



1200 new prison beds quietly funded as government stalls on guaranteed diversion of children from the justice system

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As State Government expenditure on 1200 additional prison beds has come to light, advocacy group Smart Justice For Young People is anxiously awaiting the introduction of a legislated scheme to divert children and young people away from a justice system in which they can become entrenched and progress to adult offending.

“Diversion recognises the seriousness of offending, but offers an alternative that tackles the underlying causes of criminal behaviour, has been proven to reduce re-offending, and assist young people to engage positively with the community. Diversion reduces crime, reduces reoffending, and is far more cost-effective than building new prisons that result in higher rates of re-offending and undermine community safety,” said Tiffany Overall, spokesperson for Smart Justice For Young People, today”

“The announcement of the new prison beds comes as a diversion briefing for parliamentarians held yesterday at Parliament House attempted to garner support from members across party lines and prompt Government’s long-overdue response to their diversion discussion paper released last year.

It is understood that a whole-of-government response is being developed, but as yet no indication has been given as to if and when this will be announced.”

“A child’s or young person’s level of contact with the criminal justice system increases their risk of offending. By diverting them away from crime, prosecution and custody, and linking them to appropriate support programs, they will become responsible and productive citizens”.

“Diversion is not an easy option, but it’s a sensible option. It involves the young person facing up to and working on personal issues negatively impacting on the young person’s life, such as drug and alcohol issues, family breakdown, mental health issues, or being kicked out of school”.

“While adults are guaranteed diversion, children and young people are not. In the youth justice system there is a paucity of diversion options available, and young offenders living in certain remote, rural and regional areas generally can’t access court-based diversion options at all”.

“The introduction of a state-wide legislated diversion scheme in the Children’s Court similar to the adult system is needed urgently,” Ms Overall said.

Community-based diversion options are more effective in reducing re-offending than the traditional justice system. Current diversion programs result in over 75 per cent of young offenders not re-offending compared to well under half of those released from detention. Conversely, imprisonment

results in higher re-offending rates, does nothing to address the underlying causes of crime, inflicts long-term damage on the person imprisoned, and is extremely expensive.

Very significant savings accrue from preventing young people from having prolonged contact with the justice system, particularly corrections.

Investment in diversion programs significantly reduces the costs of managing young people in the justice and corrections systems. For example community-based programs and orders cost one tenth or less of the cost of detaining a young person.

“Given the pressing issue of prison overcrowding, the Victorian Government should be doing more to support diversion. Diversion can help reduce the need for new prison capacity, and new prisons only contain the consequences of crime, while diversion can help to stop it happening in the first place,” Ms Overall concluded.

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