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Closing the Gap report highlights need for national leadership on children and young people

The Productivity Commission’s annual Closing the Gap report finds that just four of 19 targets are on track to be met, and that outcomes are worsening across a range of indicators for Aboriginal children and young people, demonstrating the need for Federal leadership to ensure vulnerable individuals, families and communities are supported to thrive, says Jesuit Social Services.

“It is disappointing to note that outcomes are worsening in areas such as childhood development and children in out-of-home care, and that there has been no progress towards the target to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in detention by at least 30 per cent by 2031,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“The Closing the Gap report is released at a time when Governments, including Victoria, the Northern Territory and Queensland are actively pursuing punitive policies instead of addressing the drivers of crime. They know these will lead to an increase in the number of people – and young and First Nations people in particular – being incarcerated. This is condemning more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to the irreversible harms of the justice system when we know they would be far better off supported to connect with education, family and culture in the community.

“We know that children who have contact with detention are more likely to commit further crimes. We must be doing more to intervene earlier to prevent crime from occurring, supporting children from engaging in anti-social behaviour, investing in evidence-based diversion programs that keep children accountable for their actions while supporting them towards more positive pathways and ensuring detention is only ever used as a last resort,” says Ms Edwards.

The report also finds that adult imprisonment rates have increased across most jurisdictions since 2019, with Victoria the only jurisdiction to have shown progress in that time.

Ms Edwards says the report – which finds the only targets on track to be met by 2031 are preschool enrolments, employment, and land mass and sea waters subject to legal rights and interests – shows that the Federal Government must act.

“Prior to this year’s Federal Election, we joined calls for the Federal Government to establish a Cabinet Minister for Children with responsibility for the human rights and wellbeing of children in Australia, and to commit to national leadership on youth justice at a time when punitive approaches adopted by states and territories undermines Closing the Gap and human rights priorities. It is well understood that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately and uniquely impacted by intersecting injustices and systemic failures. The ongoing failures of these systems cannot be ignored by the Commonwealth – national leadership is now critical.”

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