

CATHOLIC SOCIAL SERVICES AUSTRALIA CALLS FOR URGENT YOUTH JUSTICE REFORM IN LETTER TO ATTORNEYS GENERAL

20 September 2026

Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) has today written to the Attorneys General across all Australian jurisdictions, urging immediate action on the recommendations of the recent Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee inquiry final report into Australia's Youth Justice and Incarceration System.

The letter, signed by CSSA CEO Dr Jerry Nockles, expresses strong support for the Committee's call to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 years across all jurisdictions and to implement enforceable national minimum standards to protect vulnerable children and young people.

"Justice is not simply about punishment; it is about peace and restoring human dignity," said Dr Nockles. "As Pope Leo XIV reminds us, *'We must rise from every fall; no human being is ever truly justified by what they have done, and justice is always a process of reparation and reconciliation.'*

"Our youth justice system must embody this restorative spirit, recognising that every child is more than the sum of their mistakes and deserves the opportunity to heal and thrive."

Dr Nockles highlighted the vital role Catholic social service providers play nationwide: "Our network is active in every state, territory and electorate, supporting families and young people in need, including youth engaging with the justice system. We bring a wealth of experience and compassion to this issue, and we want to work collaboratively to help build a system that truly supports children to thrive."

Ms Carmel Sefian, CSSA Director of Policy and Advocacy, said: "Children caught up in the justice system are often those who have suffered the greatest disadvantage and trauma, including the overrepresentation of our First Nations children and children with disability. We must respond with compassion, not condemnation. Inspired by the Holy Father's call for justice as a process of healing, CSSA is committed to advocating for early intervention, culturally safe services, and community-led support that can break cycles of harm and open pathways to hope."

Ms Sefian added: "Punitive 'tough on crime' approaches do not work in the best interests of children. We need a justice system that reflects the efficacy of evidence-based community education and diversionary approaches that restore relationships and dignity, not one that perpetuates trauma. CSSA stands ready to partner with governments and communities to ensure reforms are grounded in love, respect, and the dignity of every child."

The letter urges the Australian Government to demonstrate national leadership through the Standing Council of Attorneys General (SCAG) under National Cabinet to prioritise coordinated reform efforts, particularly the raising of the age of criminal responsibility, consistent with international human rights standards.

CSSA calls on all jurisdictions to act swiftly to protect children from the harms of incarceration and to invest in early intervention, diversion, and rehabilitation programs that address the root causes of youth offending.

ENDS

About CSSA

CSSA is the national peak body for Catholic social service providers. CSSA's network of forty-two member agencies runs across all Australian States and Territories with a combined total of over seven hundred sites, delivering essential services to vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians.

Annex: Letter to the Standing Council of Attorneys General

Media Contact | Carmel Sefian | 02 6285 1366 | carmel.sefian@cssa.org.au