

A photograph showing the silhouettes of three children riding bicycles on a beach at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange and yellow glow. In the background, other people and structures are visible, including what appears to be a boat or a small building. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

Raising Children Up – Shutting Detention Down

Systems Reform Agenda for Child and
Youth Justice in Australia - May 2026

Note:

This *Raising Children Up – Shutting Detention Down* paper preferences use of the term ‘child justice system’, rather than ‘youth justice system’, to better reflect a child rights approach. ARACY recognises that the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines every human being below the age of 18 years as a ‘child’. The terms ‘child’ and ‘youth’ are used interchangeably throughout this report.

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Acknowledgement of Country

ARACY acknowledges the Traditional Custodians and their enduring connection to the lands, waters, and skies. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In solidarity, ARACY supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the need for truth-telling about the history and impact of colonisation. We treasure the rich and diverse cultures and customs of First Nations people – valued knowledge holders, leaders and partners in creating the conditions for all our children to thrive.

“Set an imagination agenda for our classrooms, remove the limited thinking around our disadvantage, stop looking at us as a problem to fix, set us free to be the solution and give us the stage to light up the world”
- Imagination Declaration (2019)¹

About ARACY

ARACY – the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth champions the wellbeing of all Australian children and young people. We use evidence to drive systemic change, collaborate with communities, and amplify young voices to create a healthier future. Our work focuses on prevention, early intervention, and equity. Our purpose is for every child and young person to thrive. Our definition of wellbeing is derived from The Nest, Australia’s first and most widely used, evidence-based framework for the holistic wellbeing of all children and young people.

About The Nest Wellbeing Framework

This paper is underpinned by The Nest was developed by ARACY in consultation with over 4,000 children, families, experts and community organisations across Australia.

The Nest identifies six interconnected domains of wellbeing that every child needs to thrive: being Valued, Loved and Safe; having Material Basics; being Healthy; Learning; Participating; and having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture.

That sixth domain — culture and identity — was added directly as a result of community consultation. It is described in The Nest’s own technical foundations as underpinning and fundamental to all other domains². The Nest was developed with a stated commitment to privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, and key First Nations leaders including the CEO of SNAICC and the Programs Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation were among its founding advisers.

The Nest is not a framework designed for First Nations communities from the outside. It has been taken up, adapted and given cultural form by communities themselves. In Alice Springs, the Child Friendly Alice Community Profile — co-designed with Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Tangentyere Council, Children’s Ground and Akeyulerre, and illustrated by local Arrernte artist Geraldine Stuart — used The Nest as its organising framework for understanding how children in Mparntwe are faring³. Across the Northern Territory, the NT Government’s biennial *Story of Our Children and Young People* uses The Nest as its structural backbone, with its own Aboriginal Framework developed through conversations with Aboriginal people from across the Territory⁴.

Throughout this paper, The Nest serves two roles: as the diagnostic lens that explains why harmful behaviour happens when children's conditions break down, and as the accountability framework governments can use to measure whether reform is actually improving children's lives.

Key Messages

1. **This is a public health crisis: crime is the symptom, not the disease.** Children and young people don't develop in a vacuum. What surrounds us shapes us. When safety, stability, connection and support break down, harmful behaviour is more likely. The Nest Wellbeing Framework maps exactly the conditions that matter — health, learning, belonging, safety, material basics and cultural identity. When those conditions break down, harmful behaviour becomes more likely. Changing conditions in the environment is how we change behaviour — for good.
2. **Child wellbeing and community safety are the same investment.** Strong families, connected communities, good health, learning and belonging — these are what keep children out of the justice system. Building those conditions is not a soft alternative to community safety. It is community safety. The Nest gives governments and communities a shared blueprint and accountability framework — so reform can be measured against what actually matters for children, not just what is easy to count.
3. **First Nations-led solutions work.** Overrepresentation won't shift without self-determination in practice — fund and back Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to lead diversion, healing and reintegration, with governments supporting rather than directing. This is systems reform, not cultural input on the side.
4. **Detention backfires — it harms health, shrinks futures, and makes communities less safe.** Children need connection, development and belonging — not detention. Incarceration disrupts the very conditions children need to grow and contribute. It damages health, disrupts learning and weakens the relationships that protect young people and communities alike. The result is more repeat harm and less safe communities.
5. **Reform works best when children, young people and families help design it.** People who have lived inside the system know where it fails and what actually helps. Their insight is the foundation of effective reform — not an optional add-on. Building this into governance and commissioning as standing infrastructure is how we get systems that actually work — systems that build the conditions every child needs to thrive.

Executive Summary

Australia has the evidence, the programs, ancient wisdom and community knowledge to build a child and youth justice system that actually works. What is needed now is the political will to act on it — and a shared framework to guide that action. This paper provides both.

A sustainable, evidence-based public health approach to child and youth justice is now within reach. The conditions that keep children safe — strong families, connected communities, learning, belonging and cultural identity — are the same conditions that keep communities safe. Investing in them is both the ethical choice and the smart one.

The current child and youth justice system — particularly incarceration — is not delivering. An estimated 84% of child safety system spend goes to tertiary intervention, with only 16% supporting families at risk. This imbalance does not address the conditions driving families into crisis. It does not slow the flow of children entering the system. And it does not improve long-term outcomes for children, communities or public finances. The evidence is clear — and so is the alternative.

The alternative works at scale. Scotland's Getting it Right for Every Child — a sustained, whole-of-government prevention agenda — delivered a 45% reduction in offending by young people under 18 years and reduced the average number of under-21s in custody from 1,012 in 2008–09 to 168 in 2023–24. These results followed two decades of consistent investment in early intervention, relational practice and shared outcomes frameworks. Australia can do the same.

Detention disrupts the very conditions children need to grow and contribute. It damages health, disrupts learning and weakens the relationships that protect young people and communities alike. Going back to treating detention as a genuine last resort — and investing instead in the conditions that prevent harm — is how we reduce repeat harmful behaviour for good.

Federal, State and Territory governments can act now to:

1. **Embed lived experience** of children and young people in governance, commissioning, design and evaluation as standing infrastructure for reform.
2. **Scale up funding and power-sharing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations** to lead locally designed, culturally safe prevention, diversion and throughcare.
3. **Shift investment upstream in every budget**, redirecting an increasing share of justice spend into proven prevention and early intervention, prioritising the Early and Middle Years (including 11–14) and culturally appropriate, community-based diversion.
4. **Make children's wellbeing a standing National Cabinet priority**, backed by a coherent national package with targets and transparent reporting.

5. **Use The Nest as the shared outcomes and accountability framework** — backed by a public health reform plan across primary, secondary and tertiary interventions, with clear targets and reporting that shows how reliance on detention will fall through prevention, early intervention and health-led pathways with strong throughcare.

This paper offers a practical tool for decision-makers: a framework that combines The Nest's six domains of wellbeing with the three stages of public health action — primary prevention, early intervention and tertiary response. It maps evidence-based actions across schools, health, child protection, community services and justice. It shows how investment can shift upstream. And it demonstrates how governments, communities and First Nations organisations can act together — with children's wellbeing as the shared measure of success.

1. Five Principles of Reform

These are overarching operational principles for systemic reform that cut across all domains of The Nest.

1. **Take a public health approach to youth justice reform.** It is imperative to realign Australia's youth justice and incarceration systems with public health paradigms, emphasising the prevention of crime through a balanced allocation of resources toward upstream determinants, as well as diversionary and rehabilitative support mechanisms.⁵ See ARACY's [Inverting the Pyramid](#).⁶
2. **Consider youth justice through an evidence-based ecological model.** The risk factors associated with child and youth offending should be understood through an ecological lens and examined across the life course. What surrounds us shapes us and young people are often being locked up for behaviours linked to trauma. This approach facilitates a systematic response to the complex, multifaceted drivers of offending. See ARACY's [The Nest](#).
3. **Commonwealth Government takes a leadership role.** In Australia's federal system, each state and territory is responsible for its own youth justice policies and legislation. This jurisdictional complexity can create significant barriers to reform, necessitating strong leadership from the Commonwealth Government to drive a nationally coherent and effective approach to youth justice.

This leadership includes ensuring compliance with Australia's international obligations relating to the treatment of children in detention, as outlined by the United Nations, and acting on the Australian Senate Inquiry's recommendation for the Commonwealth to "use whatever levers it has at its disposal to protect disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in detention". The Commonwealth also has a critical responsibility to lead strategies addressing the disproportionate

incarceration of First Nations children, which is a National Agreement on Closing the Gap target that has not improved from its 2023 baseline.

4. Enable self-determination among First Nations communities.

The disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the youth justice system represents a policy failure and a profound national injustice rooted in systemic racism, historical trauma, and discriminatory legal frameworks.⁷ Despite existing commitments to Closing the Gap, Australia continues to criminalise First Nations children at alarming rates⁸, prompting formal complaints to the United Nations by organisations such as SNAICC and the Human Rights Law Centre.⁹

First Nations self-determination must be understood as a core systems principle — not a reform stream sitting alongside other priorities. Current systems were not designed with or for First Nations peoples and therefore produce inequitable outcomes. A genuinely reformed child and youth justice system must be co-designed and governed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the ground up¹⁰. Governments must redirect authority and resources to ACCOs, enabling these entities to spearhead culturally informed, locally driven justice solutions. Adequately resourced, First Nations-led initiatives are vital for breaking cycles of harm and fostering futures anchored in healing and a sense of belonging.¹¹

5. Engage in consultation and co-design with children and youth with lived experience of the child justice system.

Incorporating the insights of children and young individuals who have experienced incarceration can substantively enhance programmatic responses, potentially reducing both incarceration and reincarceration rates.¹² Children and young people who have been through the justice system carry knowledge that no policy document can replicate. When they help design the responses, those responses work better. Government needs to build this into governance and commissioning as standing infrastructure — not one-off consultation.

Organisations focused on reforming the child and youth justice system are encouraged to adopt The Nest in their work. This framework delineates how the various domains of The Nest can be effectively addressed through primary, secondary, and tertiary public health approaches. Furthermore, it can be customised by age group to guarantee that the interventions employed are developmentally appropriate throughout different stages of life. Each cell within the matrix is designed to encapsulate distinct strategies tailored to the specific needs of varying age cohorts.

Figure 1: The Nest using a Public Health Approach for Child Justice

THE NEST x PUBLIC HEALTH		The Nest Domains					
Age Group?	Ecological Layer?	HEALTHY	VALUED, LOVED & SAFE	STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY & CULTURE	MATERIAL BASICS	LEARNING	PARTICIPATING
Early Childhood Middle Years Adolescence Early Adulthood	The Child The Family The Community The System						
Public Health Approach	PRIMARY						
	SECONDARY						
	TERTIARY						

2. The Issue

Engagement with the child and youth justice system is associated with significant long-term harm, including mental and physical health consequences, increased risk of reoffending, disrupted education and employment opportunities, and social and economic disadvantage.¹³ The youth justice system has marked inequities through the disproportionate representation of specific demographic groups, including First Nations children.¹⁴

Numerous predictors associated with contact with the justice system can be identified from the onset of conception or emerge during early developmental stages.¹⁵ These include intergenerational trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and compromised mental health, particularly pronounced between the ages of 11 and 14 years – the middle years.

The prevailing public discourse, along with the allocation of resources in the child justice system, tends to prioritise punitive measures and interventions such as incarceration. This focus inadvertently contributes to the overrepresentation of young individuals from specific social and demographic backgrounds, including multicultural young people, children who've lived in residential or out-of-home care, girls and young women with complex needs¹⁶ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.¹⁷



"Tragically, by not addressing their human rights early on, and instead taking a punitive approach to their offending, we are essentially criminalising some of the most vulnerable children in Australia."

Former National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds

Many elements of the youth justice system are ineffective and compound disadvantage, contributing to a cycle of involvement with the justice system. Incarceration can be particularly harmful when practices that violate international human rights standards are employed, deepening complex social and mental health challenges. The justice system, as it currently stands, is not equipped to intervene in the complex developmental, social, and environmental factors that lead to involvement with the criminal justice process. These upstream drivers require a response from education, health, and family support systems.

Numerous factors influencing engagement with the justice system are deeply rooted in early life experiences, such as systemic racism, poverty, limited access to essential services, exposure to violence, and instances of maltreatment.¹⁸ (See Figure 2). However, the current funding model for youth justice disproportionately emphasises reactive measures,¹⁹ such as incarceration, rather than proactive strategies that address these early underlying causes.

Figure 2: Social Determinants of Justice



Source: R. McCausland and E. Baldry (2023), 'Who does Australia Lock Up? The Social Determinants of Justice', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 12(3), p. 45

These systemic shortcomings are further compounded by a deficit-oriented public narrative that prioritises punitive approaches.²⁰ It is crucial to foster coordinated efforts among government agencies, service providers, the mass media, and families, including the voices of children and young people themselves, to shift the focus toward holistic, evidence-based early interventions that enable all children and young people to thrive.

In Australia, spending on youth crime totals \$3.4 billion, representing 14% of all expenditure on late intervention services.²¹ This investment imbalance is also visible in child safety spending. An estimated 84% of child safety system spend goes to tertiary intervention — removing and placing children — and only 16% to supporting families at risk. Spending more at the crisis end will not slow the flow of families into crisis. It will not disrupt the conditions driving harm in the first place.²² For decades, research has identified effective strategies, however a significant gap between evidence and implementation persists. Bridging this gap requires a shared commitment to what the evidence shows works: early investment, community-led responses, and systems designed around children's development rather than around processing offences. Australia has the knowledge. What is needed now is the will to act on it together.

3. Background

3.1 Causes of the Issue

Our current child justice system is not adequately equipped to deal with the upstream drivers of youth justice engagement, and dealing with these upstream drivers is more for a child across their life course than incarceration. Child maltreatment, including exposure to domestic and family violence, historical trauma, intergenerational disadvantage, and systemic racism are key drivers of engagement with the youth justice system,²³ yet the youth justice system does not have the authority or resourcing to address these drivers. Indeed, no single government department or non-government organisation does.

Tackling the upstream determinants of youth justice system involvement – including those occurring antenatally – requires a coordinated effort across stakeholders, which is inherently challenging. System fragmentation compounds these causes. Children and families in contact with child safety and justice systems often navigate multiple disconnected plans — covering disability, child protection, education, housing, mental health and victim support — with multiple case workers and repeated wrong-door referrals. No single department holds the whole picture. Coordinated, whole-family planning is not yet the norm.²⁴ Systemic change that is conducive to cross-sectoral collaboration is required to address this.

A fundamental element of effective interventions is the co-design process involving those for whom these interventions are intended²⁵ – specifically, children who interact with the youth justice system and their families. However, these children, who are in

contact with the youth justice system, have the least opportunity to express their perspectives on the resources and support they require to thrive.

These factors are reinforced when public discourse focuses on punishment rather than on the conditions that cause harm in the first place. Research shows that community connection, early support and belonging are the real protective factors — the conditions that keep children and communities safe. When systems invest in those conditions, outcomes improve. When they default to detention, the cycle continues.²⁶

This gap between political incentives and evidence-based practice obstructs the reforms that children and communities need. As a result, the system becomes overwhelmed and largely reactive, ultimately punishing and perpetuating disadvantage²⁷. Thus, children can become trapped in a cycle of repeating harmful behaviour becoming entrenched in the system. Essential practices are frequently overlooked, such as integrating fundamental human rights within youth justice centres and screening for basic health concerns, including hearing impairments and developmental delays²⁸, which can intensify harmful behaviours.

The solution to this is reforming systems and funding allocations so that stakeholders are equipped to invest in upstream determinants in a coordinated way, coupled with rehabilitative and diversionary efforts that are codesigned with children and families with lived experience.²⁹ Responsible journalism and elevation of lived experience – i.e. subjective measures of effectiveness – into standard data collection around youth justice and related systems are important first steps. By doing so, we can cultivate safer communities and support the wellbeing of our youth.

3.2 Long-Term Harms

The long-term harms associated with contact with the youth justice system are significant and multi-faceted.

3.2.1 Mental Health Consequences

3.2.1.1 Trauma and Psychological Effects

Contact with the justice system can lead to significant psychological harm, including anxiety, depression, and trauma.³⁰ Experiences of being incarcerated, facing legal processes, or being stigmatised can damage a young person's sense of self and their mental well-being.

3.2.1.2 Stigma and Marginalisation

Labelling a child as a criminal can damage their sense of who they are and what they can become. That damage compounds. It reduces the trust, connection and opportunity that every young person needs to contribute to their community.

3.2.2 Increased Risk of Reoffending

3.2.2.1 Criminalisation

Early and ongoing contact with the youth justice system can normalise criminal behaviour, making it more likely that young people will re-offend. Young people who face punitive measures without proper rehabilitation are more likely to return to the justice system as adults, creating a cycle of criminal behaviour. A Victorian review found that once children have been in contact with the justice system, offending patterns remain the same and life outcomes are poor, particularly with younger age of first offence and higher number of prior offences. Over 80% of Victorian youth who served a custodial term reoffended. When consulted, young Australians with lived experience agreed that incarceration reinforces offending.³¹

3.2.2.2 Lack of Rehabilitation Opportunities

Young people miss out on opportunities to change their behaviour and avoid future contact with the system if the focus of the system is on punishment rather than prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration.³²

3.2.3. Disrupted Education and Future Opportunities

3.2.3.1 Interrupted Education

Involvement in the youth justice system often leads to disruptions in education.³³ Suspension or expulsion from school, as well as the experience of dealing with the justice system, can significantly hinder a young person's educational progress, reducing future employment opportunities.³⁴

3.2.3.2 Lack of Employment Skills

Young people involved in the justice system may lack the skills or qualifications necessary to secure stable employment. Without access to education or vocational training, they are at a greater risk of entering the workforce in lower-paying, unstable jobs, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage.

3.2.4. Impact on Family and Social Relationships

3.2.4.1 Family Strain

Youth justice involvement can put considerable strain on family dynamics, as families may struggle emotionally and financially to support the young person through their involvement with the justice system. This strain can lead to breakdowns in family relationships, reducing the support networks available to the young person.

3.2.4.2 Social Exclusion

Youth involved in the justice system may face exclusion from social groups, which can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation. This lack of social support can further push them toward negative behaviours that are not conducive to rehabilitation.

3.2.5. Increased Vulnerability to Abuse and Exploitation

3.2.5.1 Exposure to Harmful Environments

Detention centres and correctional facilities can expose young people to further harm, including physical and emotional abuse. They may encounter violent or exploitative peers, which can perpetuate the cycle of trauma and harm.

3.2.5.2 Institutionalisation

Prolonged contact with the justice system can lead to institutionalisation, where the young person becomes more accustomed to detention environments than life outside incarceration. This can impair their ability to reintegrate into the community upon release.

3.2.6. Long-Term Economic Disadvantage

3.2.6.1 Barriers to Employment

A criminal record can create barriers to employment for young people in the future. This limits their ability to find stable, meaningful work, contributing to long-term financial instability.

3.2.7. Disproportionate Impact on Vulnerable Groups

3.2.7.1 Structural Over-representation of First Nations and other children

First Nations children and children from other communities are over-represented in the justice system because of structural failures — under-investment in early support, over-policing, and systems not designed with or for them. This is a systems design problem. It requires a systems design solution.

3.2.7.2 Cumulative Disadvantage

For many young people, the youth justice system interacts with broader social determinants like poverty, poor housing, and family dysfunction.³⁵ This cumulative disadvantage increases the risk of long-term negative outcomes in areas such as health, education, and employment.

3.2.8. Long-Term Social Costs

2.2.8.1 Impact on Communities

The long-term consequences of youth justice system involvement extend beyond the individual. Families and communities face the social costs of young people who struggle with reintegration, lack education and employment, or experience ongoing mental health issues. This perpetuates cycles of poverty and disadvantage within communities experiencing disadvantage.

3.2.8.2 Intergenerational Impact

The harms caused by the criminal justice system contact can extend across generations. Children of parents who have been incarcerated or involved in the justice system may face the same challenges, including higher likelihoods of education disruption, involvement in crime, and mental health issues.

4. Evidence - What works

4.1 Young Voices

Young Australians have expressed a range of perspectives on the nation's justice system, highlighting both its shortcomings and potential pathways for reform. An initiative by the Queensland Family and Child Commission engaged over 100 children and young people, primarily of First Nations heritage, to share their experience with the system. These young voices emphasised that disconnection from family, community and culture; encounters with discrimination and disengagement from education were significant factors contributing to interactions with the justice system. They also advocated for solutions that prioritise cultural connection and supportive relationships.

Young people have participated in various consultations and surveys conducted by Mission Australia and Children's Commissioners across the country and their insights stressed the importance of diversionary strategies, suggesting that investments should prioritise prevention, early intervention, and targeted supports over punitive measures.

ARACY recognises the existing gaps in youth perspectives on this issue and is dedicated to conducting our Young and Wise Roundtables to engage youth insights and problem-solving. This collaboration will expand the collection of case studies based on real-life experiences. We emphasise the importance of continuously consulting children and young people, particularly those who have limited opportunities to express their views and those who are in contact with the justice system. ARACY firmly believes that young people's lived experiences with the justice system must inform the development of policies and practices.

4.2 Universal Measures – Primary Prevention

Universal measures are initiatives and policies designed to provide support and resources to all children and young people, regardless of their background and circumstances.³⁶ By prioritising universal measures and prevention strategies, we can create a foundation that not only supports the holistic development of all children but also effectively reduces the potential for future engagement with the justice system. Universal measures are generally highly cost-effective due to the reduction in downstream costs (for example through the avoidance of expensive interventions such

as incarceration, which trigger further costs through long-term health, social, and economic disadvantage).³⁷

Risk factors for youth offending should be conceptualised through an ecological model (individual, family, community, systems factors) that looks at the interconnected domains of wellbeing (healthy, participating, learning, positive sense of identity and culture, material basics, loved and safe). Systems have been designed and can be re-designed to address these factors through both preventative and rehabilitative efforts with appropriate funding.³⁸

The evidence that prevention works at scale is not theoretical. Scotland's Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) — a sustained, whole-of-government prevention agenda — has delivered a 45% reduction in offending by young people under 18 years, and a 26% reduction in children on the child protection register between 2014 and 2024. The average number of under-21s in custody fell from 1,012 in 2008–09 to 168 in 2023–24. These results followed two decades of consistent investment in early intervention, relational practice, and shared outcomes frameworks — not a single program.³⁹

Alongside The Nest, two complementary frameworks help explain why early conditions matter and how systems can respond. The Resilience Scale maps the dynamic interaction between adversities and protective factors across individual, family, community and systems levels — showing how reducing adversity, building skills and adding positive supports together shift outcomes. The Human Connections and Capabilities Framework articulates the core skills children need to navigate life well: self-regulation, agency, relational skills and problem-solving. Neither framework is currently embedded in child and youth justice systems. Both offer practical tools for workforce development, program design and accountability.⁴⁰

4.3 At Risk – Secondary Prevention

Secondary prevention in the context of child justice in Australia refers to proactive strategies aimed at identifying and addressing the needs of young people at increased risk of becoming involved in the justice system.

There are well-established associations between early childhood experiences such as poor maternal mental health, hostile parenting practices, child maltreatment, and subsequent development of antisocial behaviours in children - a strong predictive factor of youth offending.⁴¹ A secondary prevention strategy with significant potential is sustained home nurse visiting programs for children born into families experiencing vulnerability which have proven benefits to maternal mental health, parenting behaviours, and experience of family violence.

In addition, enhancing social welfare systems—such as parenting payments and income support for low-income families—constitutes essential secondary prevention strategies

aimed at reducing the likelihood of youth offending and promoting healthier family environments.

The NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into behaviour management in schools found no research evidence to support the use of suspensions as a solution to disruptive classrooms. In addition, they found evidence that the use of suspensions reduces disruptive classroom behaviour, and the research indicates that it can have detrimental consequences, including increased recurrence of the problem behaviour, lower scores in academic achievement, lower school retention rates, increased likelihood of involvement with the youth justice system.⁴²

4.4 Exiting the System for Good – Tertiary Interventions

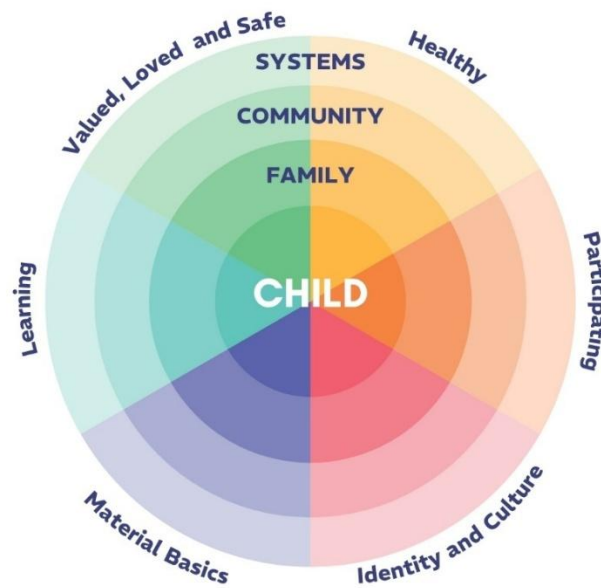
Tertiary intervention focuses on supporting young people who are already engaged with, or at risk of ongoing involvement in, the child justice system. This level of intervention aims to rehabilitate individuals, reduce recidivism, and facilitate successful integration into society by emphasising the need for holistic and tailored approaches that address the complex needs of young people.

Where the State detains a child, it takes on the role of corporate parent. That role carries the same responsibilities any parent would hold — to build connection, support development, and act in the child's long-term interests. The child and youth justice system is not yet purposefully designed to fulfil that role. Detention environments frequently undermine the very capabilities — trust, self-regulation, belonging — that children need to exit the system for good.⁴³

4.5 Indicative Public Health Recommendations

The following examples use The Nest (below) to demonstrate how practical actions at every level of the ecological model across all six domains of wellbeing can reduce harmful behaviours and prevent children from coming into contact with police and the child justice system.

Figure 3: The Nest demonstrated as an ecological model



To increase utility and assist individuals and organisations to join ARACY in advocating for a public health approach to reforming the child and youth justice system we present a new matrix model that combines domains of The Nest with Public Health approaches.

Figure 4: The Nest and Public Health Approach Matrix

THE NEST x PUBLIC HEALTH		The Nest Wellbeing Framework Domains					
Age Group?	Ecological Layer?	HEALTHY	VALUED, LOVED & SAFE	POSITIVE SENSE OF IDENTITY & CULTURE	MATERIAL BASICS	LEARNING	PARTICIPATING
Early Childhood	The Child						
Middle Years	The Family						
Adolescence	The Community						
Early Adulthood	The System						
Public Health Approach	PRIMARY			Pro-social participation opportunities in the community e.g Arrente Boxing Academy			
	SECONDARY			Early Intervention to support bullies, suspended or expelled students			
	TERTIARY			Children's Court Mental Health Advice and Response Service			

The below recommendations **are not exhaustive**; they represent some effective, evidence informed alternatives to harmful responses, such as incarceration. We must invest in preventative measures and supportive environments that allow all children and young people to thrive.

This is what a public health approach to child and youth justice looks like in practice.

Participating

PRIMARY INTERVENTION

- **Make children’s participation routine, not optional.** Build systems that consistently listen to and act on children and young people’s lived experience, so services fit real lives, strengthen belonging and trust, and prevent problems escalating into justice contact. This empowerment can reduce feelings of marginalisation and disengagement, which are known risk factors for offending behaviour.⁴⁴
- **Scale-up initiatives to provide universal support for the “missing middle” (8–14).** Back schools and communities to assist children in this critically under-serviced⁴⁵ age group to thrive. Help keep them safe while navigating a ‘developmental switch point’⁴⁶ with educational, social, physical, neurological and technological changes to spot issues early and provide timely wellbeing and belonging supports – solving problems early instead of letting them escalate. Support mustn’t fall off the cliff once their aged out of approaches like the Government’s *Thriving Kids Initiative* (0-8). E.g. The Uniting-ARACY-Stronger Smarter Institute’s place-based, *Maximising the Middle* program in Southwest Sydney (8-14).⁴⁷
- **Invest in pro-social “third spaces”.** Fund safe, inclusive third spaces – places outside home and school (and age-appropriate online spaces) where young people can gather, connect and contribute – backed by safe, affordable transport so access isn’t a barrier. E.g. *Arernte Boxing Academy (Alice Springs, NT)*⁴⁸ and *Belconnen Youth Centre (ACT)*⁴⁹

SECONDARY INTERVENTION

- **Scale community-based mentoring and skills programs.** Target structured mentoring, practical life-skills and culturally safe development supports to children and young people showing early signs of challenge or harmful behaviour keeping them connected to school, family, friends and community. E.g. *Raise Foundation*⁵⁰, *PCYC Queensland After Dark*⁵¹, *BackTrack*⁵², *PCYC Solid Ground (ACT)*⁵³

TERTIARY INTERVENTION

- **Use throughcare to stop the post-release cliff.** Throughcare is coordinated support that starts in custody and continues after release – with a lead worker and warm handovers to housing, health/mental health, education/training, income, and family/cultural connection. Ultimately creating positive participation opportunities. The Australian Government’s evaluation of *Adult & Youth Through Care* programs sets out how this opt-in, intensive model is being delivered and what’s working (and what needs fixing).⁵⁴

PRIMARY INTERVENTION

- **Strengthen parenting and caregiver support.** Make evidence-based parenting programs and sustained home visiting easy to access for every family – with extra intensity when needs are higher – so stress is reduced and children get consistent, nurturing care. E.g. *Sustaining NSW Families*⁵⁵ and *The Triple P-Positive Parenting program*⁵⁶
- **Prevent child maltreatment and family violence early.** Many children who later face the justice system have first been harmed – so invest in maternal mental health, family violence responses and safe caregiving supports that break intergenerational cycles of harm. E.g. *The Australian Family Partnership Program*⁵⁷, *NSW Health's Safe Start model*⁵⁸ and the *Gidget Foundation*⁵⁹,
- **Build a strong early childhood development system (pregnancy–5).** Link maternal and child health, family support and quality ECEC – prioritising culturally strong, ACCO-led services – so children's development, identity and connection are protected from the start. E.g. *NSW Aboriginal Children and Family Centres Program* combine ECEC with maternal and child health, parenting/family supports and warm referrals, with local Aboriginal leadership baked into governance⁶⁰, *SNAICC's Early Years Support*⁶¹ and *Tasmania's Child and Family Centres*⁶².

SECONDARY INTERVENTION

- **Keep children safe and communities safer by intervening early.** Expand community-based diversion and practical bail supports – including safe accommodation, casework, restorative justice and culturally-safe, community-led responses – so young people stay connected to family, school and services and avoid the harm of remand and detention. E.g. *NSW's Youth Bail Assistance Line*⁶³ and *Queensland's Community Youth Response and Diversion program*.⁶⁴
- **Back family therapy that's explicitly youth-justice-facing (early, practical, at-home).** Example: *Functional Family Therapy – Youth* by OzChild in partnership with Yerrabi in the ACT, works with young people and family/kin, with a stated focus on keeping young people out of youth justice and create a safer and more inclusive community⁶⁵.
- **Reimagine crisis response away from punishment and toward care.** Invest in Alternative First Responder models that send health workers, peer workers, Elders and community-led responders – not just police – to situations involving mental distress, trauma, family conflict or child wellbeing concerns. These approaches reduce escalation, keep young people connected to community and supports, and prioritise safety, dignity and long-term wellbeing over criminalisation. E.g. the Alternative First Responders campaign led by the National Justice Project.⁶⁶

TERTIARY INTERVENTION

- **Make detention safe, lawful and genuinely rehabilitative – aligned with UN standards and developmental science.** Implement national minimum standards across all jurisdictions, guided by children and young people, with transparent monitoring and consequences for non-compliance.

That means, at minimum:

- Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 – nationally, with no carve-outs.
- End practices that amount to torture or ill-treatment – including spit hoods and solitary confinement – and never detain children in adult facilities.
- Guarantee the basics in custody: education, health and mental health care, and meaningful family contact.

As per multiple submissions by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Australian NGO coalition, Save the Children/ 54 Reasons and the Human Rights Commission ⁶⁷

- **Optimising opportunities for bail** and supports to facilitate bail (such as accommodation) to prevent cyclical contact with the youth justice system.⁶⁸

Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

PRIMARY INTERVENTION

- **Build culturally safe, anti-racist systems that strengthen belonging.** Remove discrimination in schools, services and policing, and back community-led design so every child's identity is respected and they're treated fairly – reducing harmful pathways into statutory systems. E.g. the *National Anti-Racism Framework's* 63 recommendations⁶⁹, Reconciliation Australia's *Narragunnawali Awards* for schools⁷⁰ and *Learning To Engage- A Review of Victoria Police Cross-Cultural Training Practices* (2013)⁷¹
- **Self-determination to deliver Closing the Gap targets.** Embed formal partnerships and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and invest in community-controlled services, to accelerate progress on national targets – including reducing youth detention, out-of-home care overrepresentation, and family violence. E.g. *The Productivity Commission review*⁷², *OCHRE Local Decision-Making Stage 2 Evaluation: NCARA-State Accord Evaluation Report (4. Focus Areas)*⁷³ and Queensland's *Our Way Changing Tracks Report*⁷⁴.
- **Build a high-quality workforce and systems.** Require wellbeing training for all professionals who work with or make decisions about children – grounded in child brain and body development science, trauma-informed practice and cultural safety – so services consistently centre children's safety, identity and holistic wellbeing. E.g. *ACSQHC's* national work on cultural safety training⁷⁵ shows what "minimum capability" should look like across systems and the *Emerging Minds 2023 National Workforce Survey*⁷⁶

SECONDARY INTERVENTION

- **Partner with First Nations communities** to design and deliver culturally safe, community-controlled alternatives to custody. ACCOs provide place-based, healing-informed supports that build identity and reduce reoffending. For example: *Maranguka*, the first Aboriginal-led place-based model of justice reinvestment in Australia, based in Bourke in north-west NSW between 2015 and 2017 rates fell by: 18% for major offences, 34% for non-domestic violence related assaults, 39% for domestic violence related assaults, 39% for drug offences, 35% for driving offences and rates of reoffending also dropped significantly.⁷⁷

TERTIARY INTERVENTION

- **Upgrade practical powers of First Nations Elders in the justice system – not just ‘cultural input’.** All States and Territories started operating First Nations Sentencing Courts between 1999 (SA) and 2006 (WA)⁷⁸. Victoria’s *Children’s Koori Court* for example seats Elders/Respected Persons alongside the magistrate at the table, creates space for the young person and family to speak, and supports culturally informed decisions that strengthen accountability and connection.⁷⁹ However, this cultural input is only available to children and young people who plead guilty. This perpetuates addressing the symptom not the cause of harmful behaviour.

Here are some examples of practical strategies to increase self-determination in the justice system and reduce over-representation of First Nations children and young people in the system:

- **Legislate diversion-first cautions so court is genuinely last resort.** NSW’s *Young Offenders Act* set a clear “warnings–cautions–conferencing–court” pathway⁸⁰; in its first three years the odds of an Aboriginal first-time offender being taken to court fell by almost 50% – showing that rules plus oversight can narrow over-representation at the front door.⁸¹ This law was cited by Premier Allen as inspiration for similar provisions in the Victorian Government’s *Youth Justice Bill 2024*⁸²
- **Use Elder-supported cautions at first police contact.** Victoria Police’s *Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program* (AYCP) is an enhanced cautioning approach developed in with Aboriginal communities that connects young people with Aboriginal Elders and local supports to address harmful behaviour that’s driving police contact.⁸³
- **Use action-and-support plans monitored over time, not “one and done” court events.** NSW’s *Youth Koori Court* identifies risks (like homelessness, disengagement from education, health issues), builds an action/support plan with the young person and community, connects to wrap around services and reviews progress across multiple court dates before sentencing.⁸⁴
- **Make “Elders in the room” normal practice in diversion conferencing.** NSW’s *Youth Justice Conferencing Manual*⁸⁵ explicitly includes Aboriginal Elders and respected community members, and *Queensland’s restorative justice*

*conferencing guidance*⁸⁶ says Elders/CJG members may be invited to help repair harm and strengthen cultural connection.

- **Fund ACCO-led cultural support and throughcare alongside orders and reintegration.** Queensland's 'The Yili Program' delivered by Yiliyapinya Indigenous Corporation provides holistic wellbeing support to First Nations young people who have recently exited detention combining cultural wisdom with neuroscience. Victoria's *Koori Youth Justice Program* (delivered largely through ACCOs) focuses on keeping young people connected to family/community, supporting compliance in the community, and providing pre- and post-release support to reintegrate safely.⁸⁷

Learning

PRIMARY INTERVENTION

- **Early Years and Adolescent Brain Development.** Increased capability across workforces, and providing support for caregivers, with understanding the critical role of relationships and the Early Years for fostering healthy brain development.

In addition, evidence highlights that “three conditions are critically important to healthy psychological development in adolescence: (1) the presence of a parent or parent figure who is involved with the adolescent and concerned about his or her successful development, (2) inclusion in a peer group that values and models prosocial behaviour and academic success, and (3) activities that contribute to autonomous decision-making and critical thinking. Schools, extracurricular activities, and work settings can provide opportunities for adolescents to learn to think for themselves, develop self-reliance and self-efficacy, and improve reasoning skills”.⁸⁸

Embedding neuro-informed knowledge across workforces and communities is critical for a whole-system preventative response. Queensland Kids Partnership (QKP) is leading this work through its [Building Brains and Bodies portfolio](#) — bringing together researchers, educators, health services and communities to embed brain and body science into the systems around children. At the heart of this is Growing Deadly Brains — a three-year, First Nations-led initiative co-led by [Yiliyapinya Indigenous Corporation](#) and QKP, fusing cultural knowledge with neuroscience to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to thrive. Yiliyapinya — meaning brain in the Wankumara (Galali) Language — provides evidence-informed, applied neuroscience programs using an ecological approach, aiming to close the gap in learning outcomes for children who have experienced adverse life circumstances. Yiliyapinya Growing Deadly Brains is a collaborative, family and community-building initiative working across services, systems and disciplines to reduce the experience and consequences of inequity and adversity for Queensland First Nations children.

As a universal service, the education system plays a critical role in embedding this across workforce capability building and curricula.

- **Orientate education for wellbeing.** Reorientate the education system to support the holistic wellbeing of students as well as academic success, in alignment with the principles in *Reinventing Australian Schools*⁸⁹. Reorientating the education system to supporting wellbeing holistically, in alignment with the principles in *Reinventing Australian Schools*. Noting student wellbeing is also a priority of the *Full and Fair Funding Agreement (2025-2034)*.⁹⁰ E.g.: the *Berry Street Education Model* a trauma-informed positive education initiative⁹¹; The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation's School Food Systems Position Statement which argues for a national food skills competency framework for all young people to support lifelong health and wellbeing⁹²; and place-based coalitions coordinating school and community supports like *Communities that Care*⁹³.
- **Back the world's best ECEC sector especially ACCO-led.** Build a strong early childhood development system (maternal and child health, family support, ECEC) – prioritising ACCO-led services – so children start safe, connected and learning well, reducing later statutory system contact. E.g. Recommendations from SNAICC Early Years Support Evaluation Report,⁹⁴ NSW *Aboriginal Child and Family Centres* integrated, culturally safe early years services which provide “one front door”,⁹⁵ and NSW's *Early Learning Commission* now an independent ECEC regulator (ratings, compliance, enforcement) – a practical model of what stronger oversight looks like nationally.⁹⁶
- **Train decision-makers to use a shared wellbeing and learning “common language”.** ARACY's *The Common Approach*⁹⁷ builds practical conversation skills and a consistent wellbeing framework (digital pathway + workshop) that can be used across education, child protection and justice. This will empower children and young people caught in the system to be able to communicate with its representatives about their holistic wellbeing needs and drivers of their harmful behaviour.

SECONDARY INTERVENTION

- **Transition away from punitive punishments that suspend or expel children from schools.** School exclusion significantly increases the risk of contact with the justice system. Supportive schooling environments reduce disengagement and create protective routines and relationships.⁹⁸ E.g. Victoria's School-wide *Positive Behaviour Support* a globally recognised, evidence-based framework. An external evaluation found it created: Greater student connectedness, inclusion, and respect for diversity; Improved classroom behaviour and reduced bullying; More students reporting they feel supported by an adult at school; Increased staff collaboration and confidence; and Fewer suspension days⁹⁹

TERTIARY INTERVENTION

Train decision-makers to underpin decisions with trauma and neuro-informed understanding

By recognising how developmental vulnerability and trauma interact, youth justice systems can move beyond punitive models toward prevention strategies that address underlying neurodevelopmental needs, ultimately improving long-term outcomes for young people and communities shift from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?”, so responses address developmental

vulnerability and the impacts of adversity rather than defaulting to punishment.¹⁰⁰

Material Basics

PRIMARY INTERVENTION

- **Invest in social housing.** Public and community housing – gives families a safe, stable, culturally safe home. That stability strengthens health and safety and is a practical prevention investment that reduces justice system contact. E.g. *Perth's 50 Lives 50 Homes* reported substantial reductions in justice-system costs once people were housed. i.e. 35% reduction in offences committed one year pre/post housing and 43% reduction after two years pre/post housing.¹⁰¹ For people who experience chronic homelessness and exhibit high use of health, criminal justice and homelessness services, a tenancy at *Brisbane Common Ground* is associated with a reduction in service use that, even when the cost of providing *Brisbane Common Ground* are included, constitutes a cost offset of \$13,100 per person per year.¹⁰²
- **Pair parenting and other income supports to meets basic needs.** By lifting *JobSeeker* and *Youth Allowance* (and related payments) to parity with the pension, indexed to wages as well as prices – so families can keep housing, food and transport stable, and young people can live safely when they can't stay at home. On the parenting side, evaluated Australian programs like *Teen Triple P*¹⁰³ and *Parents Under Pressure*¹⁰⁴ reduce parent-child conflict, parenting stress and child behaviour problems – key upstream risk factors for later justice contact

SECONDARY INTERVENTION

- **Provide rapid housing stability support for young people at risk of homelessness.** Pair it with trauma-informed family mediation and safety planning where safe, to prevent homelessness before it becomes a crisis. Evaluated early-intervention models that stop housing crises becoming repeat system contact e.g. the *Reconnect* found measurable improvements in clients' housing situation and strong provider agreement it reduces entry into homelessness¹⁰⁵. *The Geelong Project* reported a 40% drop in adolescent entries to Specialist Homelessness Services after implementing its school-service model¹⁰⁶. *Youth Foyers'* economic analysis also estimates reduced offending and justice-system costs when stable housing is paired with education and wraparound supports.¹⁰⁷

TERTIARY INTERVENTION

- **Guarantee safe accommodation as a default alternative to remand.** Expand services like NSW's *Bail and Accommodation Support Service* (BASS) so after-hours police and courts can place young people straight into safe, supported housing with wraparound casework – keeping them out of remand when the real issue is nowhere safe to go.¹⁰⁸
- **Fund wrap-around service models.** Provide coordinated support for people leaving the criminal justice system, addressing income, employment and social support needs. E.g.

- *Community Restorative Centre (NSW)* – community-sector reintegration casework (throughcare). The evaluation found 66% fewer days in custody, 63% fewer new custody episodes, and 62% fewer proven offences after participation, with estimated \$10–16m criminal justice cost savings per annual cohort.¹⁰⁹
- The NSW *Reintegration Housing Support Program* – housing-first style support for people exiting custody, with housing navigation + casework. evaluation reported 46% achieved long-term housing, compared with 3.2% for Specialist Homelessness Services clients exiting custody.¹¹⁰
- The Queensland Government, Department of Youth Justice and Victim Support (2018–2026) *Transition to Success* program community-based vocational training and therapeutic supports for 15–17-year-olds involved in youth justice (an “off-ramp” to work/training). This program reports 95% transitioned into education/employment/training (or another T2S course); \$2.13 benefit per \$1 spent; and average custody nights per month reduced from 1.8 to 1.1 in the 12 months after completion.¹¹¹

Healthy

PRIMARY INTERVENTION

- **Build universal, preventative mental health supports in schools.** Make supportive relationships and predictable environments the default – teach social and emotional literacy skills, strengthen student connectedness to trusted adults, and respond early to stress and dysregulation. This reduces bullying, aggression and classroom disruption (common pathways into later justice contact). E.g. Victoria’s School-wide Positive Behaviour Support whole-school prevention framework. An external evaluation found stronger implementation was associated with improved classroom behaviour, reduced bullying, and fewer suspension days.¹¹² The Kids Institute’s *Friendly Schools Friendly Families* program proved that comprehensive whole-school programmes that include capacity building and parental involvement appear to reduce bullying behaviour.¹¹³
- **Scale up Maternal Early Childhood Sustained Home-visiting (MESCH) / *right@home*** a sustained nurse home visiting program to vulnerable families to address risk factors such as maternal depression is associated with impaired parenting¹¹⁴, inconsistent discipline, and increased conflict — all of which are linked to the development of externalising behaviours in children, such as aggression and rule-breaking, which are precursors to youth offending. At ages 4–5, outcomes of the *right@home* Victoria and Tasmania pilot evaluations showed an overall pattern favouring the intervention, with modest benefits across child and maternal mental health, parenting and family relationships¹¹⁵ The *right@home* NT evaluation reports strong reach into priority families, with 45% of families engaged in enhanced care and psychosocial support – supporting the case for embedding sustained home visiting as part of a proportionate universal system.¹¹⁶

SECONDARY INTERVENTION

- **Provide health screening for at-risk youth.** All children at first contact with either the youth justice or child protection systems should be screened for hearing impairment and developmental delays given the high prevalence and additional complexity these treatable health conditions can contribute. E.g. The *Queensland Deadly Ears Program* shows when systems make ear and hearing checks routine and follow through with treatment, hearing loss drops.¹¹⁷
- **Divert minor drug offences to a health response (not court).** In Queensland, eligible young people (including under 18s) can be diverted by police into a **Drug Diversion Assessment Program** with a Queensland Health-funded alcohol and other drug (AOD) service¹¹⁸.
- **Make diversion plans explicitly include counselling and neuro/cognitive assessment early.** Victoria's Children's Court Youth Diversion Service lists common diversion activities including counselling and assessment for cognitive impairment or learning difficulty¹¹⁹.
- **Scale specialist community forensic youth mental health outreach for kids showing escalating behaviour (including via schools).** In 2026 Victoria boosted funding for the Community Forensic Youth Mental Health Service to expand early access and prevention-focused support for some of Victoria's most vulnerable and at-risk youth with specialist treatment and care".¹²⁰
- Commission evidence-based intensive family therapy that treats harmful behaviour as a health-and-development issue. Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is a structured, intensive family and community-based treatment aimed at reducing antisocial behaviour (including substance use) and keeping young people out of the justice system¹²¹.

TERTIARY INTERVENTION

- **Use police-clinician co-response so a health crisis doesn't become a charge.** Example: A-PACER pairs a senior mental health clinician with Victoria Police for mental-health-related 000 callouts; police can refer directly¹²².
- **Make screening and early response to disability and neurodevelopmental needs mandatory.** At first contact with police, courts, youth justice or child protection, routinely screen for hearing impairment, FASD and other disabilities, and guarantee quick access to assessment, communication supports and tailored services – so disability isn't misread as "bad behaviour" and children aren't criminalised. E.g. The WA Justice's *Functional Impairment Screening Tool* hard-wires screening into justice workflows. An evaluation found of 9,219 screenings (7,102 people), 151 people (2.1%) had a hearing impairment.¹²³

5. Recommendations for all Australian Governments

There is now strong consensus across the evidence, community experience and professional expertise: prevention-first reform is both the right approach and the effective one. The question is no longer whether — it is how, and how fast.

Smart Justice for Young People's *Working Together* action plan is explicit that “youth crime prevention” is a by-product of fixing the systems that aren't working for young people and their families¹²⁴. The National Children's Commissioner's *Help way earlier!* report similarly calls for national, evidence-based reform that protects children's rights and improves safety through earlier support⁹. Aboriginal-led coalitions like *Change the Record* also call for investment in holistic early intervention, prevention and diversion – designed with communities¹²⁵.

ARACY's point of difference is *whole child – whole system*. We put children's holistic wellbeing at the centre of reform, using The Nest as the shared blueprint for what children and young people need to thrive and a practical way for a whole of government approach to judge whether reforms are improving real outcomes (not just processing and compliance). This aligns with health-sector calls to treat child and youth justice as a public health issue and reduce reliance on detention¹²⁶.

ARACY calls on Federal, State and Territory governments to:

Design – build prevention into the system

1. **Embed lived experience** of children and young people at every level: governance, commissioning, design and evaluation as standing infrastructure for reform. Victoria's Youth Diversion Pilot Program evaluation (which included interviews with young people) found diversion worked best when young people had real agency and decision-making power in identifying their needs and shaping the activities in their plan. The evaluation also recommended: “the need for consultation gathering young people's feedback about what helps and what makes it hard to move away from criminal justice system involvement.”¹²⁷ The WA Department of Justice's 2025 Cultural Security Framework was “intentionally been shaped by the voices of people deeply involved with and impacted by the WA youth detention system.”¹²⁸
2. **Scale up funding to and power-sharing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to lead locally designed, culturally safe responses.** This should cover prevention, early intervention, diversion and throughcare – for example *Maranguka* (Bourke, NSW) as a community-led justice reinvestment backbone for prevention¹²⁹; Tangentyere Council's *Looking After the Kids / Night Patrol* (Mparntwe/Alice Springs) as early intervention that diverts kids from escalation¹³⁰; The Yili Program (Meanjin, Qld) as a healing space post detention, KALACC's *Yiriman* (Kimberley, WA) as an on-Country diversion

pathway¹³¹; and North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) *Youth Throughcare* (NT)¹³² plus ATSILS Queensland Throughcare¹³³ to keep young people connected to health, housing, family and learning before and after detention or court contact.

Investment - shift resources upstream

3. **Use every budget to shift investment upstream**, redirecting an increasing share of the justice spend into proven prevention and early intervention, prioritising the Early Years and Middle Years (including 11–14) and community-based diversion. In 2024 the Scottish Government proved it is possible to ‘invert the pyramid’. Over time they built the infrastructure required with secured care settings to eventually remove all children (under 18) from imprisonment.¹³⁴

The case for shifting investment upstream is supported by both Australian data and international evidence. An estimated 84% of child safety system spend currently goes to tertiary intervention. Scotland demonstrates that sustained investment in prevention can reverse this imbalance — and reduce detention rates substantially over time. A shared outcomes framework, built on The Nest, can anchor this shift — moving accountability away from process compliance and toward measurable life outcomes for children and their families.¹³⁵

Deliver – make it stick across governments through strong accountability and governance.

4. **Make children’s wellbeing a standing National Cabinet priority – backed by a coherent national package with targets and transparent reporting.** Australia already has the ingredients: strong services, committed communities, and clear evidence about what helps children thrive. What’s missing is consistent national leadership that lines up Commonwealth, State and Territory decisions so supports don’t fragment at the seams. Aligned with the Act for Children alliance of child-centred organisations – a practical package of measures within the Prime Minister’s remit include: establish a Cabinet Minister for Children, put child safety and wellbeing on the standing National Cabinet agenda¹³⁶, agree a National Plan for Child Wellbeing with measurable targets and public reporting, and legislate a National Children’s Act so children’s rights and wellbeing are embedded across portfolios, not treated as optional extras¹³⁷. This is how we move from patchwork to purpose – giving governments a shared direction, the authority to coordinate, and the accountability to show whether children are actually doing better.

5. **Use The Nest as the national shared outcomes and accountability framework** – and require a public health reform plan across primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. Governments should publish (and fund) a single, measurable plan that maps prevention and youth justice actions against The Nest’s domains and the public health intervention levels, with clear targets and transparent reporting. This must explicitly show how detention reliance will fall by: (primary) preventing predictable harm early, (secondary) intervening quickly when risks emerge, and (tertiary) expanding health-led, developmentally appropriate pathways and strengthening throughcare so children stay connected to family, learning and community. Require The Common Approach wellbeing training (based on The Nest) for police and justice personnel as a workforce standard aligned with Working with Children Check expectations.

We need political leadership that prioritises evidence over short-term pressure — because the cost of inaction is measured in children's lives and community safety. Victoria’s own rationale for the new Violence Reduction Unit is blunt: “the best approach is always to stop crime before it starts” – built on a “preventative and public health approach” that links up police, schools, health, housing and community services, rather than pretending punishment alone will fix what other systems failed to prevent. That’s the shift we need – stop swinging between ‘soft on crime’ and ‘tough on crime’ and get ‘smart on crime’.¹³⁸

5. Conclusion

Australia has everything it needs to build a child and youth justice system that actually works — the evidence, the community knowledge, the programs, and the frameworks. What is needed is sustained investment in the right place, at the right time, guided by what children and communities tell us works. Every year of delayed reform is a year of preventable harm — to children, to families, and to the communities that want to be safe.

ARACY is calling for a public health and wellbeing reset – with Federal, State and Territory governments acting together, using The Nest as the shared blueprint and accountability frame. This means making children’s wellbeing a standing National Cabinet priority with a shared national child safety and wellbeing plan and transparent reporting, embedding lived experience in governance, commissioning and evaluation as core infrastructure, and redirecting an increasing proportion of justice investment every budget upstream into prevention, Early and Middle Years support and community-based diversion. It also means funding and backing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to lead locally designed, culturally safe responses, and reducing reliance on detention by expanding health-led, developmentally appropriate rehabilitation pathways.

Systems deliver the results they are designed, resourced and equipped to deliver. The challenge facing child and youth justice reform is not fundamentally one of intent — it is one of design. Transforming outcomes for children requires transforming the systems around them.

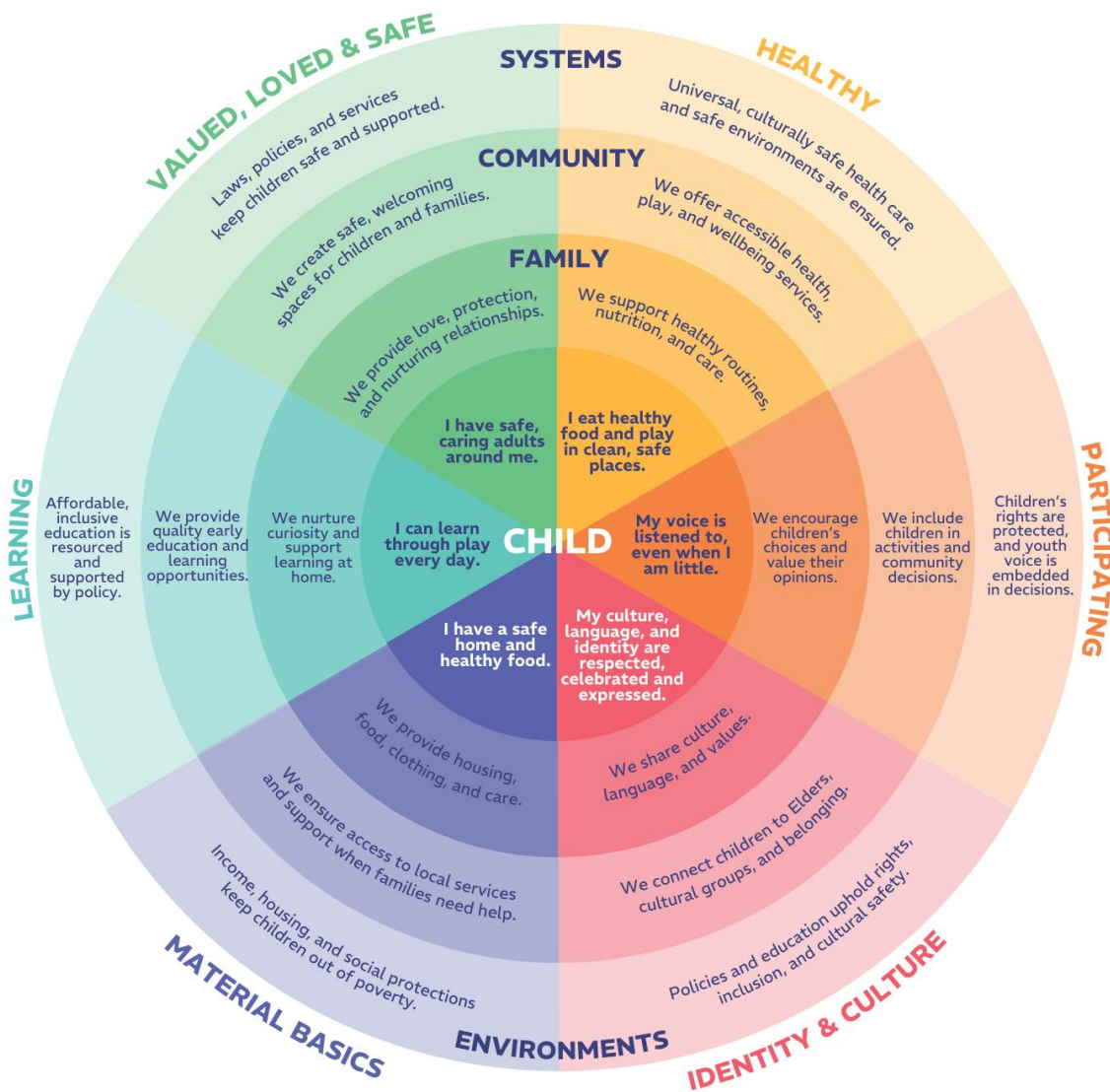
If governments are serious about safer communities, the test is simple – stop paying most when it’s too late and start building the conditions that prevent harm and keep children out of the system in the first place.

6. Example Systems Recommendations

The below uses an ecological model to illustrate the interconnected domains of The Nest. It shows what children need to thrive which will protect them from harmful behaviour and contact with the child justice system.

THE NEST

Wellbeing Wheel



7. Endnotes

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