

Supplementary questions

Justice and Equity Centre

- Despite strategies and directives such as the Youth Strategy and Aboriginal Strategic Direction, there still seems to be a strong 'police-led' approach to reducing youth crime. Why do you think this is, and how do you think these strategies and directives can be better embedded in police responses to youth crime?

Reducing youth crime requires a focus on prevention, early intervention and diversion measures which address the drivers of crime. The younger that a person comes into contact with the criminal justice system, including with police, the more likely they are to become entrenched in that system.

While the NSW Police Force's Youth Strategy 2023-25 and Aboriginal Strategic Direction may contain elements of what is needed to address the drivers of youth crime, they do not change the predominantly 'police-led' approach.

Although the NSW Police Force's Youth Strategy 2023-25 includes an emphasis on prevention and early intervention measures, it also commits to proactive and compliance-based policing initiatives – despite there being little evidence that such measures are appropriate for addressing the needs of young people. Proactive policing increases the interaction of police with young people and their likelihood of ongoing contact with the criminal justice system. It also has a minimal impact on crime reduction and can exacerbate social problems.

Additionally, policing actions often do not adhere to the aim of the NSW Police Force's Aboriginal Strategic Direction to support and divert Aboriginal young people away from the criminal justice system. This was recognised in the LECC's monitoring report of the previous NSW Police Force Aboriginal Strategic Direction 2018-2023 which stated that:

Even with the positive engagement and commitment demonstrated by some Commands, there are certain actions of the NSW Police Force that appear to undermine the goals of the [Aboriginal Strategic Direction]. The Commission has seen examples of continuing Aboriginal over-representation in the use of certain proactive, discretionary policing methods... Some police officers we spoke to also described that they saw an inherent conflict between building community relationships and enforcing the law. This attitude needs to be addressed internally by NSW Police Force.

The ongoing failure of 'police-led' approaches to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal young people in the criminal justice system is borne out in recent BOSCAR statistics. Aboriginal young people constitute 6.2% of the NSW population aged 10-17, yet in June 2024 they comprised 58.7% of the youth detention population.

As recognised in the NSW Police Force's Youth Strategy 2023-25 and Aboriginal Strategic Direction, effective collaboration between government agencies and communities is needed to address youth crime.

However, this is not occurring at the scale needed. The risk factors associated with offending by youth are often beyond the direct influence of the NSW Police Force, but the organisations and services that *can* influence these factors are not resourced to meet the demand for support. This frequently leaves police as the only responders to young people who are in need of support.

There must be greater investment in Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations to provide services for First Nations children, families and communities. There is also an urgent need for increased resourcing for foundational services, such as housing and health, and targeted services and interventions.

Alongside the provision of more supports for young people, raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 will achieve better outcomes for children and promote greater community safety by reducing the known harm of criminalisation and shifting resources and effort to things that work to reduce offending.

- Can you comment on the impact of media reporting on public perception of youth crime trends? Some stakeholders have told us that government should focus on public education and awareness to address concerns about community safety. What are your thoughts on this?

High levels of media reporting of youth crime have raised the profile of offences and contributed to community sentiment that youth crime is more prevalent than it is. In turn, this can drive reactive, 'tough-on-crime' responses that harm young people and do not make communities safer.

We would welcome measures for greater public education and awareness to combat these harmful narratives. These education measures should emphasise that addressing the drivers of crime requires a focus on capacity building through investment in foundational services and intervention and diversion strategies. This is what is required to make communities safer and ensure NSW is a place where every young person can thrive.