Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Election Priorities 2026



Children in youth justice

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The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare is the peak body for child and family services in Tasmania and Victoria. For over 100 years, the Centre has advocated for the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and families, ensuring their right to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture.

Election Priority

Provide every young person in the youth justice system with tailored, evidence-informed support to address their specific educational, health, emotional and psychological needs, and set them up for successful reintegration into the community.

What this looks like

- Invest in a robust, interconnected and effective family services system to support parents and carers to create safe, stable and nurturing home environments for their children to prevent them from coming into contact with the justice system
- Resource and expand evidence-led, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive diversionary programs for children at risk of entering, or already in, the youth justice system
- Reduce the number of children and young people on remand by raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years, consistent with international evidence, and offering appropriate child-centred alternatives to detention.
- All child justice matters should be heard in a specialised Children's Court or by child-specialist magistrates, not in an adult court.
- Assess every child in remand and detention to determine their specific needs and link them to the relevant services and supports, including literacy and numeracy tuition, mental health and AOD specialist services, safe housing options on release, disability diagnosis where relevant, and ongoing cultural connection.

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- Implement, evaluate and report on the actions outlined in the *Wirkara Kulpa: Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy 2022-32* to encourage strengths-based approaches to keeping Aboriginal children out of the justice system and supporting successful reintegration into the community.

Background

There are several points along a child's trajectory into youth justice where systems, services and supports can make a difference in a child's life and therefore in the safety of a community. Providing early supports to a family can help a child grow up in a safe, stable and nurturing home environment, connected to their culture and community, and reduce the likelihood of criminal offending.

An effective diversionary program can steer a child away from youth justice, minimising contact with police and courts, and providing an alternative pathway to support healthy development and safe connections with community.

For children already in the youth justice system, there is a window of opportunity where they can be linked into services. This time in detention should be used to diagnose developmental delay or disability, improve literacy/numeracy, and address mental health challenges or substance misuse, manage anger, provide life skills, engage in education or training, connect with culture and community, become job-ready. This kind of support can help turn young lives around and reduce the likelihood of re-offending. Assessment needs to be intersectional and identify strengths, social assets and protective factors.

In September 2025, the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Victoria increased from 10 to 12 years and new 'Adult Time for Violent Crime' laws were passed in 2025 to address the small number of children who repeatedly commit serious and violent crime.

Evidence shows that raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility and providing the necessary supports, services and programs to children before or at the time of offending, would better address the underlying causes of antisocial behaviour than incarceration, while also helping to reduce recidivism.

The Centre welcomes the significant investment made by the Victorian Government in the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) with its data-informed and public health approach to early intervention, diversion, and community reintegration programs.

First Nations children in youth justice

A May 2026 report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination found that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children only make up around 6.5% of children in Australia aged 10-17 years, they represented around 65% of children in detention on an average day in 2023-24.

The Australian Human Rights Commission report, *Help Way Earlier*, highlighted the need for further investment in the strengths-based prevention and early intervention work of ACCOs to keep Aboriginal children out of the justice system and support successful re-entry into the community. A 2021 Commission for Children and Young People report *Our Youth, Our Way*, shows the importance of involving Aboriginal communities in the design, administration and supervision of key elements of the youth justice system.

Key Data Points



545

young people aged 10 and over were under youth justice supervision on an average day in Victoria in 2024-25 (AIHW, 2026).



1 in 300

youth justice cases involve offences by children aged 10 to 13 (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2025).



21x

First Nations young people aged 10-17 were 21 times as likely as non-Indigenous people aged 10-17 to be in detention in Australia between 2021-25 (AIHW, 2025).

57%

of 10-13 year old alleged offenders in 2021-22 had previously been recorded as a primary Affected Family Member or child witness to a family violence incident or a victim in a criminal incident.

- In 2023-24, the number of children and young people aged 10-17 detained in Victoria decreased by 23.6%, falling from 364 to 278 young people. Victoria recorded the lowest youth detention rate in Australia.
- Victoria recorded the lowest youth detention rate of any state or territory: 1.4 per 10,000 children and young people aged 10–17 on an average night in the June quarter of 2025, compared with 17 per 10,000 in the Northern Territory.
- Despite the low overall rate, most children in detention in Victoria are unsentenced: 60% were held on remand rather than serving a sentence in 2024–25, the lowest proportion nationally, but still a majority of children engaged in the youth justice system have not been sentenced.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people remain significantly overrepresented in Victoria's youth justice system, detained at 6.6 times the rate of non-Aboriginal children in 2023–24 (7.3 per 10,000 compared with 0.7 per 10,000).
- Nationally, First Nations children remain profoundly overrepresented, comprising 60% of the youth detention population despite representing only 6.6% of the general population.

Lived Experience

"For me and people I know, offending is often for money not for fun … there is not enough money for food, clothes and the basic things to live." (Help way earlier! p. 33)

"This place is awesome. There's a man who comes and does men's business with us, making didgeridoos. It's rehabilitation. It's changing me – I'm finding a better version of myself and I didn't even know I had it in me." (Our Youth, Our Way, p. 17)

"Give children a chance instead of locking them up. Even if they are repeat offenders, they need a chance to change." (Help way earlier! p. 10)

Key Programs

Target Zero – www.cmy.net.au/targetzer0/

Aimed at ending the criminalisation of 10-25 year olds and over-representation in the justice system of First Nations young people, multicultural young people and young people in residential care in Brimbank, Melton and Wyndham.

Violence Reduction Unit – www.vic.gov.au/violence-reduction-unit

Victorian Government program, statewide, whole of community, public health approach. The program focusses on early intervention programs to address the factors that can lead to serious violence.

Children's Court Youth Diversion (CCYD) program in Victoria - www.justice.vic.gov.au/justice-system/childrens-court-youth-diversion-service

Targets young people with limited or no criminal history who would otherwise be sentenced to an outcome not requiring supervision from youth justice.

Youth Crime Prevention Program - www.crimeprevention.vic.gov.au/grants-and-programs/youth-crime-prevention-program

Victorian Government program providing support for young people aged between 10-24 years who have had contact with or have demonstrated risk of being involved with the criminal justice system.

Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Program (YCPEIP) – Victoria Police - www.police.vic.gov.au/youth-crime-prevention-and-early-intervention-program

Aimed at reducing rates of offending and re-offending for children and young people who commit low-level, less serious crimes, helping to minimize their contact with police and the courts.

Key Research

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- Commission for Children and Young People, *Our youth, our way: Inquiry into the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system, Summary and recommendations*, Commission for Children and Young People, Melbourne, 2021. https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/inquiries/systemic-inquiries/our-youth-our-way/

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- Sentencing Advisory Council (2025). Sentencing Younger Children's Offending in Victoria. Sentencing Advisory Council, Victoria. https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-06/sentencing_younger_childrens_offending_in_victoria_0.pdf

- United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2026). Australia; Indigenous children face systematic racial discrimination on criminal justice system, UN Committee warns. United Nations.

- YSAS (2024). YSAS Submission: Inquiry into Australia's youth justice and incarceration system. Submission 95. https://ysas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Sub95-YSAS_Inquiry-into-Australias-Youth-Justice-and-Incarceration-System.pdf