

Call to lift criminal age to 12 New report 'compelling'

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THE age of criminal responsibility in Victoria should be raised from 10 years old to 12 to prevent disadvantaged children from being doomed to a life of crime, a report says.

Jesuit Social Services is calling for changes to youth justice in the state, with a newly released report showing the number of children on remand increasing by two-thirds between 2007 and 2010.

Children who offend at younger ages are among the community's most vulnerable and need support, because locking them up achieves nothing, the organisation's CEO, Julie Edwards, says.

"Too many of these children spend their teenage years cycling in and out of custody" she said yesterday.

"Detention is no place for primary schoolchildren." In 2010, 25 per cent of children with youth justice orders in Victoria came from just 2.6 per cent of postcodes, the group's report shows.

It found the vast majority of young offenders had come from broken homes and had been expelled or dropped out of school.

The report calls for the minimum age a child can be charged with a criminal offence to be lifted to 12, in line with United Nations recommendations, and for more co-ordination between child protection and the youth justice system.

It also says support services should be expanded outside of business hours because that is when 80 per cent of youth arrests occur.

Judge Paul Grant, president of the Children's Court of Victoria, said the report's arguments for reform were "absolutely compelling".

AAP