

Kids say youth prison better than state care

LAUREN NOVAK

NEW research will examine why growing numbers of young South Australians in state care are ending up in custody.

The office of the Guardian for Children in Care has launched a new project in response to a 20 per cent increase in the number of young people who are already in the care of the government being detained at the Youth Justice Centre.

Guardian advocate Conrad

Morris has revealed some young people have told the office they would "rather stay in the centre than go back to their (care) placement, which is really concerning".

Mr Morris will examine what is driving them to break the law, including the influence of their peers and how their behaviours are managed by child-protection workers.

There are about 4400 children in state care, including about 550 who live with staff in state-run homes.

Last financial year, 328

youths were admitted to the Youth Justice Centre, including 93 who were also in state care. That was up from 77 in 2017-18, although the total number of young offenders has remained stable.

Many are repeatedly caught and serve multiple periods in custody. A report from the Guardian's office shows youths in care are admitted an average of 2.8 times a year, compared with 1.7 times for other young offenders.

The report also warns "most" of the girls or young

women detained at the centre were living in state-run homes at the time of their offending.

The Child Protection Department says police are called if a young person who has run away is known to be in danger.

It says national data published last year shows youths detained in SA were the least likely to have also been involved in the child-protection system.

The department has brought in specialist staff, including 10 allied health workers and a lead psychiatric

director, to work with young people who repeatedly flee.

The government is also spending \$600,000 on a new therapeutic care approach in state-run homes, as well as \$18.7m to upgrade the Youth Justice Centre.

Opposition spokeswoman Katrine Hildyard said numerous advocates had long raised concerns about the rates of children in state care who are taken into custody.

She said the Guardian's office needed more funding to monitor their situation.