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MEDIA RELEASE

COSS Directors call for national action to raise the age of criminal responsibility

Today the [Australian Council of Social Service](#) (ACOSS), the [ACT Council of Social Service](#) (ACTCOSS), [New South Wales Council of Social Service](#) (NCOSS), [Northern Territory Council of Social Service](#) (NTCOSS), [Queensland Council of Social Service](#) (QCOSS), [South Australian Council of Social Service](#) (SACOSS), [Tasmanian Council of Social Service](#) (TasCOSS), [Victorian Council of Social Service](#) (VCOSS), [Western Australia Council of Social Service](#) (WACOSS) jointly called on Commonwealth, state and territory governments to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years of age.

The COSS network met with ACT Attorney-General, Shane Rattenbury MLA to commend the ACT Government for committing to raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 in the current Parliamentary and Governing Agreement. In all other states and territories, the age of criminal responsibility is 10, well below the global median of 14 and in contravention of international human rights obligations.

Medical and scientific consensus is that young children do not have the developmental capacity to be held criminally responsible, and that detention increases their odds of reoffending.

Louise Giolitto, WACOSS CEO said: "We already have alternatives to criminalising children that work. Justice and Social Reinvestment solutions that help young people respond to the underlying causes of offending, rather than causing more harm. Initiatives like Olabud Doogethu in the East Kimberley, and the Youth partnership Project in Armadale. If government, community services, and local communities come together, we can create solutions that reduce crime, and allow our young people to thrive."

The national call comes on the back of the official launch of the WA campaign Raise the Age last night, coordinated by Social Reinvestment WA.

Joanna Quilty, NCOSS CEO said: "All the evidence tells us that prison is no place for children. Not only is the brain of a 10-13 year old not yet fully developed to be held criminally responsible, we know that imprisoning kids only makes them far more likely to become repeat adult offenders."

Aboriginal and/Torres Strait Islander children are grossly overrepresented in the justice system. Based on rates of detention per capita, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children are locked up at 18 times the rate of non-Indigenous children.

Dr Cassandra Goldie, ACOSS CEO said: "If the Federal Government is truly committed to Closing the Gap, it needs to show leadership on this crucial issue which is causing immense harm to the health, wellbeing and future of children."

If diverted from the youth justice system, the needs of children under 14 can be addressed by appropriate services in youth homelessness, child protection, and mental health. Providing early and alternative supports to children and their families is likely to have better outcomes for the individual, their family and the wider community than engagement with the criminal justice system.

Emma King, VCOSS CEO said: "Kids belong in school and with their families and communities, not in prison cells. There is not a single shred of credible research that says putting children in jail helps them develop or reduces crime. This barbaric and damaging practice must end."

There is significant consensus amongst the COSS Directors and their member organisations that the age of criminal responsibility must be raised. This is matched by public sentiment, with research undertaken by the Law Council of Australia and the Australian Medical Association showing that 51% of Australians supported raising the age of criminal responsibility.

Ross Womersley, SACOSS CEO said: "Criminalising any child should have no place in our society. We know that detaining children causes them immeasurable life-long harm. Raising the age of criminal responsibility is not hard, and it's not complicated. It's just clearly the right thing to do. It's hard to understand why we haven't done it already – right across the nation. So let's just get on with it."

Deborah Di Natale, NTCOSS CEO said: "NTCOSS has, alongside many Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations, and medical and legal experts, long called for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised to 14. The NT Government committed to raise the age, and it is time that they delivered, for the benefit of the whole community."

"We know prisons are failing the adult population, so they are certainly no place for children," said TasCOSS CEO Ms Adrienne Picone.

"Instead of locking children up we should be taking seriously our shared responsibility for their wellbeing and invest in programs and services that support them and their families before things start to go wrong. There is plenty of evidence for what works, we simply need to make that choice to invest in our children's futures."

Dr Emma Campbell, ACTCOSS CEO said: "ACTCOSS is proud to be based in the only jurisdiction in Australia that has recognised that children simply do not belong in prison. We applaud the work done by the ACT Government and Attorney-General Shane Rattenbury to progress this critical issue, and call on other jurisdictions to follow suit and take decisive, positive action."

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Media contacts:

WACOSS - Laurene Coller, Communications Officer, laurene@wacoss.org.au, 0419 316 557.