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New youth justice spending data highlights effectiveness of restorative justice programs: Jesuit Social Services

The Productivity Commission’s annual Report on Government Services, released today, highlights that Government spending on youth detention has increased exponentially in recent years. With community-based restorative programs such as Group Conferencing resulting in better outcomes for young people and the wider community, it is clear that detention should only ever be used as a last resort, says Jesuit Social Services.

“This report shows us that while the average number of young people in detention across Australia has remained relatively steady – and actually decreased over the five-year period from 2016-17 to 2021-22 - the cost of incarcerating children and young people in Australia continues to rise,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“In Victoria, the average cost per day of keeping a young person in detention has more than doubled over the past five years to its highest level of just over \$5,000 per day. That’s more than \$5,000 a day to lock up a young person when all of the evidence shows that detention is not conducive to rehabilitation, and that young people actually exit the system worse off than when they entered it.”

Jesuit Social Services delivers Youth Justice Group Conferencing in Victoria and parts of the Northern Territory. This restorative justice program brings together a young person with those impacted by their actions, including victims, family members and police, to allow the young person to take responsibility, make amends and be supported onto positive pathways.”

A recent evaluation of the Victorian program by researchers from Swinburne University found that Group Conferencing was associated with a substantive reduction (between 24 to 40 per cent) in the likelihood of recidivism compared to traditional justice approaches.

“Today’s report shows us that the average total cost of a completed Group Conference in Victoria is just over \$20,000 – the same cost of locking up a young person for four days. Not only is a model like this far more cost effective than detention, but it leads to less crime and fewer victims,” says Ms Edwards.

Ms Edwards says that overall, the Report on Government Services and a recent report by the Victorian Crime Statistics Agency point to some positive trends in Victoria.

“The Crime Statistics Agency recently reported that overall offending by people aged 10 to 24 years is at its lowest level in five years, and the Report on Government Services shows us that Victoria currently has the lowest rate of young people in detention and community-based supervision anywhere in the country.

“This is positive news that more young people are remaining connected with education and family in the community, instead of being exposed to a harmful detention system that makes it more difficult for them to lead safe, productive lives and reach their potential. These positive trends will ultimately support stronger and more cohesive communities for all.”

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