

MEDIA RELEASE

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Action needed to stop young children getting caught in cycles of offending

New data released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) confirms the pressing need for greater action to prevent the youngest children who come into contact with the justice system from spiralling into lives of crime.

Commenting on the release of research by the AIHW into the involvement of 10-14 year olds in the criminal justice system, Jesuit Social Services' CEO, Julie Edwards said, "This research has found that 85% of young people who have their first contact with the justice system at 14 years of age or younger have repeated and ongoing involvement in the system as they get older. This should be a wake up call for our community to take action now to prevent these children from getting stuck in lives of crime."

"From our own experience and research we know that children in the justice system are likely to experience a range of problems including mental illness, unstable and violent family environments, and difficulties engaging in education. Early responses are needed to address these issues."

The AIHW report has shown that failure to respond to the youngest offenders can lead to more serious involvement in the justice system. "This research shows that younger people in the justice system are more likely to end up spending long periods of time in sentenced detention as they get older. Thirty three per cent of young people who were first in the justice system when aged 10–14 ended up in sentenced detention at some time between the ages of 15–17, Ms Edwards said."

Ms Edwards noted with concern the finding that 46% of all children supervised by youth justice authorities across Australia in 2010-12 were Aboriginal despite being less than 5% of the population. "More than 20 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, young Aboriginal children are 25 times as likely to be in prison as non Aboriginal children. The over-representation of Aboriginal people across the whole justice system remains a disgrace, but tragically, the level of over-representation is in fact greatest for the youngest children.

"We are talking about a very small number of children here. We can make a difference by identifying them at a young age and guiding them on a path to a future beyond the walls of a prison. To do this we must rethink the boundaries of our justice system including the age of criminal responsibility. We also need more intensive responses to deal with issues like mental illness, disengagement from education, and family breakdown."

These issues will be explored in Jesuit Social Services' upcoming [National Justice Symposium](#) on the 18th and 19th of September, which will focus on rethinking the boundaries of children's involvement in the criminal justice system.

Jesuit Social Services is a not-for-profit organisation which works to build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged young people, families and communities.

Media Enquiries: Catherine Neville 0407 318 832, Catherine.neville@jss.org.au

Key findings from Young People Aged 10-14 in the Youth Justice System (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)

Young people under youth justice supervision

- There were 1,940 young people aged 10–14 (or 16 per 10,000) under youth justice supervision in 2011–12 (excluding WA and NT).
- 1,005 (8 per 10,000) young people aged 10-14 experienced detention.

Nature of involvement in the justice system

- Around 27% of young people under youth justice supervision (aged 10-17) first entered supervision when they were aged 10–14 (from a cohort of people born in 1993-94).
- 85% of young people in this group who were supervised at age 10–14 had returned to (or continued under) supervision when they were aged 15–17.
- Unsentenced detention was the most common first type of supervision among young people who were first supervised aged 10–14, with 48% of young people aged 10–14 experiencing unsentenced detention as their first supervision type.
- About three in five (61%) young people involved in the justice system between aged 10-14 experienced detention.
- 33% of those who first entered supervision at age 10–14 (and returned at age 15–17) were in sentenced detention at some time when they were 15–17, compared with only 8% of those who first entered supervision aged 15–17
- Among those who first entered supervision aged 10–14, the median amount of time spent under supervision at age 15–17, in total, was 80 weeks (563 days), compared with about 33 weeks (234 days) among those first supervised at age 15–17.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Overrepresentation

- Aboriginal young people are grossly overrepresented in younger age groups - Nationally, they were 23 times as likely as non-Indigenous young people to be under community-based supervision during 2011–12 and 25 times as likely to be in detention (excluding Western Australia and the Northern Territory).
- Indigenous young people were more likely than non-Indigenous young people to have first entered supervision aged 10–14 (39% compared with 23%)
- Indigenous young people were more likely than non-Indigenous young people to have experienced both community-based supervision and detention at age 10–14 (59% compared with 41%), and were less likely to have experienced either community-based supervision only (33% compared with 43%) or detention only (8% compared with 16%)
- The median amount of time spent in detention when aged 10–14 was 31 days for Indigenous young people, compared with 9 days for non-Indigenous young people

Young people in contact with police:

- About 20,000 young people aged 10–14 (or 144 per 10,000) were proceeded against by police during 2010-11. The most common offences were: theft (36%); acts intended to cause injury (17%); unlawful entry with intent (14%); property damage (11%); and public order offences (8%)
- In 2011–12, there were 6,261 young people aged 10–14 finalised in the Children's Courts, most of whom (4,785 or 76%) were proven guilty.