

**MEDIA STATEMENT – Thursday 12 March, 2020**

## **“10-year olds don’t belong in prison” — WA Youth peak calls for raised age of criminal responsibility**



In Australia, children as young as ten can be charged with criminal activity and locked up in detention.

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA), Western Australia’s peak body for young people and the youth sector, has joined with youth peak bodies across Australia to call for major reform to end this outdated practice.

Responding to a call from the Council of Attorneys-General investigating the minimum age of criminal responsibility across Australia’s states and territories, last week YACWA called for an increase to the legal age of criminal responsibility from 10 years old to 14 years old.

A number of community organisations submitted to this review calling for an increase, including Social Reinvestment WA (SRWA), a coalition of not-for-profits campaigning for justice reform.

“No child belongs in prison. Our legal system is no place for a child,” Ross Wortham, YACWA CEO said.

“Young people who offend often do so as a result of neglect and trauma.

“When young people are breaking the law, our first question should be what’s going on behind the scenes or at home to make them behave this way, and not what punishment they should receive.

“Criminalising them only compounds that trauma, making them more likely to reoffend in future, rather than providing them the support they need to lead healthy and safe lives.

“The evidence is clear — research shows neurodevelopment is not fixed. The ability to understand criminal responsibility is different for every young person and cannot be assigned to a specific age.

“It is unconscionable that we would criminalise a young person who does not have the capacity to know what they did was wrong. ”YACWA advocates for an increase to early intervention and diversion programs for young people, with sentencing and detention for young people a matter of last resort.

YACWA also advocates for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to be delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations wherever possible.

“Evidence-based youth work practice saves lives. We need youth workers in every system young people have contact with,” said Ross Wortham.

“Aboriginal young people deserve services that are culturally appropriate, that are trauma-informed, and are based in communities to support young people to form meaningful connections.”

YACWA continuing to have ongoing conversations with young people on their experiences of the youth justice system in partnership with SRWA.

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Ross Wortham, YACWA CEO is available for further comment.

**About the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia**

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak body for young people aged 12 to 25 and the youth sector in Western Australia. YACWA operates primarily as a human rights organisation, and seeks to address the exclusion of young people in a rapidly changing society.

Our vision for Western Australia is one that celebrates and engages young people in all aspects of the community. Our role is to strengthen the trust, cooperation, collaboration, professionalism, and voice of the non-government youth service sector to better serve the young people of Western Australia.