

North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency

Media Statement

14 August 2024

Stop the politics around youth offending and invest in programs that divert and tackle causes of crime

The North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) has called for the next NT Government to prioritise improved access to diversion programs— aiming for a target of at least 80 per cent of youth matters diverted – as part of a broad appeal for smarter policies to reduce the Territory’s overreliance on prisons.

NAAJA today released its pre-election policy recommendations, which include raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years and reversing previous bail reforms that have contributed to an explosion in the prisoner population.

It also called for decisive action to curb the rising number of children in the child protection system, which is a known precursor for later contact with the criminal justice system.

NAAJA Principal Legal Officer Jared Sharp urged policymakers to adopt smarter policy measures to address reoffending, community safety, and improve the justice system.

“The Northern Territory has a justice problem,” said Mr Sharp.

“The upcoming election presents a landmark opportunity to press the reset button on how we, as a society, support individuals out of a cycle of offending and make our communities safer.

“This cannot be achieved by simply funding more police and more prisons.

“Without increased investment in tackling disadvantage, poor housing, and health issues that impact our communities, Aboriginal people will bear the brunt of law-and-order policies that overlook the root causes of offending.”

NAAJA’s recommendations come in the wake of the latest Closing the Gap report, which revealed that 2031 targets around reducing the prisoner population for both adults and children were unlikely to be met.

Between 2018 and 2023, prisoner numbers in the Territory soared 22 per cent.

NAAJA has called for greater investment in alternatives to prison, such as the introduction of an adult diversion program and more community work opportunities that provide offenders with pathways to training and employment.

Mr Sharp said there was a public perception that youth crime had been on the rise when youth justice court lodgements Territory-wide have fallen for three years running.

“NT locks up four times as many children as anywhere else in Australia,” he said.

“At the same time, our child protection system is failing Aboriginal children, with child protection lodgements jumping 50 per cent in the last 12 months and just one quarter of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care are placed in a kinship placement.

“We must keep politics away from children.

“The smarter way forward is to provide more support for young people by investing in services and programs that work, such as youth-specific drug and alcohol programs and trauma-informed residential rehabilitation programs as well as more diversion options facilitated by Aboriginal organisations.

“We must also ensure that vulnerable children have access to high-quality, suitably trained, culturally competent, and impartial legal representation in child protection matters.

“We must also prioritise the role of Aboriginal kinship carers in the child protection system to keep more Aboriginal children with family, aiming for a target of 75 per cent of children to be placed with kinship carers.”

Media contact: Rebecca 0411 790 304