Australia is harming children at a crucial time in their development

The pre-eminent voice for public health in Australia has backed Amnesty International Australia’s campaign to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14.

Australia locks up children as young as 10 - far younger than the rest of the world - with Indigenous children the worst affected.

“We at the Public Health Association of Australia agree -- it’s not fair and it’s not right,” said Public Health Association of Australia CEO, Terry Slevin.

Revelations in tonight’s Four Corners program on the horrors inside Queensland’s police watch houses demand a national justice response.

“That response must consider the long term impacts of locking up children,” said Mr Slevin.

It must canvas and fund alternatives to jail and watch houses - which in Queensland are being used to house children for weeks alongside adults convicted of serious crimes.

“Queensland or any other jurisdiction can’t simply commit to building more facilities to lock up kids.”

“Studies show that locking up children has the most detrimental effect on their life outcomes. It makes it very hard to get a job and lead a normal life,” said Mr Slevin.

Many of the children mentioned in the files revealed by Four Corners have intellectual disabilities and psychological issues.

“The younger you come into contact with the criminal justice system, the more likely you are to continue returning over a longer period of time. There are demonstrated harms to mental health of people in detention with ongoing trauma from detention experiences.”

“Developments in neuroscience and about how the adolescent brain develops brings into question capability for being criminally responsible.”

“Rather than spending more on expensive incarceration, we want to see an integrated system that offers comprehensive programs that action prevention, early intervention, diversion and rehabilitation.”
Tonight’s Four Corners program comes after damning reports about the incarceration of children in the Don Dale facility in the Northern Territory.

The royal commission into Don Dale offered a blueprint for reform across Australia, but not one recommendation has yet been implemented by the federal government or by the Northern Territory Government.

“The recommendations must not be allowed to rot on a shelf. Time is of the essence,” Mr Slevin said.

‘Whoever forms national government after Saturday should make youth justice a focus.”

ENDS

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