

Tuesday 11 May, 2021

Children's commissioners and guardians unite in opposing NT legislation

All fourteen Australian and New Zealand Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ANZCCG) have united in opposing new legislation introduced by the Northern Territory Government, which proposes to alter the NT's Youth Justice Act and Bail Act.

The commissioners and guardians wrote to NT Chief Minister Michael Gunner at the end of March expressing their concerns about the legislation and asking him to reconsider his approach. They have not received a reply.

Their letter said the proposed changes are "regressive" and "signal a shift away from evidence-based policy approaches and directly unwind the implementation of key recommendations from the 2017 Royal Commission".

National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds said, "All the evidence tells us the best way to prevent youth offending is to divert young people away from the justice system and into alternative programs that offer the support they need.

"Children who come to the attention of our justice systems are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our communities, often with backgrounds of abuse or neglect. This legislation may well have the effect of trapping young people within the justice system where they might otherwise have had an opportunity to find a better path."

NT Children's Commissioner Ms Sievers said, "Resorting to this regressive and expensive policy direction has the potential to doom future generations of Territory children to a life within the justice system."

If passed, the legislation would make it easier for police to use electronic monitoring, restrict access for young people to diversionary programs, and result in far more children being held in detention on remand.

The Northern Territory already has the highest rates of child detention anywhere in Australia.

The ANZCCG stands with Indigenous leaders, legal experts and peak bodies including Larrakia elders, the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, NT Criminal Lawyers Association, Australian Lawyers Alliance, NT Council of Social Services, Central Australian Youth Justice and Jesuit Social Services in opposing the legislation.

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