



North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency



New youth justice and child protection coalition backs law changes to youth justice

With new laws proposed to overhaul key aspects of the Northern Territory's youth justice system a new coalition has formed to push for more effective approaches to reduce youth crime and get better outcomes for young Territorians. In announcing its formation and as first order of business the Northern Territory Youth Justice, Child Protection Coalition welcomed the introduction of the *Youth Justice and Related Legislation Amendment Bill 2019* to the NT Parliament.

The coalition voiced support for the Bill as being evidenced based and likely to lead to better responses to break the cycle of offending by young people and in turn enhance community safety.

Priscilla Atkins, CEO of NAAJA and spokesperson for the Coalition, said "these changes are what is needed to increase access to programs like diversion that will help children to learn from their mistakes and get them on a positive path. Changes to bail laws will increase the chances of supporting children to stay out of trouble and with their families and in their communities."

Too many children caught up in the quicksand of the criminal justice system are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Many are victims and survivors of trauma, neglect and abuse and have higher rates of mental health conditions and disability. The failure to identify health needs and understand the link between challenging behaviours and the traumatic impact of abuse and neglect can lead to children offending. The link between poor early childhood experiences and later offending is clear.

- This is why a study of youth in the Banksia Hill Detention Centre in WA revealed that 9 out of 10 young people were suffering from a severe disability in brain function and 39% were diagnosed with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
- This is why children on care and protection orders are 27 times more likely to also be under youth justice supervision.
- This is why almost half of the young people in detention have also been involved in the child protection system this year.

This is why our approach to Youth Justice needs to change and why this Bill is a step in the right direction. The right responses are those built on the emerging evidence of brain development and are far more effective at supporting children to learn from their experiences, become better citizens and reduce further offending.

The organisations underpinning the Coalition have observed that young people entering Bail and Diversion programs do far better than the young people entering detention. Early data has also confirmed this with a rapid uptick in young people completing and complying with bail and community orders in the last year. While this is so, it will take time for these programs to be evaluated and for the services to be refined.

Priscilla Atkins said “there are no quick fixes. But we need to stay the course, implementing the Royal Commission’s recommendations, with bold reforms and investment to correct the failures of the past and take us in the right direction. Whilst there is still much work to be done, this Bill is a step in the right direction.”