



## MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

### **Protecting First Nations lives must be a national priority**

Attributable to Jane Vadeloo, Children's Ground CEO

On the Anniversary of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Children's Ground calls on Australian governments to demonstrate genuine care through action that protects the lives and wellbeing of First Nations people.

With the ongoing and dangerous politicisation of young people and crime, there are alarming rates of First Nations youth overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Across Australia, young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are being locked up at 27 times the rate of non-Indigenous people. This is an appalling abuse of both children, and the systems meant to protect them. It now costs an average of \$1.1 million each year to imprison a single child in Australia. This funding is not preventing harm, it is entrenching it.

Since the Royal Commission released its final report in 1991, the Australian Institute of Criminology reports that at least 590 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody. First Nations people continue to be disproportionately represented in Australia's prison system, a direct result of decades of systemic racism, neglect and punitive policy. The high incarceration of First Nations people is not a reflection of criminality but a failure of justice systems.

In the Northern Territory, First Nations people are experiencing a harmful return to discriminatory and oppressive policymaking under the current Northern Territory Government. This is being driven by a deliberate dismantling of progress, including halting the Territory's Treaty process, lowering the age of criminal responsibility to 10 years old, reintroducing spit hoods in youth detention, and reversing decriminalisation reforms on public drunkenness. Rather than investing in prevention, punitive laws and policies are criminalising First Nations people.

This is what a broken system looks like. Governments continue to advance harmful laws while ignoring proven solutions that support and protect communities. For over 12 months, both the Northern Territory and Australian Governments have failed to progress an independently funded proposal from Children's Ground to build a state-of-the-art centre in a key Town Camp in Alice Springs.

The centre is designed to support First Nations children and young people at risk. It is a proactive and community-driven solution backed by philanthropic investment. Despite the urgency and clear need, there has been little progress. Politics is blocking prevention, and bureaucracy is unable to achieve meaningful action.

Children's Ground urges all levels of government and political leadership to abandon the status quo and commit to policies, laws, funding and partnerships that uphold human rights, protect dignity and prioritise the wellbeing of First Nations children and communities. Governments must replace top-down control with genuine partnerships by investing in systems that nurture rather than punish, that heal rather than harm and that are guided by the strength and leadership of community.

The Anniversary of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody is a powerful reminder of the cost of inaction—and the responsibility governments have to ensure that justice is not delayed any longer.

**END**