

Youth problems rise in WA, fall elsewhere

Aboriginal children and young people comprise 5-6% of the youth population of WA, but make up 75-80% of youths in detention.

While the numbers of young people in detention are rising in WA because more Aboriginal children are being locked up, the numbers are falling around Australia.

Between 2008 and 2012, young people in detention in WA rose from 157 to 168 on average, compared to significant falls in NSW (351 to 266) and Victoria (76 to 63).

WA to June 2012 had 0.69 young people per 1000 in detention, virtually double the Australian average of 0.35. Victoria had just 0.12 by comparison.

As Civil Liberties Australia says about adult detention, this is crazy political economics. While adult prisoners cost on average about \$100 a day, youth prisoners cost the WA government \$624 a day, according the WA Department of Corrective Services 2011-12 annual report (the figure is similar in NSW).

It beggars belief why governments continue to promote futile, punitive policies (the election-driven 'law-n'order' campaigns) which only result in their people paying more in tax, CLA says.



Perhaps WA's Children's Commission Michelle Scott thinks the same way: for whatever reason, she believes the above figures need urgent government response. Ms Scott this month called for a rapid increase in services and programs, including mental health, employment, drug and alcohol, and education, to address the problems and causes of young people's offending behaviour.

There should be a strong focus on diversion and improved collaboration between agencies in WA, she said in issues paper on 'Youth Justice' released in May 2013.

Heading in the wrong direction: Commissioner

"We are heading in the wrong direction because we have not made sufficient investment in the programs that are successful in keeping young people out of detention and protecting the community," Ms Scott said. "Justice issues are inextricably linked to social disadvantage and mental illness and are influenced by factors including dysfunction at home, alcohol and drugs, violence, poverty and disengagement from the school system and community.

"As a community we must do all we can to provide these children and young people with the opportunity to get their young lives back on track."

"We have successful programs in WA, such as the Regional Youth Justice Services, Outcare and Halo, they are just not sufficiently supported and available across the State. We also need to learn from the successes in other states such as NSW and Victoria.

Other changes she wants include:

- establishing community-based safe houses where at-risk children can seek refuge;
- funding culturally-appropriate programs to tackle the significant over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in contact with the justice system;
- ensuring a statewide 24-hour bail service for young people;

- rapidly expanding the forensic mental health service being trialled at the Children's Court; and
- investing significantly more money in education, training, mental health and drug and alcohol programs for young people in detention, to reduce recidivism.

The Youth Justice paper is available at: www.ccyp.wa.gov.au > Publications > Issues papers.

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