

Rights of kids 'under threat'

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RAISING the criminal age from 10 to 14 years, improving school outcomes for vulnerable students and better mental health access must be made priorities to advance the rights of the young, the state's children's commissioner says.

In an annual review of progress against United Nations benchmarks, Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly, pictured, said South Australia was making "slow but positive progress" in some other areas.

Ms Connolly's office studies progress on health, justice, child protection, education, physical punishment, disability, and the environment.

Her review found courts were only sometimes applying

the principle that children aged 10-14 were incapable of forming criminal intent.

She also said children were too often detained by police, noting police use of powers to divert the young away from the justice system was resulting in fewer going through the courts "(but) the numbers are still far too high".

There was some evidence of better treatment of youth detainees, but detaining them with adults needed to stop and the use of handcuffs must be reduced, she said.

Ms Connolly found SA still spent the least of all states per capita on child and adolescent health, though there was some evidence of progress in health improvements.

She found that while mental health problems were increasing for children aged 5-17,

fewer were accessing services and the number of paediatric

mental health beds had barely risen at all. At the same time obesity rates in children rose from 28.5 per cent to 32.7 per cent. The review also highlighted "the disproportionate number of vulnerable children affected by school exclusions and disengagement".

These included those with disabilities as well as Indigenous children and those in state care, particularly ones who have been in contact with the youth justice system.

Health Minister Stephen Wade said the state government had been funding improvements in child mental health, but Covid-19 anxiety had affected children more than any other age group.

He said the latest state budget allocated more than \$6.2m to "initiatives that will directly benefit children and adolescents", on top of \$1.3m for mental health responses relating to children and the pandemic. The government is building a new \$1.95bn Women's and Children's Hospital which will double acute mental health services for mothers.

Ms Connolly said new laws were needed to ban the sterilisation of children with disabilities in SA, noting there had been no progress on that front and the scale of the problem was not known.

