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NT youth justice reforms a significant backwards step: Jesuit Social Services

The Northern Territory Government’s announcement of a number of legislative changes in relation to the youth justice system are counter-productive, will funnel more children into the detention system, and will not improve community safety, says Jesuit Social Services.

“We are very concerned about the measures announced by the Territory Government, including changes to the Bail Act that will result in more children being locked up, and police being given powers to fit electronic monitoring devices to children,” says Jesuit Social Services’ General Manager – Northern Territory, John Adams.

“It is deeply disappointing that the Territory Government is turning its back on the recommendations of the landmark Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, in favour of populist measures that will not work.

The outcome of this posturing to appear ‘tough on crime’ will only result in vulnerable children being exposed to the youth detention system – which means they are more likely to re-offend than children who are supported in the community instead. Our political leaders must look at the evidence of what works in an effective youth justice system. This includes an emphasis on addressing the root causes of anti-social behaviour and supporting children to connect or reconnect with family, education and culture in the community,” says Mr Adams.

Mr Adams says that the final report of the Royal Commission, handed down in 2017, provided a roadmap for a system that would better prevent crime from occurring in the first place and support children who did have contact with the youth justice system to turn their lives around.

“The Royal Commission gave us a blueprint of a system that would keep children, as well as the broader community, safe. Today’s announcements are a significant step in the wrong direction, and will have a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who make up the vast majority of children who have contact with the Territory’s youth justice system.”

“Evidence presented by Northern Territory Police to the Royal Commission showed that the offence of breach of bail did not reduce re-offending – in fact, it led to an increased number of children and young people on remand without being found guilty - which does not support community safety.

“There is also no evidence that electronic monitoring reduces crime. Instead of implementing such a system at the taxpayers’ expense, we should be investing more in programs and services that help young people stay out of trouble in the first place. Restorative justice responses that help children to take accountability for their actions and repair harm while steering them towards positive pathways must play a critical role in an effective youth justice system,” says Mr Adams.

“These proposed changes will harm, not help, children, their families and the broader community.”