

Locked up at only nine

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Article from: Sunday Herald Sun

Kelvin Healey, Crime reporter
August 12, 2007 12:00am

AN alcoholic nine-year-old boy who waged a two-year crime spree, including car theft, has become Victoria's youngest prisoner.

The pint-sized menace was locked up in a secure welfare unit this week as authorities attempt to cure him of alcoholism and stop him committing crimes.

The State Government will be asked to explain how the boy was able to carry out his crime spree and descend into a booze battle without welfare authorities stepping in.

The boy, who began offending at the age of seven, came to police notice 35 times in two years, but he could not be charged because of his age.

His crimes included car theft, stealing from cars and chroming and was also a suspect in a violent assault while on a train.

The boy taunted police who arrested him, telling them he knew he could not be charged.

The department fast-tracked an application to a children's court only when the case became public in June.

Department of Human Services spokesman Brendan Ryan confirmed that the boy had been locked in secure welfare this week.

"He receives daily intensive case management with specialist child support workers and has an additional case worker," Mr Ryan said.

"We are continuing to work with support agencies and police to manage this child's challenging behaviour.

"A lot of people have been working hard to try to turn this child's life around."

Mr Ryan said the boy, from Melbourne's southeastern suburbs, had received specific treatment for addictive behaviour.

Opposition community services spokeswoman Andrea Coote described the case as the worst Department of Human Services scandal in four years.

"It is horrendous," Ms Coote said.

"This is an absolute disgrace. The new minister should make it her top priority.

"This child is nine – there are obviously some significant problems."

Ms Coote said she would demand answers over the case from Community Services Minister Lisa Neville in Parliament.

"We have a really slick and smug government and the children are being neglected," Ms Coote said.

She described it as the worst case of departmental failing since the "Baby Ben" scandal in late 2003.

In that case, a five-month-old baby was handed back to a sadistic foster mother, even though she had inflicted broken bones, cuts, burns and bruises on the child.

Ms Neville's spokesman, Nick Talbot, declined to answer the *Sunday Herald Sun's* questions on the case.

But he said the Government had "a proven track record of working with families for the benefit of children at risk".

"The Department of Human Services works hard to provide safe, secure environments that meets both the needs of children and ensures the safety of the broader community," Mr Talbot said.

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