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Justice Legislation Bill will further entrench young people in the justice system: Jesuit Social Services

The passing of the Victorian Government's *Justice Legislation (Police and Other Matters) Bill 2018* will further entrench vulnerable young people in the prison system, says Jesuit Social Services.

The Bill, which passed the Legislative Council yesterday, creates new offences and higher penalties for people who seek to harm or intimidate police officers, protective services officers, police custody officers and youth justice custodial officers.

"We all agree that everybody has the right to be safe at work, and of course this includes people who work to keep the community safe, such as youth justice officers. However, we cannot legislate our way out of the issues currently plaguing our youth justice system," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

"These laws will have a detrimental impact on marginalised young people, and will mean more people will find themselves caught up in the revolving door of the prison system. We need to build an effective justice system that supports people to address the underlying problems behind their offending and do all we can to get their lives back on track.

Ms Edwards says that recent tensions in Victoria's youth detention system can be attributed to a number of factors, including facilities that are not fit-for-purpose and a workforce that requires the skills, experience and attributes to adequately care for vulnerable children and young people.

"This is really challenging work with young people who often face a complex range of challenges – for example, 70 per cent of young people involved in the Victorian youth justice system have experienced trauma, abuse or neglect which can be a key factor in their offending behaviour."

"Instead of more punitive legislation, we must develop effective responses to the issues occurring in Victoria's youth justice system. This can be achieved by raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years and developing diversion and early intervention programs that re-engage children with education and employment."

Ms Edwards says Victoria must also look at best practice abroad to improve its youth justice system.

"In 2017, leaders from Jesuit Social Services visited parts of Europe and the US to explore effective youth justice systems. We found that they shared an emphasis on recruiting and retaining staff members who are experienced, well-supported and skilled in trauma-informed practice.

"In Norway, corrections staff members have a minimum of two years of paid training and applicants are screened for positive and humane attitudes towards working with vulnerable young people. This means better results for everyone – including safer working environments for staff and a system that prepares young people to make a positive contribution on returning to the community. This provides a blueprint for Victoria to work towards."

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