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Significant failings of WA’s youth detention system require urgent reform

Revelations about the inhumane treatment of children and young people in Western Australia’s youth detention system, as investigated by ABC TV’s *Four Corners*, are deeply distressing and must be the catalyst for urgent reform to keep children and young people safe, says Jesuit Social Services.

“Last night’s program included harrowing footage of detention guards using physical restraint practices, banned elsewhere, on vulnerable children and outlined the use of isolation and its profound mental and physical impact on children,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“This is unacceptable and it defies belief that some of our community’s most vulnerable children could be treated in such an inhumane manner by people and systems tasked with their care. We support calls for the closure of the Banksia Hill facility, which is clearly not fit for purpose, and for a Royal Commission to understand the extent of the systemic failures. All Governments around Australia must also commit to raising the age of criminal responsibility as a priority.”

Ms Edwards says that the characteristics of young people in contact with youth detention around the country are similar, with many children themselves the victim of abuse, neglect and trauma and high levels of mental illness, substance abuse and disengagement with education.

“These children will all return to the community one day and we have an obligation to ensure that they do so better off than when they entered the system through the system focused on rehabilitation, not further punishment that only increases the likelihood of them re-offending.”

Senior leaders from Jesuit Social Services have undertaken #JusticeSolutions tours of effective youth justice systems in part of the US, Europe and New Zealand, finding that successful systems share facilities that are small and home-like, and emphasise recruiting and retaining experienced staff skilled in trauma-informed practice to meet the needs of children and young people.

“Our 45 years of work with children who have contact with the justice system as well as these international study tours have shown systems based on evidence and best practice have safer facilities, less crime and fewer victims. There is much we can learn from these jurisdictions about evidence-based, therapeutic approaches to working with young people in trouble, including only ever using detention as a last resort and keeping children in the community wherever possible.”

A previous *Four Corners* report into the Northern Territory’s Don Dale facility led to the establishment of a Royal Commission and 227 recommendations to reform the Territory’s youth justice system. In line with those recommendations, the Northern Territory Government recently committed to raise the age of criminal responsibility from the current 10 years to 12.

“While there is still a long way to go for the Territory to truly reform its youth justice system after failings over many years, the commitment to raise the age of criminal responsibility is a positive step that will make a tangible difference to young people, their families and the broader community.

“Now is the time for Western Australia, as well other states and territories, to learn from these appalling stories and commit to genuine and sustained reform of their youth justice systems.”

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