Open Letter to the Premier

From Smart Justice for Young People and community organisations across Victoria and Australia

Dear Premier,

We, the undersigned community organisations, write to express our deep concern and strong opposition to the Victorian Government's proposed youth justice changes, which would allow children as young as 14 to be sentenced in adult courts and face life imprisonment.

These proposals represent a serious step backwards for Victoria. They ignore strong evidence about child development, rehabilitation and human rights, and will cause lifelong harm while making our communities less safe.

Punishment is not prevention

The evidence is clear: harsher penalties and adult sentencing do not deter youth offending or improve community safety. Instead, they increase trauma, reoffending and long-term disadvantage. Children, especially those who have experienced abuse, neglect, disability, family violence, homelessness or exploitation, need support and rehabilitation, not prisons.

The Sentencing Advisory Council has confirmed that children are developmentally different from adults: they are more impulsive, less able to assess consequences, and far more capable of change. Treating children as adults contradicts this evidence.

Children deserve care, not prison cells

These proposals breach Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities and our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which require that imprisonment be a last resort and that children be treated according to their developmental capacity. These reforms prioritise punishment over evidence and human rights, echoing recent Queensland changes acknowledged as unnecessarily harsh and inconsistent with international standards.

They will disproportionately harm Aboriginal children, children in out of home care and children from cultural backgrounds already overrepresented in the criminal legal system due to systemic failures in housing, education, health and child protection.

Community safety comes from support not incarceration

Real community safety comes from addressing the causes of youth offending: poverty, trauma, racism, social isolation and lack of support.

Community-led, culturally safe and trauma-informed programs keep children connected to school, family and culture and reduce reoffending. These services work, yet they remain critically under-funded while prison and police budgets grow.

Victoria must invest in early intervention, diversion and prevention – not measures that entrench cycles of harm.

A call for leadership

We urge you to halt these proposed laws and engage in genuine consultation with Aboriginal leaders, community organisations, legal experts and young people.

Victoria should be known for fairness and compassion, not sentencing children to life in prison.

Signed (25 November 2025),

Aboriginal Housing Victoria

Aboriginal & Torres Straight Islander Legal Service (QLD) Ltd

Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia

Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum

Djirra

Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations

Indigenous Law and Justice Hub

Indigenous Social Housing Assocation - Melbourne

Koorie Youth Council (KYC)

Lidia Thorpe - Senator for Victoria

Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group

Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation

Sisters Inside

SNAICC - National Voice for our Children

Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation – Centre of Excellence for Aboriginal Families Wellbeing

Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages

VACL

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance Ltd

Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young People's Alliance

54 Reasons - Proudly Part of Save the Children Australia

Save the Children 54 reasons

Australian Education Union Victorian Branch

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION AEU

Allied Justice

Allied Justice
Here for community

Alternative First Responders Campaign

ALTERNATIVE FIRST RESPONDERS

Angus Cameron and Partners

ANGUS CAMERON PARTNERS

ANTaR Victoria

ANTaR Victoria

ARACY

every child thriving aracy

ARC Justice

arc justice

ASRC

ASRC
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

Australian Services Union - Vic/Tas Authorities & Services Branch

AUSTRALIAN SERVICES UNION

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights

AUSTRALIAN LAWYERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Australian Lawyers Alliance Limited

Lawyers for the People
AUSTRALIAN LAWYERS ALLIANCE

Barwon Community Legal Service

BARWON
COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE

Bendigo Community Health Service

Bendigo Community Health Services

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

Centre Against Racial Profiling

CENTRE AGAINST RACIAL PROFILING

Centre for Non-Violence

Centre for Non-Violence

Centre for Innovative Justice

Centre for Innovative Justice

Civil Liberties Australia

CLA
Civil Liberties Australia

Centre for Multicultural Youth

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Centre for Multicultural Youth

Comm Unity Plus Services Ltd

commUnity+

Drummond Street Services

Drummond St Services

Federation of Community Legal Centres

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OF COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRES VIC

Formerly Incarcerated Girls Justice Advocates Melbourne (FIGJAM)

First Step Legal

FIRST STEP LEGAL

Flat Out

Fitzroy Legal Service

Foundation for Young Australians

Gippsland Community Legal Service

Human Rights Law Centre

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service

Inner Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network

Inner Melbourne Community Legal

inTouch

James Dowsley & Associates

Justice Reform Initiative

Jesuit Social Services

Junction Support Services

Justice Connect

Kids First Australia

Knowmore Legal Service

Law and Advocacy Centre for Women

Liberty Victoria

Marshall Jovanovska Ralph Criminal Lawyers

Melbourne City Mission

Mental Health Legal Centre Inc.

Moonee Valley Legal Service

National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse

National Justice Project

Northern Community Legal Centre

Orygen

OzChild

Police Accountability Project

Peninsula Community Legal Centre

Prison Network

Robinson Gill Lawyers

Smart Justice for Young People

South-East Monash Legal Service

Southport Community Legal Service

Southside Justice

The Drum Youth Services

The National Network of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls

Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association

Vacro

Victorian Council of Social Service

Villamanta Disability Rights Legal Service

Women and Mentoring

WestJustice

Women's Legal Service Victoria

Youth Affairs Council Victoria

Youthlaw

Youth Support & Advocacy Service

Eastern Community Legal Centre

No To Violence