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Community Legal Sector Calls for a Smarter Approach to Justice

The Federation of Community Legal Centres Victoria (the Federation) has joined the chorus of legal centres, social services and human rights organisations making a united call for a “smarter criminal justice system” - one that identifies the social determinates of crime and reinvests in community-led solutions.

Speaking at the Inquiry into Victoria’s Criminal Justice System, Federation CEO Louisa Gibbs called for a “radical rethink” of the way Victoria approaches criminal justice.

“We need solutions that enhance the safety of all Victorians and a criminal justice system that is effective, evidence-based and respecting of human rights. The current system is not,” Ms Gibbs said.

Ms Gibbs told the Inquiry that the criminalisation of children as young as 10 was out of step with human rights standards, the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the child and research on child development.

She added that the current punitive criminal system is not working to break the cycle of trauma, victimisation and offending: “Policy decisions that are intended to make the community safer, are actually having the opposite effect.

“Evidence shows that harsher sentencing and increasing imprisonment rates do not reduce crime. We also know that than half of victims of crime become people who offend; and more than half of people who offend become victims of crime.”

Ms Gibbs told the Inquiry a criminal justice system needs to start from the position of preventing crime – investing in early intervention, wrap-around supports, and community-led positions that address the social determinants of crime.

“Rather than being punitive, we have the power to nurture and build on the strengths of those who are disadvantaged in our communities, to prevent crime from happening in the first place.

“There is extensive evidence that providing a person with stable housing, employment opportunities, and community-based supports for mental ill-health, substance use or victimisation reduces the likelihood that a person will come into contact with the criminal legal system, either a victim or as a perpetrator,” she said.



The cost of incarcerating Victorians is \$1.675 billion every year, having grown exponentially from \$639 million in 2010. Sadly, statistics show up to 44 per cent of people who have completed jail sentences return to prison within two years.

The Federation supports justice reinvestment programs, which reallocate a portion funds spent on prisons to local communities. The money is then reinvested in programs and services that address the underlying causes of crime in that community, Ms Gibbs said.

While Community Legal Centres play a vital role in supporting Victorians with criminal matters, they also play a vital role intervening early in civil matters to ensure they don't escalate into criminal behaviour: providing wrap-around, holistic and place-based support to marginalised and disadvantaged Victorians.

The Federation thanks the Inquiry for their expertise and supports the submissions of its various members including:

- Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
- Human Rights Law Centre
- WEstjustice
- Peninsula Community Legal Centre
- Justice Connect
- Mental Health Legal Centre
- Youthlaw
- Smart Justice for Women coalition
- Smart Justice for Young People coalition.

A link to the Federation's full submission to the Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System is [here](#).

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