

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – MAY 30, 2018

New youth justice data shows Australia is failing Aboriginal children: Jesuit Social Services

A tenfold over-representation of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people in the criminal justice system shows that Australia is failing vulnerable children, and raising the age of criminal responsibility and culturally-specific responses should be among the solutions to address the issue, says Jesuit Social Services.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Youth Justice in Australia 2016-17* report, published days before National Reconciliation Week, shows that while only about five per cent of young people aged 10-17 in Australia are ATSI, 50 per cent of young people aged 10-17 under supervision on an average day in 2016-17 were Indigenous.

"Over the last decade, Closing the Gap reports have shown that a disproportionate number of ATSI people face significant disadvantage in many aspects of life including health, education and employment," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

"The AIHW report shows many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face challenges early in life that can lead to a lifetime of cycling in and out of the justice system. We need to intervene early to address the factors behind anti-social behaviour and break the cycle of offending".

Ms Edwards says that the AIHW data also shows that the over-representation of young Indigenous people in the justice system is increasing.

"Five years ago Indigenous children aged 10-17 were 15 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to have involvement with the justice system but now they are 18 times more likely.

Jesuit Social Services has recommended a range of solutions to prevent young ATSI people from having contact with the youth justice system, including raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 (the current age) to 14.

"No primary school aged child should be in prison. We should be taking a restorative approach with children aged under 14 to give them every opportunity to lead healthy lives.

"We also need a greater range of culturally-specific programs that work with young ATSI people and help connect them to culture, education and family. An example of this is the Barrng Moorop program in Victoria which provides intensive support to ATSI children between 10 and 14 who have had contact with police.

"New approaches and solutions that support, not punish, children is the best way we can address the shocking over-representation of young ATSI people in the justice system. If we keep failing vulnerable children and their families, we ultimately continue to fail all Australians."

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