-survivors, and in doing so can disrupt intergenerational cycles of violence.

However, funding for services to support healing and recovery remains limited and significant gaps exist across the service system, resulting in missed opportunities to address and prevent harm.

The Federal Government should play a leadership role in designing and fully funding a range of services for children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse. These services must be developmentally appropriate and accessible in the settings in which children and young people spend their time. To ensure efforts are coordinated, we recommend the investment be guided by a dedicated five-year National Action Plan for children and young people who have been victims of violence or abuse. This National Action Plan should embed system accountability to the needs and perspectives of young victim-survivors, and align with the National Plan. Further detail on our recommended approach is set out in our [Adolescent Man Box report recommendations](#).

### Recommendation 5

Develop and deliver a dedicated five-year National Action Plan for children and young people who have been victims of violence or abuse, which embeds system accountability to their needs and perspectives and guides investment in services to support healing and recovery.

### Recommendation 6

Play a leadership role in designing and fully funding a range of targeted, trauma informed services for children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse, guided by the National Action Plan detailed in **Recommendation 5**.

<sup>3</sup> Internal Jesuit Social Services program data.

<sup>4</sup> Salter et al. (2023). *Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes among Australian men*. Jesuit Social Services & University of New South Wales. ([Weblink](#))

## Enhancing data, research and evaluation to inform policy, practice and investment in work with people who use violence and at risk young people

Rates of men's violence against women, children, and trans and gender diverse people show Australia is responding to these men too late, with potentially serious impacts for victim-survivors.<sup>5</sup> We need better data, research and evaluation to enable earlier identification of boys and young men using violence, better target interventions, and identify which approaches are effective in preventing and reducing violence.

Building on data collected through Jesuit Social Services' *The Man Box* and *Adolescent Man Box* research, as well as our work with UNSW into the [prevalence of child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes](#), the Government should fund research further exploring the extent, dynamics and drivers of perpetration. The research should also explore risk and protective factors across different population groups, places and settings, with the aim of informing targeted prevention strategies and early intervention efforts to prevent men's violence.

The standard of evidence underpinning prevention and early intervention programs to reduce men's violence also remains uneven. Although some programs show promising results, few have been validated through strong experimental or longitudinal evaluation. The evidence base should be strengthened by expanding the use of rigorous evaluation methods, including experimental designs (such as randomised controlled trials) and longitudinal studies capable of demonstrating causal impact and sustained behavioural change; and identifying effective practice, drawing on lessons from rigorously evaluated international initiatives such as *Becoming a Man* and *Coaching Boys into Men*.

Investing in the collection of more high quality data concurrently with rigorous evaluation is essential to inform sound policy and program decisions, and guide the expansion of effective prevention and early intervention programs that reduce violence by boys and men.

### Recommendation 7

Building on data collected as part of Jesuit Social Services' Adolescent Man Box research, as well as our work with UNSW to understand child sexual abuse perpetration, invest in the collection of more high quality data on the extent of perpetration of violence against women, children, and trans and gender diverse people, as well as its dynamics and drivers. This research should explore risk and protective factors across different population groups, places and settings, with the aim of informing targeted prevention strategies and early intervention efforts to prevent men's violence.

### Recommendation 8

Establish a dedicated evaluation fund to enable community service organisations to increase the standard of their program evaluations, including moving towards randomised controlled trials. Evaluation findings should be shared publicly and used to inform policy and investment, and drive evidence-based expansion of programs that demonstrate positive outcomes.

5 Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet (2024). *Gender based violence in Australia at a glance*. ([Weblink](#))

# Preventing and addressing child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours

The 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) revealed that child sexual abuse is shockingly widespread in Australia, finding that nearly one in four (28.5%) Australians aged 16 and over have experienced child sexual abuse.<sup>6</sup> Recent high profile cases of [child sexual abuse perpetrated by childcare workers](#) have caused significant distress in the community and reignited national discussions about protecting children in childcare settings. Reforms to strengthen protections in the childcare sector are long overdue. Yet child sexual abuse that occurs in childcare settings represents only a small proportion of offending.<sup>7</sup> Government must have a much stronger focus on preventing offending, particularly through intervening with undetected/unarrested perpetrators, or people who have a higher likelihood of offending.

Prevention and early intervention are key themes in all three frameworks aimed at preventing harm towards children: the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* (National Plan); the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030* (National Strategy); and *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–31* (National Framework). But while policy recognition is important, the alarmingly high prevalence of child sexual abuse, and the serious long term impacts on victim-survivors, calls for drastic action.

## Building understandings of child sexual abuse perpetration

Jesuit Social Services' [research into the prevalence of child sexual abuse offending in Australia](#), conducted in partnership with UNSW, is the first of its kind. It finds that one in five men in Australia report having sexual feelings towards

children and/or having committed child sexual abuse offences.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, of the men who have sexual feelings towards children, 29.6% want help with these feelings.<sup>9</sup> This equates to 4.5% of all Australian men. Beyond adult perpetrators, the ACMS found that in contemporary Australian society, more children experience sexual abuse by another young person than by an adult,<sup>10</sup> an inversion of the historical trend.

These findings emphasise the importance of preventative interventions and support for those who are concerned about their sexual thoughts or feelings towards children, including the urgent need to address harmful sexual behaviour by young people as a means to prevent child sexual abuse.

We have begun actioning our research insights through the development of initiatives which we highlight below. The insights should be further harnessed with Government support to design and target prevention and early intervention programs across key settings and cohorts, including in the online environment.

## Addressing harmful sexual behaviours by young people, including related to pornography

An increasing body of evidence links early exposure to pornography with harmful sexual behaviours displayed by young people. Professionals in this field are observing that children and young people who do not appear to have high levels of childhood trauma or adversity are displaying harmful sexual behaviours due to viewing pornography.<sup>11</sup>

One study found that 94% of children and young people first access, or are exposed to, pornography before the age of 14.<sup>12</sup> Early exposure to pornography can impact young

6 Haslam et al. (2023). *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. ACMS, Queensland University of Technology. ([Weblink](#))

7 The ACMS found institutional adult caregivers are the perpetrators in 2.0% of cases, see: Mathews et al. (2023). *The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey*. Med J Aust. 218 (6).

8 Salter et al. (2023). Op cit.

9 Ibid.

10 Haslam et al. (2023). Op cit.

11 McKibbin et al. (2020). *Clusters of risk associated with problematic and harmful sexual behaviour onset for children and young people: opportunities for early intervention*. Journal of Sexual Aggression, 1-12.

12 Martellozzo et al. (2016). *"I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it...": A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people*. Middlesex University, NSPCC, OCC. ([Weblink](#))

people’s development, their understanding of healthy relationships, and their attitudes and behaviours. For some young people, this early exposure plays a role in the pathway to harmful sexual behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Young people themselves describe desperately needing help to manage their pornography and child sexual abuse material use.<sup>14</sup>

Jesuit Social Services is collaborating with academics and practitioners to develop *What’s ok? Australia*, a new early intervention service that will support young people at risk of

engaging in harmful sexual behaviours (including harmful or developmentally inappropriate use of pornography), and parents, professionals and carers concerned about young people and struggling with how to respond. *What’s ok? Australia* builds on our work delivering the child sexual abuse prevention program *Stop It Now!*. Recently funded for nationwide expansion, *Stop It Now!* offers a free and anonymous helpline, website and online self-help resources for adults concerned about their own or someone else’s sexual thoughts or behaviours towards children.<sup>15</sup>

### **What’s ok? Australia – a national online early intervention service addressing problematic and harmful sexual behaviour of young people**

*What’s ok? Australia* is an output of the Worried About Sex and Pornography Project (WASAPP), which commenced in 2019 in collaboration with the University of Melbourne. WASAPP arose from Jesuit Social Services’ work delivering *Stop It Now!* and findings from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which identified a gap in secondary prevention services in Australia that work with children and young people who are worried about their sexual thoughts or behaviours.

Through WASAPP, we are codesigning a new online early intervention service for young people at risk of, or who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviours – *What’s ok? Australia* – drawing on current evidence and generating new evidence about intervening early in problematic or harmful sexual behaviour. The proposed service includes an anonymous helpline service delivered via multiple modes (including live chat and phone) and a website with educational content.

The website will be launched in early 2026 with philanthropic support, providing resources for young people who are worried about their own or another young person’s harmful sexual behaviour, however funding has not been secured to deliver the helpline element of the service.

Jesuit Social Services is calling on the Government to provide funding for the full national roll out and evaluation of *What’s ok? Australia*. The service would assist the Government to deliver on existing commitments under each of the National Plan, National Strategy and National Framework, and provide a critical support for young people and parents, carers and professionals concerned about problematic and harmful sexual behaviours.

### **Recommendation 9**

Provide \$2 million across 2.5 years to pilot and evaluate *What’s ok? Australia*, a first-of-its-kind national anonymous and free online early intervention service focused on reducing problematic and harmful sexual behaviours among young people.

13 McKibbin et al. (2023). *Pathways to Onset of Harmful Sexual Behavior*. Victims & Offenders, DOI: 10.1080/15564886.2023.2208579.

14 Tyler et al. (2025). *What’s ok? Australia Scoping Study: Development of a national online early intervention service addressing problematic and harmful sexual behaviour of young people*. Jesuit Social Services. ([Weblink](#))

15 Following a competitive tender process, Jesuit Social Services was awarded federal funding to deliver a National Offending Prevention Service, building on our experience delivering *Stop It Now!*, with the new service scheduled to launch in early 2026. See: [Australia’s first national child sexual abuse offending prevention service](#).

## Technological interventions to disrupt and deter child sexual abuse

Online platforms offer crucial opportunities to deter child sexual abuse offending on a large scale, by disrupting the availability of illegal and seriously harmful content (including child sexual abuse material (CSAM)) and directing individuals to intervention services.

Mainstream pornography websites are largely unregulated and contain a significant quantity of material that includes themes of child sexual abuse, incest and other harmful and illegal content. Such content plays a role in normalising the abuse of children and may lead consumers to seek out child sexual abuse material on other platforms.<sup>16</sup> New Online Safety Codes required under the *Online Safety Act 2021* will require age verification for websites with adult content. While this is an important step in limiting children's access to pornography, platforms can do much more to deter individuals who are seeking out child-related sexual content and direct them to intervention services. For

example, some pornography sites are already directing men who search for child-related sexual content to early intervention services, such as Stop It Now!,<sup>17</sup> but such practices could be more widely adopted.

Jesuit Social Services has partnered with the University of Tasmania to establish the [CSAM Deterrence Centre](#), an initiative to improve the use of technology to disrupt and deter access to CSAM. As part of this work, we are seeking to collaborate with technology platforms, or any business with a digital footprint, to strengthen efforts to use technology to prevent online child sexual abuse offending before it starts, deter those who are currently offending, and encourage help-seeking behaviours that support long-term behavioural change. Interventions could include pop-up warnings in online spaces where people may seek out CSAM or pornography that promotes and normalises child sexual abuse and sexual violence. Currently made possible with philanthropic funding, this work requires secure funding from Government if it is to achieve its intended impact.

### Recommendation 10

Provide funding to support the development and implementation of online deterrence initiatives that seek to prevent child sexual abuse such as the CSAM Deterrence Centre, established by Jesuit Social Services and the University of Tasmania. Funding the CSAM Deterrence Centre for three years would cost \$1.5 million.

<sup>16</sup> Finnish organisation Suojellaan Lapsia has found "clear patterns of pornography escalation" as a driver of child sexual abuse offending, see: Nurmi et al. (2024). *Investigating child sexual abuse material availability, searches, and users on the anonymous Tor network for a public health intervention strategy*. Scientific Reports, 14(1).

<sup>17</sup> Scanlan et al. (2024), *reThink Chatbot Evaluation*, University of Tasmania. ([Weblink](#))

# Supporting effective justice responses

Justice policies across multiple Australian jurisdictions are failing. The most vulnerable members of our society, and children in particular, are bearing the brunt of these failures. Urgent national leadership is required to incentivise investment in approaches with demonstrated ability to prevent offending and victimisation, address the over-incarceration of First Nations people, increase community safety and reduce costs to all levels of government.

## Concerns and costs stemming from the current approach to justice

In 2024, the former National Children's Commissioner published *Help Way Earlier: How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing*, which raised urgent concerns about the ongoing violation of children's rights across the country. The report called the treatment of children in the criminal justice system 'one of the most urgent human rights issues facing Australia today.'<sup>18</sup> The Senate Inquiry into Australia's Youth Justice and Incarceration System (the Youth Justice Inquiry), established in September 2024, heard deeply concerning evidence about the damage being caused by Australia's youth justice system, and in particular the harm to First Nations children and communities.<sup>19</sup> We welcome the reopening of this Inquiry in the new Parliament.

Punitive 'tough on crime' policies being adopted in Victoria, Queensland, NSW and the NT ignore evidence of community-based intervention

approaches that reduce harmful or offending behaviour in children,<sup>20</sup> and that time spent in custody increases recidivism among children.<sup>21</sup> These policies disproportionately impact already marginalised communities, including First Nations people, people living with disability, children from culturally and racially marginalised backgrounds, and children and young people with experience of the out-of-home care system.<sup>22</sup> Ongoing concerns about Indigenous deaths in custody<sup>23</sup> – with 33 First Nations people dying in custody in 2024–25, the highest number recorded since 1979<sup>24</sup> – and a widening of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous adult incarceration rates<sup>25</sup> highlight the failure of current approaches to crime prevention and incarceration.

The current approach to crime is not only harmful and ineffective – it is expensive. The average cost of keeping an adult in prison for a year is almost \$120,000, and for a child in youth detention costs skyrocket to over \$1 million a year.<sup>26</sup> While the costs of administering justice systems lie with states and territories, punitive approaches to crime are also costly for the Federal Government. Having a prison record poses barriers to housing and employment, leading to higher reliance on social support payments, lost productivity resulting from higher rates of unemployment, and poorer physical and mental health outcomes that must be borne by the public healthcare system and the NDIS.

18 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2024). *Help way earlier!: How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing*. ([Weblink](#))

19 Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee (2025). *Australia's youth justice and incarceration system – Additional Comments by Senator David Shoebidge*. ([Weblink](#))

20 Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (2017). *Final Report (Report, Volume 2B)*, pp.259; Centre for Justice Innovation (2024). *Valuing Youth Diversion: A Toolkit*, pp.12.

21 AHRC (2024). Op cit.

22 Smart Justice (2023). *Action Plan to End the Over-Representation of Particular Groups of Young People in the Criminal Justice System*. ([Weblink](#))

23 Jash & Boltje (29 July 2025). *Six hundred lives lost since Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*. ABC News. ([Weblink](#))

24 McAlister et al. (2025). *Deaths in custody in Australia 2024–25. Statistical Report no. 57*. Australian Institute of Criminology. ([Weblink](#))

25 Productivity Commission (2025). *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report*. ([Weblink](#))

26 Productivity Commission (2025). *Report on Government Services: Youth justice services*. ([Weblink](#))

## A role for national leadership

The Federal Government must not ignore the ongoing failures of state-run justice systems – national leadership is now critical. The *Help Way Earlier* report identified our federated system of government as a barrier to reform, coupled with siloing and fragmentation of portfolios and responsibilities between and across government departments. To overcome this, we need a national approach that will not only uphold children’s rights but drive states and territories to move towards more effective youth justice solutions, and we call on the Government to fully implement the report’s recommendations. Jesuit Social Services also supports calls for enforceable national minimum standards to ensure that children and young people’s human rights are upheld and protected in the child justice system, as highlighted by a range of stakeholders in evidence to the Senate Youth Justice Inquiry.<sup>27</sup> We note the existing *National Standards for Youth Justice in Australia* developed by the Australasian Youth Justice Administrators are voluntary and unenforceable.

The Federal Government has taken an important step in national justice reform by establishing the National Justice Reinvestment Program, which seeks to “pursue meaningful change by investing in place-based initiatives, led and implemented by First Nations communities and organisations, to help turn the tide on incarceration and deaths

in custody”.<sup>28</sup> But while states and territories continue to introduce punitive policies, these efforts to achieve ‘meaningful change’ will be undermined. Another challenge is a lack of services equipped to deliver effective early intervention and diversion initiatives, and no strategy or funding from government to delivery capacity and capability building in this space.

There is clear evidence on what works to prevent crime and reduce recidivism, and opportunities for the Federal Government to support such approaches. This includes through the development of national standards, or incentivising investment by states and territories in evidence-based early intervention and diversion initiatives which keep people out of the justice system and disrupt cycles of incarceration. High quality pre- and post-release programs can help people who are incarcerated turn their lives around when they return to the community, and reduce reoffending and reimprisonment. Post-release arrangements combining supervision with individually tailored supports (e.g. integration of tailored wraparound support with education or employment pathways) can have a powerful impact on a person’s successful reintegration into society upon release and create safer communities.<sup>29</sup> Finally, initiatives which take a restorative approach can improve outcomes for victims while also reducing the likelihood of recidivism.<sup>30</sup>

27 Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee (2025). *Australia’s youth justice and incarceration system Interim Report*, pp.113–116. ([Weblink](#))

28 Attorney-General’s Department. *Justice Reinvestment*. ([Weblink](#))

29 Premier of Victoria (9 July 2024). Media release: [Breaking The Cycle Of Crime With A Stable Roof Over Heads](#).

30 Bonett et al (2024). *Group Conferencing is Associated with Lower Rates of Repeated Recidivism Among Higher-Risk Youth and There are Enhanced Effects Based on Who Attended the Conference*. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 23(1) ([Weblink](#)); Choi et al (2011). *Review of research on victims’ experiences in restorative justice: Implications for youth justice*. Children & Youth Services Review.

### **Restorative justice – a better approach**

Restorative justice is a holistic intervention with a strong and growing evidence base demonstrating its success, and offers an alternative to traditional, punitive justice measures. When done well, a restorative justice process can lead to reductions in recidivism and improved outcomes for victim-survivors, those who have caused harm, and their families and communities.<sup>31</sup>

As a practice, restorative justice processes most commonly bring together people affected by harm in a safe, structured and facilitated way, to talk about what happened, how they were impacted and how the harm can be repaired or addressed. Restorative justice practices can be applied in many ways, some of which include: restorative justice conferences; talking circles; and restorative engagement. There is no one set way of 'doing' restorative justice. Practices are flexible and responsive to individual and community needs.<sup>32</sup>

Jesuit Social Services runs restorative group conferencing with children and young people in Victoria and the Northern Territory (NT), and we see first-hand its significant positive outcomes. An evaluation of the NT Group Conferencing program in 2019 found that 78% of those harmed by the young person were satisfied with the process overall, and 85% were satisfied with the young person's plan to prevent further criminal behaviour. Among young people who had caused harm, 83% had improved engagement in education and employment, and 76% reported improved connection to social supports, both of which are factors that protect against future offending. Despite this strong evidence, recent reforms in the NT have reduced the availability of diversion for a range of offences, resulting in fewer children referred to our Youth Group Conferencing programs.

Restorative justice approaches work when there is fidelity to the practice, but programs labelled 'restorative' can vary widely in quality and there are currently no agreed national standards that guide restorative justice approaches. There is an opportunity for the Federal Government, through the Standing Council of Attorneys-General, to lead the development of a set of national standards for restorative justice, including the use of restorative justice within youth diversion. National standards would help ensure programs adhere to the core components shown to reduce re-offending, strengthen accountability,

and improve victim satisfaction. Establishing national standards also enables accreditation of providers in line with these standards and evaluation of restorative justice programs and practice against a clear benchmark. Note, the proposed restorative justice national standards would be complementary, but separate, to the national youth justice standards canvassed in evidence to the Senate Youth Justice Inquiry, and would apply to restorative justice approaches broadly, not just in the context of the youth justice system.

<sup>31</sup> Bonett et al (2022). *Group Conferencing Effects on Youth Recidivism and Elements of Effective Conferences*. Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology; Bonnet et al. (2024) op cit.

<sup>32</sup> RMIT Centre for Innovative Justice. *What is restorative justice?* ([Weblink](#))

Funding must also be available to build the capacity and capability of community sector organisations, in particular First Nations organisations, to deliver community-led restorative approaches (see also *Strengthening First Nations self-determination* section below).

To incentivise delivery of high quality, evidence-based restorative justice approaches, the

Federal Government could provide matched funding to states and territories for initiatives that align with the proposed national standards, or directly fund restorative justice and diversion initiatives for specific cohorts that are over-represented in the justice system, such as First Nations peoples.

### Recommendation 11

Working through the Standing Council of Attorneys-General, lead the development of a set of national standards for restorative justice, including the use of restorative justice in youth diversion, and make funding available to states and territories through a co-investment model for restorative justice initiatives that align with the agreed national standards to incentivise adoption.

### Recommendation 12

Invest in early intervention and diversion initiatives and alternatives to criminal legal system interventions for children and young people, and cohorts who are overrepresented in the justice system.<sup>33</sup> Initiatives could be directly funded by the Federal Government, or through matched investment by states and territories, with funding available to jurisdictions that adopt evidence-based approaches and establish more diversion programs and pathways out of the justice system.

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<sup>33</sup> This includes First Nations people, multicultural children and young people, children who live in out-of-home residential care, 18–25 year olds, and girls and young women with complex needs. See: Smart Justice For Young People (2023). *Working Together: Action Plan to End the Over-Representation of Particular Groups of Young People in the Criminal Justice System*. ([Weblink](#))

## The importance of housing in a successful transition back into community

People exiting prison are some of the most disadvantaged members of the community. Yet limited support available on release means they often continue to cycle through the justice system. Across Australia, 43% of prisoners released during 2021–22 returned to prison within two years (to 2023–24).<sup>34</sup> For First Nations adults, this figure was 54.8%. The highest rate of return was in the NT, where 60.3% of all prisoners (and 62.5% of First Nations prisoners) returned to prison within two years.<sup>35</sup>

Having stable and affordable housing can make a significant difference in the life of a person leaving prison and the likelihood that they reoffend, particularly when combined with

wraparound supports. Through our programs, we have witnessed the significance of homelessness and housing instability in disrupting employment and education pathways and increasing risks of social isolation, all of which impact future justice system contact. Many services require a fixed address, so housing instability can be a barrier to accessing existing supports. Despite evidence highlighting the importance of housing, approximately one in two (48%) people expect to be homeless when they exit prison.<sup>36</sup>

Targeted housing solutions for people exiting prison can play a critical role in preventing future offending and breaking cycles of incarceration. In Victoria, this has been clearly demonstrated through the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility (MCRF).

### Case study: Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility

The Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility (MCRF) provides temporary accommodation and support for men exiting prison who are assessed as suitable to reside at the facility and who have no alternative accommodation options or are at risk of homelessness. The facility is a partnership model between Corrections Victoria and Jesuit Social Services.

Since opening in 2020, more than 250 men have used MCRF to transition into long-term housing and employment. Men supported by MCRF are 30% less likely to re-offend compared to those leaving prison without similar housing and supports.<sup>37</sup>

Jesuit Social Services provides case management to residents to address their needs and achieve their identified goals. Support is included for up to six months once residents exit the facility to support them to establish long-term housing and sustain independent living in the community. MCRF supports residents to find long-term stable housing, engage in education and work, link in with support services, enhance independent living skills and gain independence.

There is a prime opportunity to replicate the MCRF model in other locations to meet the demand for supported housing for men exiting prison. The model could also be adapted to meet the unique needs of other cohorts transitioning out of custody, for example women, First Nations people, or young people aged 18–25. This would provide the stability that is critical to successfully reintegrate into the community after exiting prison, reduce recidivism rates and create a safer community.

The Federal Government could provide direct funding for such a facility, for example under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy for a facility tailored to First Nations people. Alternatively, the Government could provide tied funding to states and territories for supported housing for people leaving prison, for example through the Housing Australia Future Fund. This kind of model is also well suited to a social impact investing model, such as through the [Commonwealth Outcomes Fund](#), where it would align with Focus Areas 2 (employment) and 3 (homelessness).

34 Sentencing Advisory Council. *Released Prisoners Returning to Prison* ([Weblink](#)) (quoting Australian Productivity Commission (2025). Report on Government Services 2025, Part C, Table CA.4. ([Weblink](#)))

35 Ibid.

36 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2023). *The health of people in Australia's prisons 2022*. ([Weblink](#))

37 Premier of Victoria (9 July 2024). Media release: [Breaking The Cycle Of Crime With A Stable Roof Over Heads](#).

### **Recommendation 13**

Provide funding to replicate the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility model in priority locations, or adapt it for different cohorts (e.g. women, First Nations people, young people aged 18–25), to reduce the number of people exiting prison into homelessness.

### **Recommendation 14**

Deliver tied funding to state and territory governments for supported housing programs for people exiting prison, for example through the Housing Australia Future Fund.

### **Recommendation 15**

Establish a series of social impact investing housing projects, for example under the Commonwealth Outcomes Fund, for people with complex needs including justice system contact.

# Strengthening First Nations self-determination

Initiatives that seek to break cycles of disadvantage and violence must be place-based and appropriate to the cultural context in which they are being delivered. For First Nations communities, who continue to experience the ongoing impacts of colonisation, dispossession and failed government policies, self-determination and community control are at the heart of effective approaches.

Priority Reform 2 of the Closing the Gap Partnership affirms that community control is an act of self-determination, and that community-controlled services lead to better outcomes for First Nations people. Yet many Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) remain underfunded or face challenges as they grow in size,<sup>38</sup> limiting their ability to provide culturally safe, responsive and innovative services.

## Strengthening ACCOs' capacity and capability to design, lead, deliver and govern services and programs

More investment and action is needed from the Federal Government to support meaningful progress towards Priority Reform 2, and to ensure First Nations organisations can access support to enable them to deliver high quality services that meet the needs of their communities. One way to support First Nations organisations to strengthen their organisational capacity is to enable them

to engage a trusted and more established non-government organisation to work in partnership, strengthening their capacity to design, lead, deliver and govern services and programs.

We propose a model of partnering informed by Jesuit Social Services' experience in the NT, where we first began working in 2007. This followed an invitation to collaborate with the Eastern and Central Arrernte people to establish a sustainable governance process for people residing in the remote community of Ltyente Apurte (Santa Teresa). Through this work, the Atyenenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation (AAAC) was established in 2010. Jesuit Social Services provided mentorship to the AAAC across its earliest years of operation, with a focus on strengthening governance, partnerships, advocacy, research and the development of in-language resources, and continues to have a seat on the board of the AAAC to the present time.

Beyond Ltyente Apurte, we have accompanied and supported ACCOs and communities on a range of projects, including developing and trialling restorative youth justice programs in Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs; partnering in Justice Reinvestment in Katherine; collaborating with other services and communities on climate justice; and supporting workforce development through delivery of training in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin.

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38 Liddle et al. (2024). *Family Matters: report 2024*. SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. ([Weblink](#))

## Proposed First Nations Self-Determination and Strengthening Fund

Our experience and relationships in the NT show there is significant demand from small and emerging ACCOs for capacity and capability building support – including in relation to restorative justice approaches, as discussed in the *Supporting effective justice responses* section. However, financial constraints can prevent them from partnering in this way. ACCOs want access to staff training, professional development, organisational infrastructure, and

data and evaluation capability, as well as support to navigate complex bureaucratic systems and requirements for government funding.

We call for the establishment of a dedicated fund to support ACCOs' self-determination and strengthening, which would enable ACCOs to secure funding to engage an established organisations of their choosing (ACCO or mainstream) to work in partnership in support of a specific project or purpose. Such a fund would support Closing the Gap Priority Reform 2, strengthening ACCOs' ability to deliver services and programs that meet the needs of communities.

### Recommendation 16

Establish a First Nations Self-Determination and Strengthening Fund for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). The fund would enable smaller or emerging ACCOs to work in partnership with a more established organisation to strengthen their capacity and capability to design, lead, deliver and govern services and programs that meet the needs of communities.

# Supporting place-based, community-led climate adaptation

Climate change demands urgent, equitable, and sustained action to protect Australian communities and build long-term resilience. Climate risks are not borne equally, with the most severe impacts falling on those already experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation,<sup>39</sup> a fact that was recognised in the [National Climate Risk Assessment](#) (NCRA).<sup>40</sup> Through our work in Victoria, the NT and NSW, we see first-hand how climate change is disrupting lives, exacerbating existing hardships and deepening cycles of disadvantage. Some communities face compounding impacts, such as extreme heat, power outages and limited service availability, on top of existing systemic inequities, poverty and locational disadvantage. We also see how resilient and adaptive some communities can be, given the right enablers and opportunities.

Investment in community sector adaptation and resilience measures offers significant strategic and financial returns for government. Return on investment for such measures has been cited as exceeding 9.6, through reduced financial, health and social costs to both government and households,<sup>41</sup> while also reducing the human and social impacts to people and communities already experiencing often complex and intersecting disadvantage. Investing in community service organisations themselves is a key method to improve climate resilience in disproportionately impacted communities. For example, Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria – not-for-profit organisations that are embedded within communities to deliver responsive, locally-focused programs that aim to empower, connect and educate individuals and groups – return enormous benefits to communities, with an estimated \$2.95 return for every \$1 of income, and \$17.71 for every \$1 of program funding.<sup>42</sup>

For many Australians, community service organisations are the only point of intervention and refuge in the face of climate change impacts, and to date they remain unsung heroes in climate change adaptation, with the least funding and most responsibility when crises occur. The Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding (the Colvin Review) found that “Australia is increasingly reliant on a local level of government, and community, which has the least capacity and often limited capability”.<sup>43</sup>

## Privileging communities as experts in climate change adaptation efforts

Investment and action must be guided by priorities at the local level, through co-governance and lived-experience leadership, place-specific responses, and alignment of adaptation efforts with disaster, energy, housing and health policies and programs. Funding must also be reliable and accessible for small to medium community service organisations.

The [Disaster Ready Fund](#) (DRF) is the Commonwealth Government’s flagship disaster resilience and risk reduction initiative. Despite one of its primary objectives being to “increase the resilience, adaptive capacity and/or preparedness of governments, community service organisations and affected communities to minimise the potential impact of natural hazards and avert disasters”,<sup>44</sup> the DRF is not fit-for-purpose when it comes to supporting community-led adaptation. The Colvin Review found that the complexity of current disaster funding arrangements “often prevents individuals, organisations and local government from accessing the arrangements”.<sup>45</sup>

39 Lawrence et al. (2022). ‘Australasia.’ in: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*.

40 From the NCRA: *Risks and impacts from climate change are unequally distributed, reflecting and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities generated by past and present governance (high confidence)*.

41 Finity Consulting (2022). *Reaping the rewards of resilience*. Insurance Council of Australia. ([Weblink](#)).

42 City of Yarra (2023). *Neighbourhood House Partnership Framework*. ([Weblink](#))

43 Colvin (2024). *Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding*. Deloitte, p.15. ([Weblink](#))

44 See [Disaster Ready Fund | NEMA](#)

45 Colvin (2024). Op cit. p.16.

Nor does the DRF appear to distribute funding on a needs basis. For example, Round 3, announced in November 2025, provided funding for just [five projects](#) in the NT, attracting less than 0.9% of the total available funds. This is despite the [National Adaptation Plan](#) (NAP) stressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change in the NT, the inequitable burden on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and the unique ways in which climate change impacts regional and remote populations. The Colvin Review recommended the Commonwealth should institute “a range of program reforms required to support a disaster management system that is scalable, sustainable, effective, equitable, transparent and accessible”.<sup>46</sup>

### Providing dedicated funding to support place-based, community-led adaptation

For future rounds of the DRF, the Government should create a dedicated **community-led resilience and adaptation stream** which ringfences a portion of available funding (for example 15–20% of available funds in each round) for community service organisations, First Nations organisations and local partnerships to lead or support community-led, place-based disaster resilience efforts, with reduced co-contribution requirements from states and territories.

The NAP recognises that the interplay between climate hazards and socio-economic factors creates “complex risk strategies that require integrated policy responses” and that “targeted support and adaptation measures for populations disproportionately at risk from the impacts of climate change will be essential to ensure equitable access to healthcare, emergency services, and social support during and after climate events.”<sup>47</sup> Through the evidence we have collated on place-based approaches over the last five years, we strongly argue that community sector organisations, First Nations organisations and local governments are well placed to coordinate long-term, locally-led

climate resilience planning and implementation, and support responses to the ‘health and wellbeing’ risks identified in the NAP.

Beyond the DRF, the Government should establish a series of **place-based climate adaptation and resilience partnerships** in regions at greatest risk of climate impacts, with multi-year funding for 8–12 regions with high levels of vulnerability to climate change. These partnerships would enable the co-design of local adaptation priorities with community service organisations, First Nations organisations and local governments.

The failure to adequately invest in place-based adaptation means the impacts of climate change fall disproportionately on those least responsible for contributing, while further entrenching deep inequalities in relation to health outcomes, housing, energy security, and water security. The government must urgently accelerate coordinated, evidence informed, community-led climate adaptation with a focus on those communities most vulnerable to climate change, so that these communities are not left to face escalating heat and climate impacts alone.

#### Recommendation 17

Create a dedicated ‘Community-led resilience and adaptation’ stream within the Disaster Ready Fund for community service organisations, First Nations organisations and local partnerships to lead or support community-led, place-based adaptation efforts, with reduced co-contribution requirements.

#### Recommendation 18

Establish a series of place-based climate adaptation and resilience partnerships in 8–12 regions with high levels of vulnerability to climate change, to enable the co-design of local adaptation priorities with community service organisations, First Nations organisations and local governments and support community-led, place-based climate adaptation.

<sup>46</sup> Colvin (2024). Op cit. p.26.

<sup>47</sup> Australian Government (2025). *National Adaptation Plan*. Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. ([Weblink](#))

# Tailored support for job seekers experiencing complex disadvantage

Education, training and employment play a critical role in addressing many of the overlapping issues facing disengaged, highly vulnerable people in our community. Fairly paid, secure jobs are a powerful means to breaking cycles of disadvantage. Employment can enable access to safe and secure housing and increased standards of living, and acts as a protective factor against contact with the justice system. Yet highly disadvantaged jobseekers are being left behind.

## Reforming Australia's employment services system to support people experiencing disadvantage

Under Australia's current employment services system, a significant cohort of people experience entrenched long-term unemployment. Independent reviews of the 'Targeted Compliance Framework' penalty system have found serious and systemic failings,<sup>48</sup> and a heavy focus on compliance prioritises transitions to short-term employment rather than upskilling and durable employment that lifts a person's living standards long term. We need to shift resources from ineffective compliance burdens to programs and local partnerships that genuinely improve people's employment prospects.

The [Final Report of the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services](#) (the Workforce Australia Report) identified a range of fundamental changes needed to better support the most disadvantaged in the Australian community, to reduce long-term unemployment and to get better value for money from our employment services system. The Government has committed to reform, but noted "it will take time for any large-scale reform to be designed and implemented".<sup>49</sup> While changes to the current ineffective system are being considered, vulnerable jobseekers and disadvantaged regions across Australia continue to bear the brunt of the failures which are clearly articulated in the report – particularly in light of the discontinuation of state funded programs (such as Jobs Victoria Mentors).

While reform decisions are being progressed, Government should urgently invest in a range of employment services trials to support disadvantaged cohorts and generate evidence to inform the new employment services model. This should involve working with states and territories and leveraging tailored models that have proven effective at addressing long term unemployment.

### Recommendation 19

Proceed with fundamental reform of the Workforce Australia system, guided by recommendations in the Workforce Australia report, with a high level blueprint for reform to be agreed and announced in the 2026-27 Budget.

### Recommendation 20

Work with states and territories to develop, fund and evaluate a series of employment services trials focused on highly disadvantaged jobseekers and their families (such as Jesuit Social Services' proposal outlined in **Recommendation 21**), leveraging proven models to support increased access to employment for people who encounter significant barriers to employment, to inform reform of the Workforce Australia system.

48 Deloitte (2025). *Targeted Compliance Framework Final Report*. ([Weblink](#)); Commonwealth Ombudsman (2025). *Automation in the Targeted Compliance Framework: when the law is changed by the system isn't*. ([Weblink](#))

49 Australian Government (2024). *Australian Government response to the House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services*. Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. ([Weblink](#))

## Supporting people with justice system contact to enter the workforce

People in contact with the justice system face unique challenges gaining employment, including existing difficulties due to lower educational attainment, lower socioeconomic status, higher levels of alcohol and other drug use, and higher levels of mental ill health compared to the general community. A history of detention adds another barrier, particularly for sentences longer than six months.<sup>50</sup>

Employment is a strong protective factor against reoffending, but the Workforce Australia Report found there are few accessible pathways into employment, education or training for people in or preparing to leave prison. It found that although there are a range of social care services for people exiting prison, they are fragmented and sometimes difficult to access.<sup>51</sup> Tailored support is required and can make a significant difference in an individual's ability to transition successfully back into the community after leaving prison.

We propose the Government invest in a justice-focused employment services trial, which would deliver a tailored, holistic approach to employment preparation that recognises the individual, family and systemic factors which affect an individual's ability to secure and sustain employment. If funded, findings from an evaluation of this trial can help shape the design and delivery of the Government's reforms and ensure our future employment services system meets the needs of people experiencing complex disadvantage.

Our proposal is distinct from the [Reconnection, Employment and Learning \(REAL\) Program](#) announced in the 2024-25 Budget, which is targeted at First Nations people currently in prison or on remand. Rather, our proposed eligible cohort is any individual with past or present involvement with the criminal justice system that may impact their access to employment, support services, or social inclusion. This broader eligibility is critical given the stigma and impacts of justice-system involvement extend well beyond a person's immediate release from prison.

Jesuit Social Services is well placed to deliver such a trial. Since 2009, we have delivered employment services to support people who need it most, including people engaged with the justice system, First Nations people, people experiencing homelessness, and humanitarian migrants. In Victoria, this includes delivering the Jobs Victoria Mentors Service. Of people with justice system contact who were placed into employment through this service across 2023 and 2024, just 9.5% reappeared in the prison system, compared to the average recidivism rate in Victoria of 39.3%.<sup>52</sup>

Ensuring employment services better meet the needs of significantly disadvantaged jobseekers, particularly people with justice system contact, will reduce barriers to employment and stable housing, long-term reliance on income support, and rates of offending and re-imprisonment.

### Recommendation 21

Provide \$5.1 million over three years for Jesuit Social Services to develop, pilot and evaluate a new approach to employment services with people engaged with the criminal justice system. The trial will target this priority cohort in two Melbourne Employment Service Areas who are being under-served by mainstream providers under the current system.

50 AIHW (2023). *The health of people in Australia's prisons 2022*. ([Weblink](#))

51 House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services (2023). *Rebuilding Employment Services: Final report on Workforce Australia Employment Services*. ([Weblink](#))

52 Sentencing Advisory Council (2022-23). *Released Prisoners Returning to Prison*. ([Weblink](#))

## Social security payments must be increased to combat rising poverty levels

The [2025 Poverty in Australia report](#) revealed that more than one in seven people in Australia (14.2%) live below the poverty line, amounting to 3,706,000 people.<sup>53</sup> Although the real increases in social security payments introduced by the Government in 2023 reduced the gaps between payments and the poverty line, these gaps remain substantial, especially for people on Youth Allowance or Jobseeker Payment. The

removal of COVID income supports and large increases in rents contributed to the rise in poverty from 2020–21 to 2022–23.<sup>54</sup> The failure of income support payments to keep pace with rising costs of living must be urgently addressed.

We support calls for the Government to lift the lowest income support payments (including Youth Allowance, JobSeeker Payment and Parenting Payment Single) to a benchmark level of adequacy, taking account of essential living costs, relativities with other income support payments and wages.

### Recommendation 22

Lift the lowest income support payments (including Youth Allowance, JobSeeker Payment and Parenting Payment Single) to a benchmark level of adequacy, taking account of essential living costs, relativities with other income support payments and wages.

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<sup>53</sup> Davidson & Bradbury (2025). *Poverty in Australia 2025: Overview*. Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

## Improving mental health, suicide prevention and disability support

Jesuit Social Services works with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our community, who often face significant mental health challenges alongside other complex needs. These include intersecting challenges, such as family violence (both as victim-survivors and perpetrators), homelessness, child protection involvement, criminal justice system contact, climate change impacts, histories of trauma, and substance use. Many also experience other forms of disadvantage or marginalisation, such as intellectual, cognitive or psychosocial disability, and discrimination based on cultural, racial or LGBTQIA+ identity.

The Federal Government invests significant funding in mental health and suicide prevention, but current arrangements are not meeting the needs of the community, especially those most in need of support. Our participants often encounter barriers to accessing support, even from services intended for people with complex needs. We witness people who have multiple diagnoses being excluded from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as well as from state-funded services.

Many of our participants are also impacted by declining access rates for NDIS psychosocial supports (non-clinical services for people experiencing mental ill health, enabling them to live independently and safely in the community) and decreases in funded package sizes.<sup>55</sup> Analysis by the Productivity Commission identified an estimated 500,000 people with severe and moderate mental illness who are not eligible for the NDIS and had no access to psychosocial supports in 2022–23.<sup>56</sup>

For service providers, funding arrangements to deliver critical mental health and suicide prevention services are often complex, characterised by short term funding arrangements, multiple funding sources, and burdensome reporting requirements. These arrangements pose risks to quality care and equitable service access, while also jeopardising opportunities to intervene early in and promote recovery from mental health challenges that can entrench disadvantage.

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55 Threlfall et al (2025). *Access Denied: Psychosocial disability and the NDIS*. Australian Psychosocial Alliance (APA). ([Weblink](#))

56 Productivity Commission (2025). *Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement Review*, Inquiry report no. 108, Canberra. ([Weblink](#))

### Case study: Suicide prevention services – *Support After Suicide*

The experience of bereavement after suicide can be complex and prolonged, and carries risks for suicidality, mental ill health and substance use, and isolation from community. Research has shown that people bereaved by suicide are 65% more likely to attempt suicide than people bereaved by sudden natural causes.<sup>57</sup> Delivery of effective, ongoing and community-based postvention services is therefore a critical part of suicide prevention. However, funding arrangements for suicide postvention services are disjointed and complex, creating a patchwork of support across different regions, with reduced service access for people in regional areas, who are up to twice as likely to die by suicide as people living in major cities.<sup>58</sup>

Jesuit Social Services' *Support After Suicide* program has been offering tailored, ongoing support to people and communities bereaved by suicide since 2004. In addition to counselling and online resources, *Support After Suicide* offers group programs and peer support, fostering a sense of belonging and community for participants. We also deliver *StandBy Support After Suicide* (StandBy), which works with the same cohort but the level of support available is more limited.

These two services are supported through a combination of Victorian and Federal funding under the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (National Agreement), as well as two separate Federal grant programs, all with separate funding periods and reporting arrangements. Adding further complexity, the current bilateral schedules of the National Agreement restrict some jurisdictions from choosing the most suitable postvention services, as the schedule prescribes a specific program. In the case of Victoria, the prescribed program is *StandBy Support After Suicide*. While *StandBy* provides a valuable initial response for people bereaved by suicide, a program like *Support After Suicide* can provide ongoing support that is tailored to the needs of the individual.

### Addressing barriers to support for people with multiple and complex needs

As the Federal and state and territory governments commence work on the next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (the National Agreement), we urge a whole-of-government approach to mental health and suicide prevention, including clearer articulation of how the National Agreement interacts with the broader policy environment across a range of areas, particularly the

NDIS. This is essential to enable participants with multiple and complex needs to live independently and safely in the community.

While the new National Agreement is being developed, governments must ensure continuity of services – including suicide prevention funding – while also looking for opportunities to improve outcomes. This includes providing greater flexibility in the commissioning of services that best meet the needs of local communities.

57 Pitman et al. (2016). *Bereavement by suicide as a risk factor for suicide attempt: A cross-sectional national UK-wide study of 3432 young bereaved adults*. *BMJ Open*. 10.1136/bmjopen-2015-009948.

58 AIHW. *Suicide and intentional self-harm hospitalisations among regional and remote communities*. ([Weblink](#))

### Recommendation 23

Continue current funding arrangements for suicide prevention and postvention services until the new National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement is in place, including by extending the National Agreement and the Targeted Regional Initiatives for Suicide Prevention program until June 2027. This extension of the National Agreement to June 2027 should be subject to removal of the requirement for jurisdictions that have postvention services in their bilateral schedule to use one specific postvention service provider/service model (i.e. StandBy).

### Recommendation 24

Ensure the next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement:

- a. provides secure and increased funding for equitable, comprehensive and responsive suicide postvention support, to reach a greater number of people bereaved by suicide, including those in regional and remote communities
- b. does not prescribe a service model or service provider, but allow all states and territories to deliver evidence-based, best-practice postvention services that meet the needs of their communities
- c. better integrates funding for postvention support from the Commonwealth and state governments.

We also call on the Government to immediately address the unmet need for psychosocial supports and to implement the recommendations from the Australian Psychosocial Alliance's (APA) report [Access Denied: Psychosocial Disability and the NDIS](#). People with psychosocial disability are at substantial risk because they are being excluded from the NDIS at a time when there are almost

no other supports available outside the NDIS.<sup>59</sup> The Government should take immediate action to ensure fair and equitable access to the NDIS, in line with the APA's recommendations; and to prioritise the resolution of roles and responsibilities for the funding and provision of psychosocial supports outside the NDIS, as recommended by the Productivity Commission in its [review of the National Agreement](#).

### Recommendation 25

Urgently, and ahead of the next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement, work with states and territories to resolve roles and responsibilities for the funding and provision of psychosocial supports, and prioritise commissioning services to address the unmet need for psychosocial supports outside the NDIS.

<sup>59</sup> Threlfall et al. (2025). Op cit.