



Position Paper – Changes to the Youth Justice system in the Northern Territory

October, 2025.

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council strongly condemns a series of harmful legislative and policy changes to the youth justice system introduced by the Northern Territory Country Liberal Party (CLP) Government since August 2024.

In October 2024, the NT Government lowered the age of criminal responsibility to 10 years and imposed stricter conditions on bail, making it more difficult for children and young people to be granted release. In November 2024 the Government announced they would be relocating all children and young people from the Alice Springs Youth Detention Facility to the Holtze Youth Detention Facility in Darwin 1500kms away. NT Department of Corrections have confirmed they will provide no financial support for families to travel to Darwin to visit children and young people incarcerated at Holtze facility. This move continues a pattern of harmful policies that sever Anangu children and young people's connection to family, culture, and Country – perpetuating intergenerational trauma that echoes the devastating impacts of the Stolen Generations.

“At ten- we don't understand crime.” – Young Person, Imanpa

Most recently, in July 2025, further changes to the Youth Justice Act were introduced, including expanded use of force within detention facilities, the reintroduction of spit hoods, mechanical restraints, and the use of dogs. These practices are harmful and dehumanising. The reinstatement of spit hoods violates Australia's commitments under key United Nations human rights treaties, including *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and the *Convention Against Torture & Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)*. These changes deeply impact the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.

NPY Women's Council are concerned by these “reforms”—particularly the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility to 10 years and the removal of ‘detention as a measure of last resort’. These measures are not supported by evidence and will significantly increase the number of Aboriginal children and young people incarcerated in the NT.

“Kids they too young to understand you know, it's just really hard to see it when I go into Alice Springs and I see things happening with kids and police. You know I really want to come straight back here where I feel more safe, happy, love learning about family history when I stay in community. Young people want to be part of it because their friends are in Alice but when they come back to community they heal. It's a different story. Community heals. And because of the youth program young people have good choices to make. They too young to understand so community heals them.” – NPYWC Director, Irrunytju

Supporting the dreams of young women, the hopes of mothers and the vision of grandmothers.

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Between April-June 2025, 161 children and young people were held in youth detention in the NT. 82% of these children and young people were unsentenced. Client data from the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) states that children and young people are being kept on remand for an average of 137 days (197 days for children under 14) and only 23% of these young people are ultimately sentenced to a term of detention. This means children and young people are spending months locked up in unsafe conditions and far away from family despite no conviction. The cost of incarcerating a single child or young person in the NT is a staggering \$1.3 million per year (Justice Reform Initiative, 2025). This money would be better allocated to community-led solutions that provide holistic support for families and young people to live safer and happier lives.

The CLP's approach contradicts the recommendations from the 2017 *Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory*, which called for trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and community-led approaches to youth justice. Further, no consultation with young people, ACCO's, or community organisations were completed prior to the legislative changes to the Youth Justice Act. NPY Women's Council recognises that these legislative changes will have a devastating impact on Anangu from the NPY region given Alice Springs functions as the primary regional service centre, requiring frequent travel for Anangu families.

"We don't want to send our kids to jail. We need funding to keep kids active, keep them out of jail and on country. Men and women need to be taught about culture when young and we need to keep it going. Keep it strong. We need young people to make our community proud." –

NPYWC Director, Mutitjulu

NPY Women's Council supports the #RaiseTheAge campaign and stands with other First Nations leaders advocating to end state violence against children and raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years to align with the recommendation by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. We urge the NT Government to reconsider these harmful legislative changes and instead invest in holistic, community-led interventions that strengthen protective factors for children and young people—such as strong family support and meaningful connections to community, culture, and Country.

"There's no need to arrest kids you know, help them. There's NPY and other organisations that can help kids" – NPYWC Chairperson

Most importantly, the voices of children, young people and families must be central to any future decision-making about youth justice legislation to ensure that Anangu are not left behind.