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CALL FOR BROADER DEBATE TO COMBAT SENTENCING SENSATIONALISM

Jesuit Social Services has called for a broader discussion around sentencing and alternative options to prison in the wake of the Sentence Advisory Council's survey results released yesterday.

Jesuit Social Services Chief Executive Officer, Julie Edwards said it is clear that in the case of sentencing, sensationalised media reports are not the best place for the community to get information about highly complex issues.

"We are very concerned that the justice debate is being overly simplified, and the community is not receiving adequate information to make sound assessments regarding appropriate sentencing.

"What is being lost in the coverage of yesterday's survey release is that the exact same people surveyed to produce today's findings were asked questions about sentencing alternatives to prison earlier in the year. While 63.8 per cent believed that judges were 'out of touch with what ordinary people think', 74.3 per cent of respondents preferred to 'increase the use of alternatives to imprisonment'.

"We know what reduces the chances of reoffending. Bringing the offender face to face with their victims has proved to dramatically decrease rates of recidivism, not simply locking them away.

"80 per cent of participants from the Jesuit Social Services' Community Group Conferencing program, which brings the offender face to face with their victims and the other community members to face the impact of the offending and make amends, have not reoffended two years later.

"We believe it would be of great benefit if the courts were able to get information out to the public about more of the cases that are dealt with everyday, not just the ones that reported in the newspaper. We would support Chief Justice Marilyn Warren in her efforts to do this.

"The 2005 World Values Survey of 1400 people found that respondents had the highest level of confidence in the Justice System with a combined positive score of 52 per cent, when compared to the Churches, Parliament, Political Parties and the Press.

"It is the role of the judge to make these tough decisions – based on a series of considerations, including the community's expectations. If we simply blame the judge we will lose sight of the real problems, including the leading causes of crime - poverty, homelessness, mental health and addiction problems," Ms Edwards said.

Jesuit Social Services works with over 500 young people a year, the majority of whom are high risk young people with complex and multiple problems and needs; such complex needs include mental health problems, disability (including intellectual disability), drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness, and health problems.

Jesuit Social Services CEO, Julie Edwards is available for comment.

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