

# OFFENDING BY YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

## BRIEFING PAPER

Trends, Causes and Policy Responses

MARCH 2025



## About SACOSS

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) is the peak body for non-government health and community services in South Australia, and has a vision of justice, opportunity, and shared wealth for all South Australians.

Our mission is to be a voice that leads and supports our community to take actions that achieve our vision, and to hold to account governments, businesses, and communities for actions that disadvantage South Australians. SACOSS aims to influence public policy in a way that promotes fair and just access to the goods and services required to live a decent life. We undertake research to help inform community service practice, advocacy, and campaigning. We have more than 75 years' experience of social and economic policy and advocacy work that addresses issues impacting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Kurna people and acknowledge the Kurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide region and the Greater Adelaide Plains. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands beyond Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We pay our respects to the cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and colleagues and recognise the cultural expertise that they hold.

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# Briefing Paper

## Offending by young people in South Australia

### Introduction

The purpose of this Briefing Paper is to provide an overview and analysis of key trends in offending involving young people in South Australia.

The data sources include South Australian Police crime statistics for 2023-24 of all offences committed by young people; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024) Recorded Crime – Youth Offenders; data from the Courts Administration Authority; and an analysis of the Productivity Commission (2025) Report on Government Services – Youth Justice Services.

### Key points

#### The data tells us that

- All crime in South Australia has gone down in the last year
- Only 9% of crime is committed by young people
- Since 2008 youth offending has more than halved and the number of young people in detention has been reduced by 35%
- In the last year youth offending ticked up slightly but is coming down again
- In 2023-24, there were 1,073 instances of young people failing to comply with their bail agreement. This is a reduction of 302 charges on the 2022-23 number of 1,375 and reflects a 22% decrease.
- The number of young people under supervision and in detention has declined since 2015
- At every stage of contact with the criminal justice system Aboriginal children are overrepresented
- We spent more than \$49m on detention-based responses to youth offending in 2023-24

#### Incarceration and our responses to young offenders are failing – we have an opportunity to do things differently and to focus more on the causes that result in offending

- There is a relatively small group of young people who re-offend and this group deserves intensive support and diversionary programs to reduce youth offending
- We need to end sensationalist and alarmist reporting based on misrepresented data which stokes public sentiment and disparages young people but doesn't do anything to reduce offending

### What does the data tell us?

#### Crime in South Australia has gone down in the last year

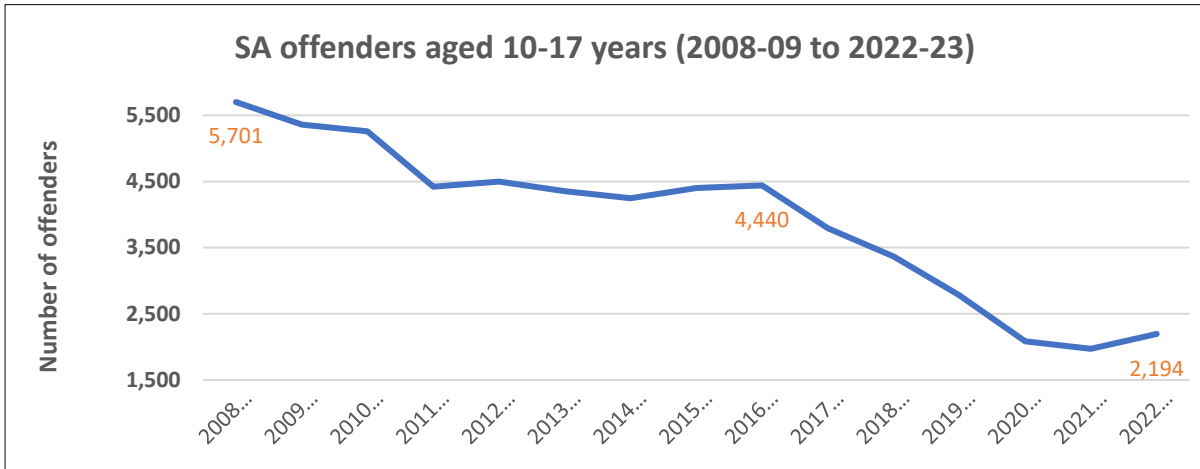
For all offenders (including young people) since December 2023 every type of offence has gone down including house break-ins, shop theft, car theft and theft from vehicles. Robbery and related offences have dropped by 26% and aggravated robbery offences by 20 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

#### Most crime is not committed by young people

In 2022-23 young offenders were only 9% of the total offender population in South Australia.<sup>2</sup>

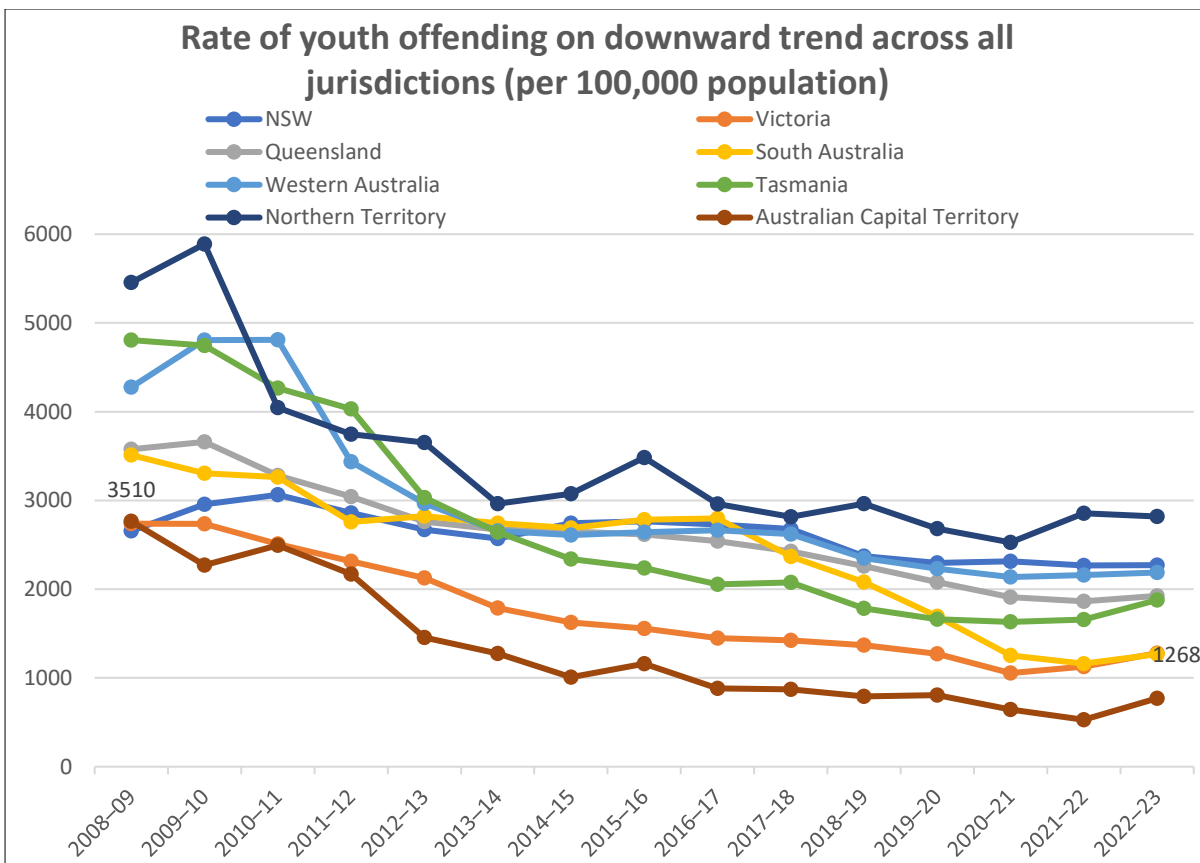
## The long-term trend shows youth offending is going down

In South Australia over the 14-year period from 2008-09 to 2022-23 the number of young offenders more than halved, with the decline accelerating after 2016<sup>3</sup> (see graph below).



Source: ABS (Feb 2024) Recorded Crime – Offenders Table 20: Youth Offenders<sup>3</sup>

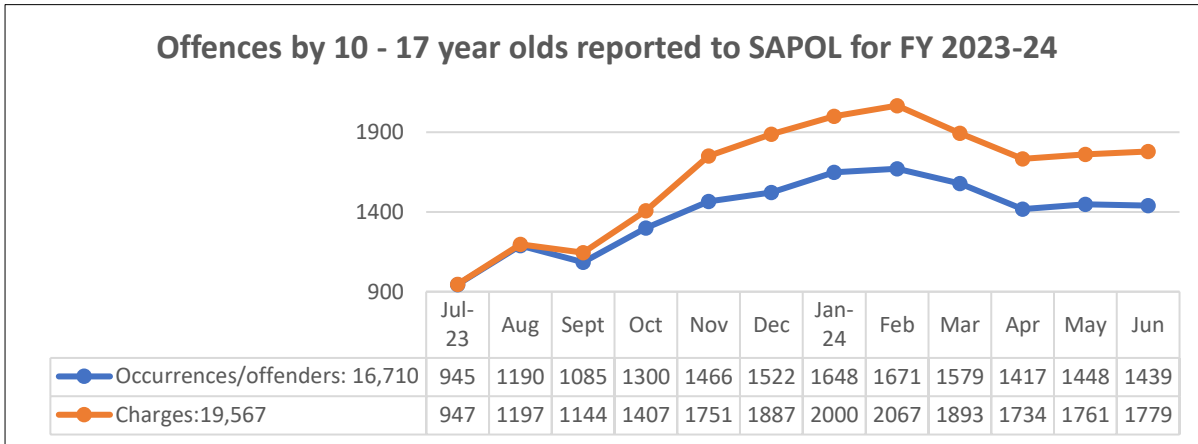
The graph below reflects data from across Australia which also finds young offending has decreased in every state and territory since 2008-09.<sup>4</sup>



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024). Recorded Crime – Offenders. Table 20 Youth Offenders, States and Territories, 2008-09 to 2022-23. Youth offences per 100,000 population

## Since January 2024 offending by young people has been coming down

During the 2023-24 financial year there was an increase in offending between July 2023 and February 2024, but between February and June 2024 offending declined.<sup>1</sup>



Source: SACOSS (2025) analysis of SAPOL data<sup>1</sup>

## The number of charges laid is not a reliable indicator of youth offending

As the graph above shows, more charges are laid (orange line) than the number of occurrences involving young people (blue line) because one occurrence of offending involving one person can attract multiple charges. Thus, reporting on the number of charges creates an inflated impression of the extent of offending, noting too that these charges have not yet been tested by the courts to indicate guilt or innocence.

## Breaches of bail orders in 2023-24 down by 22% on previous year

Recent data from the Courts Administration Authority (February 2025)<sup>5</sup> indicates that in the past year (2023-24) there were 1,073 instances of young people failing to comply with their bail agreement. This is a reduction of 302 charges on the 2022-23 number of 1,375 and reflects a 22% decrease.

Type of offence	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Total over 5yrs
Fail to comply with bail agreement	918	615	857	1375	1073	4838

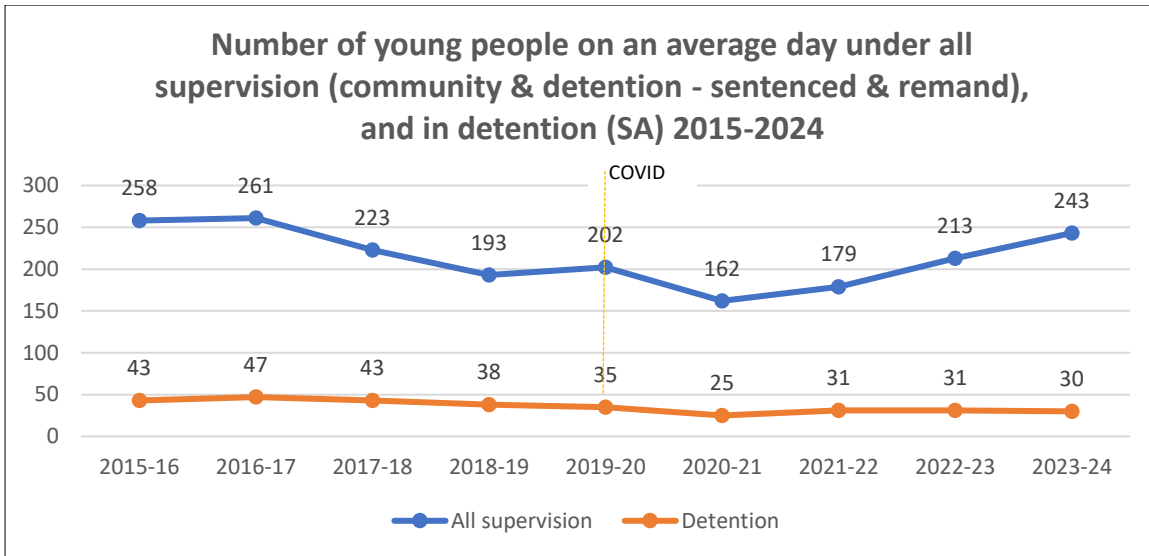
While the data for the last two financial years indicates an increase on the previous three years, including increases from 918 in 2019-20 and from 857 in 2021-22, the data needs to be understood in the context of social impacts, such as the period from 2020-21 when the COVID pandemic resulted in lock-downs, restrictions on people's movement, and an increase in social security payments through the COVID Supplement – all of which reduced opportunities for offending to occur. When compared with the low numbers during the height of the pandemic, the numbers in more recent years are relatively higher but only marginally higher than the 2019-20 pre-COVID period.

## The number of young people under supervision in 2023-24 is lower than in 2016-17

In 2023-24 there were 243 young people under supervision (community supervision or in detention, whether sentenced or unsentenced/on remand) compared with 261 in 2016-17. This number dropped during the COVID19 pandemic when offending and consequently the number of young people under supervision declined because of movement restrictions and lock-downs and the introduction of additional social security supports (COVID Supplement), which lifted many households out of poverty.

Since the height of the pandemic, the COVID Supplement has been withdrawn, and coupled with the housing and cost of living crisis and factors such as changes to policing, the number of young people under supervision

returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2022-23. It increased in 2023-24 but is still below the numbers reported for 2015 to 2017.<sup>6</sup>



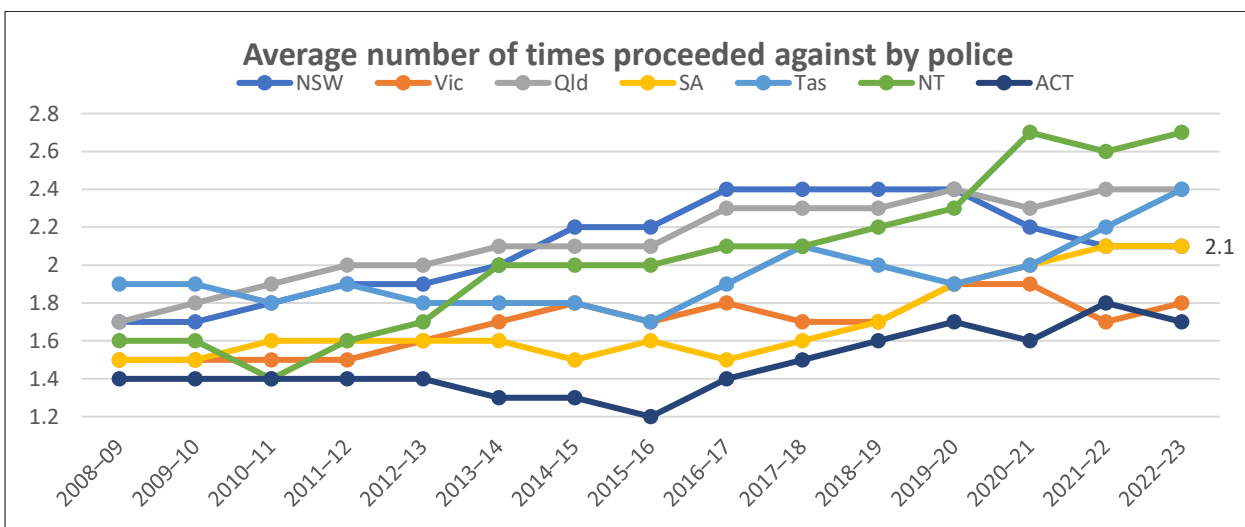
Source: SACOSS (2025) Productivity Commission (2025) Report on Government Services. Table 17A.1<sup>5</sup>

### The number of young people in detention has gone down

In 2023-24, South Australia's rate of incarceration (detention) was 1.7 per 10,000 young people aged 10-17, down from 1.8 in both 2022-23 and 2021-22. The average daily number of young people *in detention* (whether sentenced or on remand) also went down from 31 in the previous two years to 30 in 2023-24. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people continue to be over-represented in the number and rate of incarceration, with 16 young people detained on an average day (just over half the total number) and at a rate of 17 per 10,000 compared to 0.8 for non-Aboriginal young people in South Australia.<sup>5</sup>

### A small group of young people re-offend

In most states and territories, around a third (between 31% and 37%) of young offenders were proceeded against by police more than once in 2022-23. In South Australia this was 30.9%. This has increased from an average of 1.5 times per offender in 2008-09 to 2.1 times in 2022-23: the same as NSW but lower than the Northern Territory (2.7) and Queensland (2.4) and higher than Victoria (1.8) and ACT (1.7).<sup>2</sup>



Source: SACOSS (2025) analysis of ABS Data<sup>2</sup>

The Courts Administration Authority data (February 2025)<sup>5</sup>, which includes more recent data for 2023-24, indicates that recidivism/re-offending is a concern but there is a relatively small group of young people who re-offend.

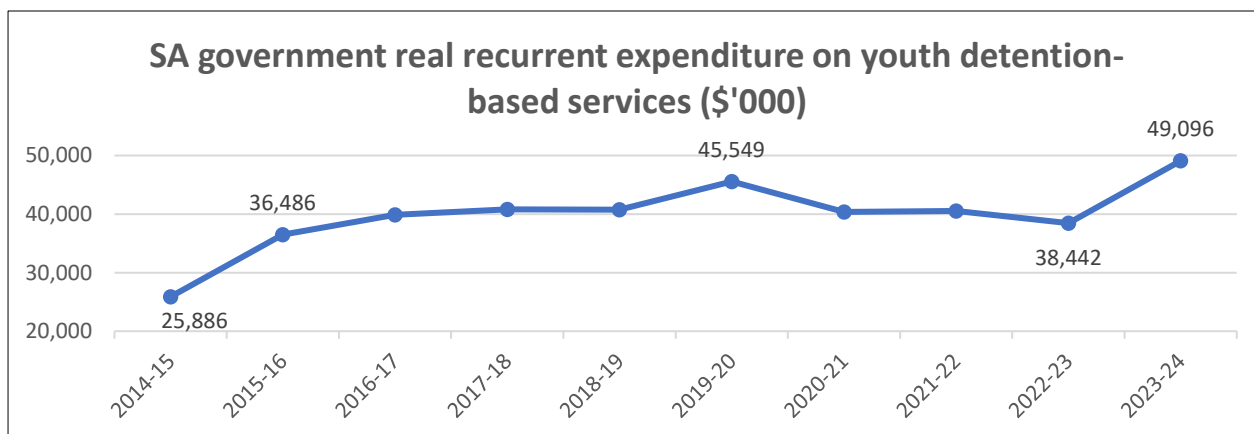
The number of children under the age of 14 years who are involved in re-offending and are ranked in the top 20 instances of multiple charges over the past five years, amounts to two 12-year-olds and twelve 13-year-olds.

Year	Number of 12-year-olds	Number of 13-year-olds
2019-20	0	6
2020-21	0	0
2021-22	2	3
2022-23	0	2
2023-24	0	1
<b>Total over 5 years</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>12</b>

Given the small size of this cohort and that these young people are known to the child protection and/or youth justice services, it would not be difficult to identify and engage with them in a more effective way through diversionary programs and intensive therapeutic support services. The fact that children and young people re-offend, with some offenders accruing a significant number of charges, reiterates that charging and detaining children is not having the desired effect.

### Expenditure on imprisoning young people has increased

Across Australia, the annual net operating costs of child incarceration exceeded \$1 billion in 2023-24, up from \$908 million the previous year and nearly double the \$544 million spent in 2014-15. In South Australia, in 2023-24 we spent 20 times as much on youth detention-based services (\$49m) as we did on family group conferencing (\$2.4m) and nearly 8 times as much as we spent on community-based services (\$6.4m).<sup>4</sup> On an average day, the cost per young person in detention is \$4,189 per day.<sup>7</sup>



Source: Productivity Commission (2025) *Report on Government Services*. 17A.20

## Despite this real decline in offending, we still need better ways to respond to the young people who do?

To further reduce offending involving young people we need to fix *the developmental system* – the matrix of institutions, relationships and primary care environments that shape and are shaped by young people and parents.<sup>8</sup> We cannot simply blame or focus on the individual young person’s so-called ‘deficiencies’.<sup>9</sup>

We can work on the factors known to influence offending behaviour and treat the underlying drivers and causes rather than criminalising and locking up young people and setting them on a trajectory of further harm.

## Factors that influence young offending

### The housing crisis and cost of living pressures

The cost of living and housing crisis has had a significant impact on young people and their families, and may trigger the drivers that result in offending. Young people are struggling in a rental and housing crisis, in which finding long-term safe and affordable housing options is becoming very difficult. The increase in theft of items such as groceries and fuel may point to them being unable to afford necessities, and may be a driving factor behind an increase in offending.

### Psycho-social experiences, maltreatment of children and a lack of support services

Across Australia, children charged with offending have been reported to have experienced:

- high levels of adversity and trauma,
- family difficulties,
- child protection involvement,
- previous contact with police,
- domestic, family and sexual violence,
- disengagement from school,
- substantial mental health and disability issues.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this assessed need, there is little evidence of engagement with clinical or therapeutic services being made available to these children.<sup>7</sup> There is also a direct link between self-reported child maltreatment and the incidence of arrests, convictions and imprisonment, varying depending on the nature of the maltreatment.<sup>11</sup>

Promoting early intervention, prevention and therapeutic programs, not locking up young people, and raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility are necessary steps to prevent the criminalisation of young people.

### Incarceration leads to increased likelihood of re-offending

There is substantial evidence that, rather than making our communities safer by promoting the positive development and rehabilitation of young people, incarceration leads to an increased likelihood of re-offending and the criminal justice system is in fact criminogenic<sup>12</sup> with prisons sometimes characterised as “...‘universities of crime’ that enable offenders to learn more and better offending strategies and skills, and to create and maintain criminal networks.”<sup>13</sup>

If the same young people are repeatedly coming into contact with the justice system, something is not working. Detention and so called “diversionary” programs are failing to turn around the behaviour of a small cohort of repeat offenders, and a relatively small number of young people are becoming entrenched in the system.

### Role of policing

Nearly all contact with the criminal justice system starts with police contact. Policing has a significant impact on offending and imprisonment rates. A policy of ‘focused deterrence’ involving the re-allocation of police resources toward a relatively small number of people will lead to children being unnecessarily arrested and funnelled into the criminal justice system, particularly in communities that are over-policed, where particular demographics are targeted or under surveillance as a ‘suspect population’,<sup>14,15,16</sup> for example, the *Youth and Street Gangs Task Force* established in January 2025, which continues the work of *Operations Meld* and *Mandrake*.<sup>17</sup>

Police discretion can work in favour of, or against, a child suspected of offending. Discretionary powers can be used to either de-escalate or escalate interactions between police and young people. For example, whether to stop a young person, question them and request identification, direct a person to ‘move-on’, decide whether to issue a formal or informal caution, whether to conduct a personal search or a strip search, make an assessment as to whether certain behaviour or language is ‘offensive’, whether to arrest a young person, to formally charge

a young person, or to consent to court-based diversion. Evidence strongly indicates that not all children are equal before the law and that at every stage of contact with the criminal justice system Aboriginal children are overrepresented, and are significantly more likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to be referred to court rather than receive a caution and be arrested rather than issued with a caution or diversion.<sup>18</sup>

Police interactions with children should be focused on moving children away from the justice system. This requires a shift in the cultural and operational norms of policing and police officers to ensure discretion is exercised. Policing culture should be focused on developing cooperative working relationships and increasing trust with communities, initiating actions that promote diversion from the criminal justice system, using non-forceful responses to situations, and making appropriate referrals to support services for children in need.<sup>14</sup>

This simultaneously requires that alternative support systems and diversionary options are in place. Bail laws must be amended to give children the presumption of bail. This needs to be accompanied by appropriate and readily available accommodation and support programs if young people do not have a safe home to go to.

## **Role of the media in influencing public perceptions**

The media plays a powerful role in influencing the perceptions society has of young people.<sup>19</sup> The language used to describe some young people plays into notions of deviancy and the construction of crime news. Young people are frequently reduced to negative labels such as 'anti-social' or 'criminal' with no means of challenging the ways in which they are represented, thereby reinforcing their own disadvantage and undermining their sense of agency. Descriptions such as 'louts', 'gangs' or 'groups of kids running riot' serve to emphasise the negative connotations attached to young people, demonising them and causing alarm. It is very rare to hear the views of young people themselves in the media, more especially when the stories are about them.

The focus on offending and criminalisation serves to isolate young people and amplify their negative portrayal, enabling an 'us' and 'them' attitude between the rest of society (perceived as largely law-abiding people) and young people. Alarmist reporting contributes to inflaming public sentiment and disparaging young people. This is amplified if the relevant data is not accurately represented. The absence of clear and accessible data further enables generalisations and inaccurate allegations about young people and the extent of their offending.

## **The need for reliable publicly accessible data**

There appears to be no current and accessible South Australia Government data on the involvement of young people in offending in South Australia. The SAPOL website currently includes rolling monthly updates on crime statistics that is not disaggregated for young people or by age. To prepare this briefing paper we had to rely on an FOI application to SAPOL and national ABS data which requires further analysis and disaggregation before it can be interpreted. Current, accurate and publicly accessible data on offending by young people in South Australia would contribute towards more accurate reporting in the media. It should not be necessary to submit a Freedom of Information request in order to access this information.

## **Conclusion**

Data about young offending shows that it has primarily been on a downward trajectory over the past decade, with variations driven by a range of factors. The misrepresentation of data about offending by young people and attempts to demonise and disparage them serve to further alienate and marginalise young people, potentially resulting in an increased likelihood of offending.

Effectively responding to offending by young people requires a multi-faceted approach. It should be informed by an understanding of the socio-economic drivers of offending; include prevention, early intervention, appropriate diversionary and support programs, and community-based initiatives; and, importantly, must be based on accurate data and appropriate levels of media accountability and responsibility that limits the licence and extent of commentators misrepresenting the facts and data.

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- <sup>1</sup> SAPOL data provided in response to FOI application to SAPOL requesting 'Crime statistics for 2023-24 financial year of all offences committed by youth aged between 10 – 17 years reported to SAPOL' accessed at [https://www.police.sa.gov.au/search?&collection=sapol-main-search&query=youth%20offending&f.Types%7Cdocuments=Documents&start\\_rank=1](https://www.police.sa.gov.au/search?&collection=sapol-main-search&query=youth%20offending&f.Types%7Cdocuments=Documents&start_rank=1) Determination 25-0984 <https://www.police.sa.gov.au/about-us/proactive-disclosure>
- <sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (Feb 2024) Recorded Crime – Offenders. Statistics about offenders proceeded against by police, including demographic, most serious offence, and family and domestic violence information. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-offenders/2022-23#south-australia>
- <sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (Feb 2024) Recorded Crime – Offenders, Table 20: Youth Offenders, Principal offence, States and Territories, 2008-09 to 2022-23 at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-offenders/2022-23/3.%20Youth%20offenders.xlsx>
- <sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (Feb 2024) Recorded Crime – Offenders, Table 19: Youth Offenders, Principal offence by sex, Australia 2008-09 to 2022-23 at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-offenders/2022-23/3.%20Youth%20offenders.xlsx>
- <sup>5</sup> South Australia Courts Administration Authority (February 2025) Freedom of Information Youth Offending Schedule, as supplied by the CAA Accredited FOI Officer.
- <sup>6</sup> Productivity Commission (2025) *Report on Government Services*. 17A.5 Youth Justice Services <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/community-services/youth-justice>
- <sup>7</sup> Productivity Commission (2025) *Report on Government Services*. 17A.20 Youth Justice Services <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/community-services/youth-justice>
- <sup>8</sup> Lerner & Overton (2008) cited in Homel R, Freiberg K, Branch S & Le H (2015). Preventing the onset of youth offending: The impact of the Pathways to Prevention Project on child behaviour and wellbeing. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 481. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/ti171570>
- <sup>9</sup> Homel, R (2005) cited in Lerner & Overton (2008) cited in Homel R, Freiberg K, Branch S & Le H (2015). Preventing the onset of youth offending: The impact of the Pathways to Prevention Project on child behaviour and wellbeing. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 481. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.
- <sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Criminology. (2024) Baidawi, S. Ball, R. Sheehan, R. and Papalia, N. (2024) *Children aged 10 to 13 in the justice system: Characteristics, alleged offending and legal outcomes* Report to the Criminology Research Advisory Council Grant: CRG 41/20–21 January 2024
- <sup>11</sup> Australian Government, Australian Institute of Criminology. Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice No. 681 *Child maltreatment and criminal justice system involvement in Australia: Findings from a national survey*, and Australian Institute of Criminology (2003). *Pathways from child maltreatment to juvenile offending*. Crime facts info no. 42. Canberra: <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/cfi/cfi42>
- <sup>12</sup> Cunneen (2017) *Arguments for raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility*, p. 12.
- <sup>13</sup> Richards, K (2011) Australian Institute of Criminology. *What makes juvenile offenders different from adult offenders?* pp. 6–7.
- <sup>14</sup> McCausland, R and Baldry, E (2023) 'Who Does Australia Lock Up? The Social Determinants of Justice', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*.
- <sup>15</sup> McConville, M. Sanders, A. Lang, R. (1991). *The Case for the Prosecution – Police Suspects and the Construction of Criminality*. Routledge, London. 1991. 14-17.
- <sup>16</sup> Bowling, B and Phillips, C. (2007). 'Disproportionate and Discriminatory: Reviewing the Evidence on Police Stop and Search' (2007) 70(6) *Modern Law Review* 936.
- <sup>17</sup> South Australia Police (5 Jan 2025) SA Police News. *Frontline police boosted*. <https://www.police.sa.gov.au/sa-police-news-assets/front-page-news/frontline-police-boosted>
- <sup>18</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (n.d.) *Doing Time - Time for Doing - Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system*, pp. 200–205.
- <sup>19</sup> Gordon, F. (2018) *Children, Young People and the Press in a Transitioning Society: Representations, Reactions and Criminalisation*, London: Palgrave Socio-Legal Studies.