



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc. *good works*

LET'S BUILD A FAIRER AUSTRALIA! AUSTRALIA'S FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

Who we are

St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic charity with over 45,000 members and volunteers and 3,000 employees operating in Australia. Founded in poverty and plague-stricken Paris in the 19th century, we have been in Australia for almost 170 years. Our people are locals who help all people in need in their communities. We are a registered charity, overseen by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

Our work is informed by the teachings of our founder, Frederic Ozanam. Our Mission and Values draw on Catholic Social Teaching principles and we follow the Society's Rule which sets our international charter.

We strive for a fairer Australia for all.

What we do

Through generous donations, sales through our national retail network ('Vinnies shops'), and some government funding, the Society distributes over \$50 million each year in emergency relief. This is done by our dedicated members and through our conferences and centres located in communities. Additionally, we provide short term, emergency and longer-term community housing options, meals, clothing, and support services.

While providing material support to people, we also lend an ear and connect people with other networks and services, depending on their needs. Our aim is to empower people to help them achieve their full potential.

We aspire to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

The Society's National Council approves our policy positions. Our advocacy is informed by the experiences of those we assist and by our members, through the National Council's Social Justice Advisory Committee and the Vincentian Refugee Network.

We advocate for policies and funding that improve people's lives. We do so in a way that aligns with our charitable purpose and is politically non-partisan.

A Voice for the Voiceless

We believe in human dignity, the common good and in our responsibility for each other. We strive for social conditions that ensure everyone can realise their full potential.

Our belief in solidarity helps us to see the 'other' as our neighbour, a helper, a sharer on a par with ourselves.

We believe in subsidiarity, or respect for personal dignity, and the importance of those most affected by a decision or policy having input to it.

We respect Australia's international human rights commitments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Australia's support for the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons.

Our policy positions are qualified by the experiences of those we assist and our members, and by Australia's extensive evidence-base in social policy and various research projects commissioned by the Society.



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Our work with others

The Society engages with other church-based charities and not-for-profit organisations in the delivery of assistance to people in need and our policy positions generally align with them. These organisations include Catholic Social Services Australia, National Shelter Australia, the ACTU, Everybody's Home, ACOSS, Refugee Council of Australia, Jesuit Refugee Services and the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum.

Why it's important

Australia is a wealthy country but has a shortage of affordable housing, growing inequality, increasingly insecure work and wages that have not kept up with inflation. Households that rely on income support are struggling to survive. One-in-six children are living in poverty, and great disadvantage persists in a number of mainly regional and remote communities.

Now, more than ever, government policy and fiscal management need to be robust, evidence based and directed to areas of greatest need.

Our 2022 Federal Election Statement, *A Fairer Australia*, has been updated to cover social justice priorities related to (1) Australia's First Nations Peoples, (2) People Seeking Asylum, (3) Secure Work, (4) Combatting Homelessness and Increasing Affordable Housing, (5) Income Support, Poverty and Debt, and (6) A Fairer Tax and Welfare System. The updated booklet, *Let's Build a Fairer Australia!* is available on our website.

This overview summarises our advocacy position with respect to Australia's First Nations peoples.

More information is also available on our website, as well as a *Report Card* that tracks the Australian Government's progress against our social justice priorities.

Our service to others, and advocacy on their behalf, is inspired by the words of St Vincent de Paul:

Deal with the most urgent needs... Teach reading and writing, educate with the aim of giving each the means of self-support. Intervene with authorities to reform structures... there is no charity without justice.

St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia; recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and community; and pays its respect to elders past, present and emerging.

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AUSTRALIA'S FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

JANUARY 2024



Summary

The Society stands in respectful solidarity with Australia's First Nations peoples.

We honour First Nations peoples' cultures, lands, waters, histories and rights to live in a society free of economic, social and cultural oppression.

Our members, volunteers, and staff acknowledge and adhere to these values in all aspects of their work.

We celebrate the deep, abiding pride that Australia's First Nations peoples have in their diverse cultures, and we greatly value the contributions they make to Australian society.

We recognise and admit past and continuing injustices as the first step towards reconciliation.

We support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Improved outcomes will only be achieved when First Nations peoples are able to 'live in dignity, to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their self-determined development, in keeping with their own needs and aspirations'.

We are committed to providing employment and procurement opportunities for First Nations peoples and strive to ensure our workforce and supply chains reflect the diversity of the communities we serve.

The Society calls for:

- funding of, and commitment to, Closing the Gap targets by all Australian governments
- the age of criminal responsibility to be raised from 10 to at least 14 years of age, and
- increased community-led programs and services that support justice reinvestment and keep children safe.

Uluru Statement from the Heart and constitutional recognition

The Society first supported constitutional recognition of Australia's First Nations Peoples back in 2012, in response to the Constitutional Recognition Bill and then again in 2014, in a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition. In 2022, the Society's position was restated in our Federal Election Statement, [A Fairer Australia](#) and updated in our [2023 statement on Australia's First Nations peoples](#), which was launched during Reconciliation Week. Recently, we prepared a [submission](#) in support of the 2023 Constitution Amendment Bill.

Our position supporting constitutional recognition was also held by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council and church-based charities including Anglicare Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia, The Salvation Army, and Uniting Care Australia.

The Society continues to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full and work with First Nations peoples towards recognition, reconciliation and justice.

The Society's position is informed by and aligns with Catholic Social Teaching principles.

The Society notes similar endorsement of the Uluru Statement from the Heart by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Fifth Catholic Church Plenary Council of Australia's First Decree, *Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts*.

The Society respects the outcome of the 2023 referendum and remains committed to advocating for improvements to the co-development and co-design of policy and funding of services and programs. We are all too aware of the few significant improvements made to the wellbeing of our First Nations peoples, despite changes of governments and policies. Change can only be achieved by empowering First Nations communities, groups and individuals to contribute to the important policy making decisions that impact on their lives.

Closing the Gap

The Society welcomes the Australian Government's National Agreement on Closing the Gap and its commitment to work alongside the Coalition of Peaks and state ministers to meet the 19 targets.

We support the *Change the Record* campaign, the only Aboriginal-led justice coalition of experts aimed at ending the incarceration of, and family violence against, First Nations peoples.

The Society supports:

- capacity-building sector plans for disability, housing, community and early childhood care developed by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap and calls for additional funding to support their implementation
- additional funding of \$1.9BN over 5 years (2023 Budget), \$424M to support the second Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (February 2023), and \$1.2 BN announced in October 2022, and
- Aboriginal led initiatives and continued review and investment by all governments.

Ongoing investment and review are needed to ensure progress is being made. The annual Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap data report (July 2023) shows that progress towards the 15 targets that can be assessed (out of 19) has been limited, with only four on track to be met. However, outcomes are improving for most targets and seven of the targets that are not on track are nevertheless improving.

Most concerningly, outcomes are deteriorating in rates of adult imprisonment, children in out-of-home care, suicide and children's early development at the start of school.

Some states and territories are contributing more towards the progress of national target outcomes than others. However, it is not possible to assess the adequacy of contributions as there are no formal 'targets' to assess state and territory progress against. Worsening progress in eight target areas is of concern and evident in the Northern Territory, while Victoria's and South Australia's outcomes for children in out of home care were below the national average.

The Standing Council of Attorneys-General has noted that reduction of the rate of First Nations adults in incarceration by at least 15 per cent by 2031 is not on track, and that significant and transformational criminal justice reform will be

required by all Australian governments to turn the tide on First Nations adult incarceration. And that while a reduction in the rate of First Nations young people in detention by at least 30 per cent by 2031 is on track, more can be done to ensure this target is achieved (September 2023).

The continued monitoring of progress against outcomes is vital and demonstrates that more must be done.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's annual *Close the Gap Report* chronicles the success of culturally safe and place-based, Aboriginal-led initiatives and calls for urgent investment in community-led solutions. As noted by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, "Just letting us sit at the table is not enough to drive the change we need. Listen to our solutions to improve the lives of our children and families. And work with us to make the change a reality." The Society supports this call wholeheartedly.

Age of Criminal Responsibility

All children should be safe and have access to resources and networks that help them make good life choices. The entry of children into the youth justice system disproportionately impacts First Nations children, with too many being locked away in juvenile detention facilities and even adult prisons.

The Society supports the Justice Reform Initiative and believes that 'punishing away' the issue by increasing penalties and building more detention facilities are not the solution. Evidence shows children remain in cycles of disadvantage and imprisonment due to a lack of early critical support services including health, disability, rehabilitation and family supports. Holding children in prison also begins a cycle of criminalisation - the younger the child is when first having contact with the justice system, the more likely they are to go on to reoffend.

The United Nations Committee Against Torture is seriously concerned about Australia's extremely low age of criminal responsibility, the practice of keeping children in solitary confinement and the use of physical restraints to discipline children.

The Society supports:

- the Law Council of Australia's call for all governments to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years, and
- ongoing funding of community-led solutions and early support services that help children to learn from their mistakes, grow and thrive.

The Society welcomes the re-convening of the Age of Criminal Responsibility Working Group, reporting to the Standing Council of Attorneys-General. While we are heartened by progress made in the ACT, Northern Territory and Victoria, progress elsewhere is slow, and messages are mixed. Tasmania is committed to raising the age but is exploring how reforms can be prioritised. Queensland also supports a national approach (but to 12 years) and seeks a framework to manage harmful behaviours.

The Society calls for continued funding of culturally led early-intervention and support services, including the Justice Policy Partnership's development of community-based pathways away from the criminal justice system for children under 14 years.

In September 2023, the Standing Council of Attorneys-General received a final report from the Age of Criminal Responsibility Working Group on the services and supports needed to support children diverted from the criminal justice system. In December 2023, the Standing Council agreed to release the report and share future updates on minimum age of criminal responsibility reform in their jurisdictions. The Society supports further commitment to progress this important work.

Justice Reinvestment

The Society welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to justice reinvestment and strengthening access to justice, with responsibility shared between all governments.

The Society supports:

- the establishment of an independent National Indigenous Justice Reinvestment Unit to monitor justice reinvestment outcomes, and
- ongoing funding of community-led justice reinvestment initiatives.

We welcome the Australian Government's \$69 million commitment over four years to establish a National Justice Reinvestment Program to support up to 30 communities to establish locally tailored justice reinvestment initiatives. We fully support the ongoing commitment of \$20 million per year, from 2026-27. We expect that these community-led services will generate positive outcomes and therefore call for a review and extension of funding to other communities over time. We also are heartened to hear of progress made including the opening of the National Justice Reinvestment Program and the Justice Reinvestment in Central Australia Program.

While the 2023 Budget included additional funding of \$21 million for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, the Society supports the view that this does little more than keep the lights on, and that an increase of around \$250 million in core funding is needed to stop ongoing service freezes in multiple communities around Australia. Demand for legal assistance has increased 100 per cent since 2018 but core funding from the Commonwealth has declined in real terms (Karly Warner, Chair of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services).

Keeping Children Safe

The Society supports the first Action Plan under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's children (2021-31)*, developed by First Nations young people, families and organisations. Commonwealth funding of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations through the Closing the Gap Evidence and Outcomes Fund to reduce the rates of children in out of home care is also supported.

We welcome all governments delegating powers of child protection services to grassroots Indigenous organisations and supporting kinship connection. We hope that the transformed system, with its focus on prevention, will reduce the number of at-risk children going into child protection.

We call all governments to provide ongoing funding to support changes to child protection services and the provision of parenting programs, alcohol and drug rehabilitation and mental health support for families.