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Link between residential care and youth justice highlight systemic failures: Jesuit Social Services

A new report by the Sentencing Advisory Council, which shows that one in five of children sentenced to a custodial order across 2016 and 2017 had experienced residential care, highlights that many of Victoria's most vulnerable children have been failed by the very systems meant to protect them, says Jesuit Social Services.

"The sad trajectory of many young people from the child protection system to the youth justice system is well documented. In our 2013 report *Thinking Outside*, we found that in 2010, all children remanded in Victoria were known to child protection. Today's report shows these pathways are still present," says Jesuit Social Services Acting CEO Sally Parnell.

The report shows that 40 per cent of children sentenced or diverted in the Children's Court in 2016 and 2017 had been the subject of at least one child protection services report. Half of the 165 children sentenced to a custodial order had been subject to at least one child protection report.

"Children who end up in the child protection system have been failed by the broader community and denied the opportunity to flourish like other children their age. The children and young people who are placed in residential care often have the highest and most complex needs, and most challenging behaviours, and have experienced neglect and trauma," says Ms Parnell.

"A contributing factor in some of these highly vulnerable children having contact with the youth justice system is being placed in an environment that often exacerbates their underlying problems."

Despite ongoing and prolonged work by successive Victorian Governments in focusing on and investing in residential care services, Ms Parnell says there clearly remains an ongoing problem with overrepresentation in the youth justice system of children and young people involved with the child protection and out-of-home care system – especially those who have experienced residential care.

"We would like to see greater transparency around what residential care models are working, and whether they could or do lead to better long-term outcomes for vulnerable children," she says.

Jesuit Social Services' youth justice program participant Charles entered residential care at age 15, and later had contact with the youth justice system.

"I had a pretty bad home life and my parents asked me to move out because I was a bad influence on my little brother. I got locked up because I was getting drunk and doing property damage and shoplifting while I was drunk. I think prisons are like a breeding ground because kids will pick up stuff from other kids or meet up when they get out," he says.

"If one kid gets drunk all the time and offends, that kid should be put in a detox instead of locking them up, because they'll just get locked up, come out and reoffend again. It will become a cycle."

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