

LET'S BUILD A FAIRER AUSTRALIA!



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

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 had a presence in Australia for 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, Frédéric 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, one based on justice and compassion.

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. We also assist individuals and communities impacted by natural disasters.

While providing material support to people, we listen to 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 in life.

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 our actions are politically non-partisan.

A VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

We believe in human dignity, the common good and in our responsibility for each other. We advocate for improvements in social conditions that will enable everyone to 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. In accordance with the words of our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, we are mindful of 'seeing Christ in the poor'.

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. Subsidiarity is the principle of ensuring that the local environment and circumstances guide all initiatives taken (refer to Article 3.9 of *The Rule*).

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, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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.

LET'S BUILD A FAIRER AUSTRALIA!



OUR WORK WITH OTHERS

The Society engages with other church-based charities and not-for-profit organisations in our advocacy work and in the delivery of assistance to people in need, and our policy positions generally align with them. These organisations include ACOSS, Catholic Social Services Australia, Ending Child Poverty, Homelessness Australia, Jesuit Refugee Services, Jesuit Social Services, National Shelter Australia, Refugee Council of Australia, the Alliance for Gambling Reform, the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum and the Community Housing Industry Association.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia has endured a cost-of-living crisis, a housing crisis, high inflation and high interest rates. While wages have improved, they have grown less than in most OECD countries. Our experience shows that those hardest hit are households that rely on income support as their main source of income. Australia-wide, one-in-six children are living in poverty, and great disadvantage persists in several 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.

In 2022, we developed a Federal Election Statement, *A Fairer Australia* covering five social justice priorities and have maintained and updated all of our federal policy papers. These policy papers now cover seven social justice areas namely First Nations peoples, Income Support, Poverty and Debt, Housing and Homelessness, People Seeking

Asylum, Secure Work, Taxation and Welfare and Gambling Reform.

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.

However, for the 2025 Federal Election, the Society has focussed on four social justice priority areas in its statement, *Justice and Compassion*: (1) Supporting a Safety Net for all Australia, (2) Housing Security Across the Country, (3) Meeting the Needs of First Nations peoples, and (4) Rising to the Refugee Challenge.

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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LET'S BUILD A FAIRER AUSTRALIA! FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

DECEMBER 2024



Summary

The Society stands in respectful solidarity with First Nations peoples.

We honour First Nations peoples' cultures, lands, waters, histories and rights to live in an Australian 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 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.

Our history of advocacy

The Society has a long history of supporting constitutional recognition of First Nations peoples. In 2012 we supported the Constitutional Recognition Bill and 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 First Nations peoples*. We also supported the 2023 Constitution Amendment Bill.

Many of our partners including the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

and church-based charities such as Anglicare Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia, The Salvation Army, and Uniting Care Australia also supported constitutional recognition and the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full.

We are all too aware of the few significant improvements made to the wellbeing of First Nations peoples, despite changes in governments and policies.

Effective 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.

This is why we continue to advocate for improvements to the co-development and co-design of policy and funding of services and programs.

The Society calls for:

- Commonwealth leadership to progress the Uluru Statement from the Heart agenda
- funding of, and commitment to full implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, particularly bringing its Priority Reforms to life 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

The Society calls on Commonwealth leadership to progress the Uluru Statement from the Heart agenda. Reconciliation efforts, including supporting the work of Reconciliation Australia, remain vital, particularly after the failure of the 2023 Referendum. We believe that truth-telling is at the heart of creating a just and reconciled Australia.

Truth-telling enables a fuller and more accurate account of Australia's history by recognising the strength and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It acknowledges the historical silencing of injustices and ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations people (Reconciliation Australia, 2024).

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 change the way Australian governments work with First Nations by implementing its four Priority Reforms.

However, ongoing investment and review are needed to ensure progress is being made. The Society supports the Lowitja Institute's 2024 *Close The Gap Campaign Report* which affirms the Productivity Commission's 2024 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap report and recommends further investment in:

- Progressing Voice, Treaty and Truth
- Leadership and Governance
- Building our Economies, and
- Implementing the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The annual Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap data report (July 2024) shows that some progress has been made with five of the 19 targets now on track, compared to four last year. A further five targets show improvement but are not on track to be met, while progress towards four targets is worsening.

While the proportion of babies born at a healthy weight has improved, life expectancy remains unchanged, with Indigenous males and females expected to live 8.8 and 8.1 years respectively less than other Australians.

Most concerning, targets are not on track to reduce the rates of adult imprisonment, children in out of home care, suicide or children commencing school not being developmentally on track.

The 2024 Budget committed additional funding towards the establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Children and Young People (\$5.9 million), a suicide prevention strategy (\$12.8 million), a First Nations Prison to Employment Program (\$76.2 million), a new Remote Jobs and Economic Development program (\$707 million) and a National First Nations Education Policy and Teacher Strategy (\$74.8 million and \$2.4 million respectively).

The *Productivity Commission's review* found pockets of good practice, where outcomes were exceeded. Consistent themes to improved outcomes included governments enacting the Closing the Gap's Priority Reforms, a strengthened Aboriginal Community Controlled sector, shared decision making and shared data, and governments changing their operations. Equity of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is within reach if governments breathe life into the Priority Reforms (Commissioner Siegel-Brown, 2024).

The Standing Council of Attorneys-General has also noted that significant and transformational criminal justice reform will be required by all Australian governments to turn the tide on First Nations adult incarceration (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

The Society supports 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.

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
- the National Children's Commissioner's report, *Help Way Earlier*, which also recommends raising the age of criminal responsibility, as well as early support services and a Cabinet Minister for Children
- ongoing funding of community-led solutions and early support services that help children to learn from their mistakes, and to 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 changes made in the ACT and Tasmania, progress elsewhere is slow, and in some jurisdictions, the progress made has been rescinded.

Victoria's Cabinet had previously approved the decision to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years but recently rescinded this policy position,

and has raised the age to 12 years only, a decision criticised by youth justice advocates, especially Aboriginal legal services.

The newly elected Queensland Government has committed to strengthening youth justice laws by repealing detention as a last resort and enacting 'adult crime, adult time'.

The newly elected Northern Territory Government rescinded recent changes made in August 2023 to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years. As expressed by the National Children's Commissioner, this is extremely disappointing.

The Society has called 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.

A Justice Policy Partnership Working Group has been established to co-design a national strategic framework for justice reinvestment and an independent National Justice Reinvestment Unit will support the framework. We welcome the Australian Government's commitment of \$10.7 million in the 2024 Budget to support the Justice Policy Partnership, which will focus on reducing the rates of adult and youth incarceration. We note that the Justice Policy Partnership is finalising an Implementation Roadmap for 2024, and we look forward to its release.

The public release of the *Age of Criminal Responsibility Working Group Report (September 2023)* and commitment by Attorneys-General to progress this important work is welcome. Importantly, the Standing Council of Attorneys-General have noted that reforms to raising the age of criminal responsibility must be conceived as part of the broader continuum of approaches that seek to mitigate the drivers of justice system contact among children and their families, and that jurisdictions prioritise reforms in these approaches, alongside reforms to raising the age of criminal responsibility. Finally, the National Children's Commissioner has called for transformational change to Australia's

child justice system that puts child wellbeing first and addresses the root causes of offending by children. The Commissioner supports raising the age to 14 years but also a much-needed national approach to supporting those aged under 14 years to prevent later system contact and promote prosocial behaviour and connections.

We note that the Standing Council of Attorneys-General are considering the National Children's Commissioner's reports and have committed to:

- pursuing evidence-based and rights-based responses to youth justice issues to positively impact Closing the Gap Target 11
- exploring opportunities for jurisdictions to co-contribute financially and in kind to justice

reinvestment programs as initiatives commence and progress, and

- agreeing to discuss bail and remand at the next meeting.

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.

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 is welcome. The Society fully supports the ongoing commitment of \$20 million per year, from 2026-27. These community-led services will generate positive outcomes and we 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.

We welcome the new National Access to Justice Agreement which includes an increase of \$326 million or 64 per cent in funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and an increase to Family Violence Prevention Legal Services of \$193 million or 112 per cent from the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

The Society supports the recommendations made in the independent review of the previous National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement (Mundy, March 2024) and looks forward to further commitments by Government to implement them.

We were heartened to see \$76.2 million committed over five years in the 2024 Budget to establishing a new First Nations Prison to Employment Program. Transitioning from prison to community is a time of high risk for re-offending. Supported accommodation and wrap-around support are also essential during this period.

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 entering the child protection system.

We call on 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.

We welcome the Australian Government's commitment to establish a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People. We note that \$5.9 million has been committed over two years to support the Commissioner's role, along with \$11.7 million to extend the First Nations Family Dispute Resolution Pilot. We hope that the Commissioner will have the power and resources to protect and promote the rights, interests and wellbeing of First Nations children and young people and that by strengthening families and keeping children safe, the unacceptable rates of out-of-home care will start to reduce.

Achievements to date

In addition to the initiatives identified above, the Society recognises and supports the following achievements to date including:

- 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, and
- \$2.4 BN over 5 years and \$4BN (jointly with NT Government for housing) (2024 Budget), \$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.