



MEDIA RELEASE

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Child protection and youth justice failing children caught up in two systems

The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People's latest report calls for immediate action to end the systems abuse affecting some of South Australia's most vulnerable children and young people.

The final report of the South Australian Dual Involved Project found that harmful practices at multiple service levels expose children and young people living in state care to a disproportionate and unacceptable risk of becoming involved in the youth justice system.

The Report draws on the experiences of 71 'dual involved' children and young people who were in state care and experienced youth detention in 2021. Giving precedence to the views and voices of the children and young people, it explores how failings in the South Australian child protection and youth justice systems contribute to 'criminalising' them.

Unsafe social dynamics and fraught, unpredictable living environments within the child protection system – at times brought about by poor or highly constrained placement matching, inadequate therapeutic support and the over-policing of children in state care – are identified as key issues leading to their incarceration in South Australia's Kurlana Tapa Youth Justice Centre.

Interviewed young people consistently said they do not feel safe at their residential care placement and prefer to be in Kurlana Tapa where they feel better supported and are 'treated better'. Many young people are being remanded in the centre due to breach of their bail, often for going missing from residential care because they do not feel safe.

Guardian for Children and Young People and Training Centre Visitor, Penny Wright, said "there is a concerning lack of accountability for dual involved children and young people who frequently pass from system to system without consistent oversight and support for their individual needs.

"There is an alarming complacency about this group of young lives. It's as if it is to be expected that children from a care background – and residential care in particular – are much more likely to end up in trouble and there is nothing we can do about it."

"We need to be absolutely clear that children and young people in state care are not overrepresented in youth justice detention because they are *inherently* more criminal than other kids. They are not born this way. Too often we can trace their offending behaviours to the care environment in which they have been placed, on top of trauma they have already experienced."

"Many have chronic health, developmental or disability related needs that have not been adequately diagnosed or addressed while they have been in care or detained in a custodial environment," Ms Wright said.

“We need to stop being fatalistic about this and set real goals for the child protection and youth detention systems to change the conditions and harm that children and young people experience on their watch.”

The Report concluded that Aboriginal children and young people remain grossly over-represented and under-supported in both the child protection and youth justice systems, and that increasing cultural support was vitally important as a protective factor against youth justice involvement.

The Report has made 15 recommendations to the South Australian government, including:

- reviewing, analysing and reducing police involvement in residential care behaviour management; and
- establishing a specialised ‘Dual Involved Team’ in the Department for Child Protection to provide expert support, case management and co-ordination for children and young people moving between the systems.

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