



Raise the age – get kids out of detention

By The Right Rev'd Chris McLeod

Sophie Relf-Christopher, parish priest at St Jude's, Brighton, produced an excellent essay on doing 'Public Theology'. You can [download it here](#).

In the paper she raised the issue of the detention and incarceration of children. It is sad indictment on our nation that children as young as 10 are believed to be able to bear the consequences of criminal responsibility, and many incarcerated in 'Juvenile Detention Centres', such as the notorious 'Don Dale Centre' in the Northern Territory.

In one year approximately 600 children and youth (10 – 17 years of age) are incarcerated in Australia. First Nations children and youth are 21 times more likely to be held in detention than non-Indigenous Australians.

In the Northern Territory, [First Nations children make up over 90% of the juvenile detention system](#). There are many more children passing through the criminal legal system, and held in detention, awaiting trial, or being held in temporary custody ([approximately 949 on any given night](#)).

While there is no doubt that some children become involved in criminal activity from a young age, the responsibility of acting with maturity and responsibility, however, at the age of 10 years is highly questionable.

The incarceration of children also sets up poor life outcomes. [Criminalisation leads to severe disadvantage](#): poor education levels, low job expectancy, poor health, and the prospect of a life of crime and recidivism. Closely connected to this is the high rate of 'First Nations Deaths in Custody' and 'Indigenous Youth Suicide'.

Those of us who have spent time in prison ministry know that gaols (including juvenile detention centres) are places of physical and sexual violence, and, are, essentially, training grounds for further criminality.

It is clearly a matter of justice that attention be drawn to the serious problem of child incarceration, and the imbalance experienced by First Nations' children.

Exploration needs to be given to other ways to divert children away from crime, such as 'Justice Reinvestment', and societal solutions to poverty and racial inequality.

The high cost of incarcerating children, over \$500,000 for one child per year, begs the question of how more efficiently this money could be spent on more positive life transforming programs.

As a Christian church we know that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to save, not only for the world to come, but in this world, as well.

We have our own role to play in ministering to the community, and guiding adults and children away from poor choices towards more positive life goals and aspirations.

However, it is a poor indictment on our society that after 200 years of the occupation of this nation that First Nations people are still the most incarcerated people in Australia; including, sadly, our children. It is with these thoughts in mind that I encourage the 'Council of Attorney Generals in Australia', and our state 'Attorney Generals' to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years of age.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matt 19: 14)

The Right Rev'd Chris McLeod is the National Aboriginal Bishop and has been named as the next dean of St Peter's Cathedral, Adelaide

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