

A LONG WAY TO GO ON YOUTH CRIME

DOUGLAS SMITH

Before South Australia looks at raising the age of criminal responsibility, other preventive measures must be considered, says the state's top advocate for children's rights.

SA's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly releases her annual report on Sunday, focusing on children's health, justice, protection, disability, education and physical punishment.

Her 2023 Child Rights Progress Report has revealed the lack of progress by the state government to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14, which SA is obligated to work towards under state legislation.

Ms Connolly said a road map to raise the age had not been started, and said there had to be other measures developed to punish children for committing crimes.

"We can't just let kids who are doing crime or being involved in things they shouldn't be or whatever it might be, we can't just let them have no kind of consequences," she told the Sunday Mail.

"But those consequences need to be more about them and helping them develop mentally, and there needs to be a health response and (assisting with) parenting and all those kinds of things."

Ms Connolly warned that the issue was only going to get worse with rising numbers of youth in detention, as locking children up was not solving the problem.

"What we know is that when you lock kids up, they're not getting better outcomes," she said.

"So, the earlier you get locked up, the more the outcomes are going to be worse over the course of your life and that's been so well documented." She recognised that it would be "expensive" to invest in other programs that focused on early intervention and assisting families with troubled youth, but said it was a better way to address youth crime.

The most recent figures released by the Justice Reform Initiative last month showed that it cost [\\$3145 a day, per child, to be in youth detention.](#)

The median length of stay was 3.3 days, with 90 per cent of children and young people under youth justice supervision in SA serving time supervised in the community.

Attorney-General Kyam Maher said the safety of the community was first and foremost and that the government had not yet made a firm decision on raising the age.

“South Australia is considering its position on this very complex issue,” he said.

“The Standing Council of Attorneys-General Age of Criminal Responsibility Working Group Report stresses protections for community safety and victims rights, which are front of mind in our deliberations.

“I’ve been on record in the past as saying that community safety must be the primary consideration in any discussion around raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility.”

Last week, Tasmania became the first state in Australia to start a process of raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14, however, the reform would not be implemented until 2029. In 2019, the UN recommended 14 years as the minimum age of criminal responsibility.