

# **Submission to the NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety: Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities**

**University of Newcastle: Name Narrate Navigate Program<sup>1</sup>**

## **Supplementary Questions**

**Some stakeholders told us that early intervention programs need to be delivered to primary school aged children, in order to have an impact before they begin engaging in criminal behaviours. What are your thoughts on this?**

*Violence used and experienced by primary school aged children is a complex and challenging social issue. In 2022, NSW Police laid criminal charges against 2964 children aged 10-13years, most commonly for violence related offences. Children from rural and remote areas and particularly Aboriginal children, were charged more often, at younger ages and more often with violence offences than their peers in metropolitan settings (AIHW, 2022). Almost 90% of those charged received no intervention as a consequence of their justice-involvement, often returning to primary-schools typically under-resourced to deal with their needs. Evidence of the number of young people aged 10-13yrs before the courts for violence related matters, and the lack of appropriate response rendered by their criminal justice involvement, further establishes the need for greater attention to a younger cohort and the potential of primary school education as a universal site of preventive intervention for youth violence.*

*Data retrieved from the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that participation in high school education significantly lowered the likelihood of engagement in the criminal justice system (Ferrante 2013; Reeve & Bradford 2014), with Ferrante (2013) noting that the protective effect was greatest for those who reached senior high school. Yet as noted in our pilot study (Blakemore et al., 2019), and observed by Indig et al., (2011), engagement in school for young people who use and experience violence, seems to be a fraught and fractured experience (Rak & Warton, 2023).*

*While existing school-based preventive interventions, including respectful relationship education and life skills programs, are associated with promising outcomes (Moulds et al., 2019; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007), most have either inherent limitations, or face significant challenges that prevent them from achieving their full potential. Many fail to address the developmental, intergenerational, and cultural trauma experienced by young people who use violence. Traditional programs typically operate outside the regular school curriculum and without involving existing staff, missing the opportunity to create sustainable cultural shifts in knowledge and practices that could more effectively address the known pipeline from school disengagement to justice system involvement.*

*Importantly, school-based programs alone cannot address behaviours that are normalized in the broader community context. Our experience demonstrates that violence is often a community-based issue related to specific spaces and places, requiring more nuanced understanding than most existing programs provide. Community attitudes and norms can either enable or create barriers to meaningful*

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<sup>1</sup> This submission is the work of the authors named at the conclusion of the document. It should not be taken as the position of the University of Newcastle as a whole. Author for correspondence : Associate Professor Tamara Blakemore, [tamara.blakemore@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:tamara.blakemore@newcastle.edu.au)

*engagement, highlighting the need for approaches that recognize this broader context while working within educational settings.*

*In this respect, parent and carer engagement presents a significant challenge for many existing programs. Some parents are reluctant or refuse to allow their children to participate due to intergenerational experiences with systems, lack of trust, and fear of reprisal if their child discloses experiences of violence, abuse or trauma. This underscores the importance of culturally safe approaches that acknowledge historical contexts and build genuine trust with families and communities.*

*NNN@SCHOOL; the delivery of the NNN program in primary school contexts, primarily through intensive 3-day deliveries, exists as one of the few interventions for youth violence that is trauma informed, and culturally safe and that is uniquely structured to address workforce needs to support and sustain changes towards safer outcomes for individuals and communities. Expansion of NNN@SCHOOL to regional and rural primary schools could address unmet need for trauma-informed and culturally safe interventions for youth crime where they are most needed, and most likely to be accessed. Further, it will provide specialist professional education and training for teachers in regions most impacted by violence, and trauma related workforce burden and burnout. Expanding NNN@SCHOOL may be a way of addressing the pipeline to prison for particularly vulnerable cohorts in regional, rural, and remote Australia*

**Could you provide some more detail about the experience of delivering NNN to Year 6 children in Port Stephens (NNN Initial Learnings report, p 15) as well as other efforts to target the program to younger children?**

*NNN@SCHOOL is a targeted approach for younger (primary school age) children that represents a critical intervention point, addressing violence typically before justice system involvement. Unlike conventional programs, NNN@SCHOOL seeks to achieve generative and sustainable change by integrating within school curriculum and existing staff, effecting cultural shifts in knowledge and practices that can actively address the known pipeline from school disengagement to criminal justice system involvement.*

*NNN@SCHOOL has been delivered three times to date. Twice in Port Stephens and once in Lake Macquarie. NNN@SCHOOL has reached over 200 students spanning years 4 to 6 through these deliveries. The success of these deliveries, hinges upon the successful engagement of the school community, and the uptake and investment of the school in having teaching and support staff trained in the NNN program. Once certified as NNN practitioners, teaching and support staff are then able to deliver NNN@SCHOOL, or aspects of the NNN program in their existing curriculum.*

*Having completed NNN training, practitioners in the school setting report feeling more confident and skilled in working with students, often reporting a deeper understanding of the young peoples lived experiences in their context. Similarly, young people reported feeling heard, valued and safe to share their stories through their engagement with the program and proud of their individual successes and gains in the work.*

*Analysis of data from the first delivery of NNN@SCHOOL at Raymond Terrace Primary School (with students in years 5 and 6) showed a high level of engagement in the program. Students shared their thoughts through anonymous postcards, where they responded to prompts such as “If you walked a day in my shoes you would know... “In response students told us we’d know about their health issues, medication they must take, how they felt about a particular teacher, grandparents, grandparents’,*

*including grief for those recently deceased often alluding that these were things they haven't told anyone about before.*

*Young people's responses were strongly focused on how they felt, and covered feelings such as how they feel all the time, how bad they really feel, feeling ashamed of their life, feelings of sadness, and annoyance. The language young people used gave us a sense of no-one in these young people's lives understanding the extent of 'how bad things are for me'.*

*Students also provided responses to the prompt "Some advice from me to you" .. where they offered their future selves advice ranging from self-improvement; encouraging themselves to be more confident, to improve their academic skills like writing, reading, and art, and to challenge themselves by giving everything a try even when it's difficult. Many young people emphasized the importance of not being afraid to try new things and always believing in themselves. Some young people offered reassurance to their future selves that everything will be okay. Several entries mentioned the importance of expressing feelings and suggested coping their mechanisms for anger, such as drawing, punching pillows or wall, and taking deep breaths. Anger management emerged as a significant theme, with specific advice like "don't take it out on the first thing you see," "don't punch a fridge," and "don't punch a hole in the wall again," suggesting some children were working through challenges with regulating emotions and behavior.*

*These responses reflect primary school aged children involved in NNN@SCHOOL as managing a mix of serious personal challenges, hopes for the future, acknowledgment of behavioral issues, and typical childhood interests, suggesting they are processing complex emotions while also thinking about their identities and futures.*

*Delivery of NNN@SCHOOL with a younger cohort of students (Years 4 and 5) at Wiripaang Primary School was similarly successful. The school has published a [short video](https://www.facebook.com/share/v/14E7eDaWJw4/?mibextid=wwXIf) of their students to a publicly accessible forum, recounting their experiences of the NNN@SCHOOL program.*  
<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/14E7eDaWJw4/?mibextid=wwXIf>

**Do you have any comments about the experience of accessing or applying for funding? Do you have any suggestions for how funding processes and frameworks could be made more accessible or less resource-intensive to navigate?**

*Programs like NNN represent valuable contributions to the crime prevention landscape, exemplifying the unique position of practitioner-academics who bridge research and practice to develop evidence-informed interventions while simultaneously building workforce capacity. These programs merit recognition for their multifaceted impact - preventing harm, contributing to the evidence base, and enhancing professional capabilities across sectors. Our experience with funding processes has highlighted opportunities to better support this important work.*

*We've observed that funding models could better recognize the essential role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and knowledge holders in program design, implementation, and evaluation. Their meaningful engagement isn't merely beneficial but critical and necessary for creating culturally responsive interventions, particularly when addressing issues that disproportionately affect First Nations young people. Funding frameworks that explicitly value and resource these collaborations from conceptualization through implementation would strengthen program outcomes while honouring cultural protocols and knowledge systems.*

*The structural aspects of grant frameworks present both challenges and opportunities for improvement. The common practice of capping administrative or management fees at modest percentages creates difficulties in sustaining the intensive coordination work underlying successful program delivery. This*

*becomes particularly problematic when considering university partnerships, where institutional overhead requirements can significantly reduce funds reaching intended communities. Universities are important partners in providing the link between theory and practice, developing and delivering programs and researching and disseminating rigorous preventive interventions. However, unless funders explicitly mandate that overhead costs directly serve grant activities rather than general research operations, valuable resources may be diverted from their intended purpose, diminishing potential impact for target populations.*

*We've also identified a concerning imbalance in funding availability for work with young people who use violence compared to those who experience it. While both areas deserve attention, the relative scarcity of funding for intervention work with those using violence creates gaps in our prevention ecosystem and underscores the reality that many young people who use violence, have also experienced violence. Critically, there needs to be greater accessibility of funding specifically designed to upskill the workforce serving these young people. Current funding models often focus exclusively on direct service provision to target groups while neglecting the essential and largely ignored capacity-building required for practitioners. This oversight contributes to a cycle of research about challenges without adequately addressing workforce capability gaps that hinder effective responses to them.*

*Delivering trauma-informed, culturally safe work is resource-intensive, requiring significant investment in both materials and time that often falls outside traditional grant budget line restrictions. The cyclic nature of short-term funding arrangements and the continual need to reapply for subsequent support substantially reduces both intervention efficacy and potential contributions to knowledge building. When interventions must repeatedly pause or adjust to accommodate funding cycles, momentum is lost, relationships are disrupted, and opportunities for systematic learning are compromised. Funding models that acknowledge this reality and provide sustained support would enable practitioner-academics to focus on quality implementation and meaningful evaluation rather than perpetual grant-seeking, ultimately enhancing outcomes for communities and strengthening our evidence base for what works.*

### **How can victims of crime can be supported in a way that does not invalidate young people who have committed crime? How can broader communities be involved?**

*Supporting victims of crime while validating young people who have committed offenses is not about choosing sides but about embracing the complexity of human experience and the potential for healing and transformation. It requires moving beyond simplistic notions of punishment and rehabilitation to create spaces where all parties can be heard, validated, and supported in their journey toward healing and growth.*

*Traditional approaches to youth justice have often created a false dichotomy between "victim" and "offender," forcing communities to choose between punitive measures that focus on accountability or welfare-oriented approaches that address underlying needs. Drawing on Cunneen and Goldson's (2015) work, as highlighted by Sheehan and colleagues (2023), these approaches typically fall into either a "justice" or "welfare" framework. The justice model, rooted in behaviourist principles, emphasizes behaviour modification through consistent boundaries and consequences, while the welfare model recognizes the intersectional vulnerabilities of justice-involved youth, focusing on addressing underlying welfare needs to reduce reoffending (Baidawi & Sheehan, 2019). This binary thinking fails to recognize the complex reality that many young people who commit crimes have themselves experienced trauma, systemic invalidation, and victimization.*

*The NNN program offers a transformative approach that challenges this dichotomy by understanding that supporting victims and validating young people who have committed crimes are not mutually exclusive goals. Supporting victims of crime while not invalidating young people who have committed offenses requires a nuanced approach that recognizes the complexity of each situation. The NNN program demonstrates that validation practices can create space for young people to reflect on their actions without feeling condemned or judged. As described by Becker and Stinson (2011), validation strategies seek to communicate to the young person that their responses and reactions to different situations can make sense within their frame of reference and the circumstances in which they were operating at the time.*

*When practitioners approach young people with an attitude of genuine curiosity rather than an "I know best" mentality, they create space for authentic dialogue. Rather than telling young people what they should have done differently—a strategy that research shows can be ineffective and even counterproductive—practitioners focus on understanding the young person's experience and perspective. Research has reported that adults' suggestions to young people that they should "just walk away" from trouble such as fighting is disconnected from their lived experiences (Quinn et al., 2017), can be found laughable by young people (Phillips & Phillips, 2010), or contribute to disengagement with services and supports (Barrett & Rappaport, 2011). Validation creates the psychological safety necessary for young people to engage with new knowledge and skills that might help them make different choices in the future.*

*Importantly, this approach does not diminish victims' experiences or needs. Instead, it recognizes that purely punitive responses have limited effectiveness in creating meaningful change or healing for anyone involved. By addressing the underlying drivers of violent behaviour, including emotional regulation challenges and empathy development needs that often stem from trauma histories, the NNN approach works toward preventing future harm while supporting current healing.*

### ***Beyond the Binary: A Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Approach***

*Young people in conflict with the law frequently report experiences of not being seen, not being asked about their actions, and not being listened to. Research with young people with a history of out-of-home care and interactions with the criminal system found that roughly 17% reported "frustration and anger" as the precipitating circumstances that led to their contact with this system (CREATE Foundation, 2018). For these young people, their use of violence related to seeking to restore a sense of justice in a circumstance where they felt wronged.*

*This sense of not being heard is illustrated by Brodie, a participant in NNN who shared one of her negative experiences with police: "When I was talking to the police.... They didn't hear it because they could see I was agitated. If I was talking calmly and non-threatening, they would listen to me..." As Gardner (2010) observes, "If adults warily scrutinize young people struggling through the process of becoming, many young people in turn take a hard look at the society in which they are asked to participate as adults and find it wanting" (p. 83). Systems designed to help them often end up reinforcing messages that they are problems to be fixed rather than human beings with inherent worth and potential. By contrast, approaches that validate young people's reality and their experience of their context—while not diminishing the harm their actions have caused—create pathways for genuine transformation.*

*A trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice acknowledges that many young people simultaneously use and experience violence within their complex life circumstances. When communities understand that young people's harmful behaviours often emerge from their own experiences of trauma, systemic invalidation, and marginalization, they can develop more compassionate and effective responses.*

**How have current government responses to the issue of youth crime affected young people, especially those who have had contact with the justice system? Have they told you about their perspective on these responses?**

*Much has been written about how young people experience this legal process, highlighting challenges and opportunities for greater responsiveness to young people's needs. In the following sections we highlight aspects of the legal process and what the literature says about how young people experience them. We provide commentary from Ray and Jazz, two First Nations young people we initially met through their participation in NNN. Later, they would go on to work in the program, contributing their knowledge and skills to its continuous improvement and delivery.*

### ***The Children's Court:***

*Despite its child-centric ethos, young people report being perplexed by the "alien nature of the court system" (Legal and Constitutional References Committee, 2004, p. 156). Young people in Scotland (Deuchar & Sapouna, 2016) and NZ (Lount et al., 2018) have reported unease and confusion about their court appearances, citing that they didn't know what to expect and found it difficult to know what was going on. These findings echo early work by O'Connor (1991) who found that young people can misunderstand and misconstrue what happens in court and can perceive it as a place they are brought to be dealt with rather than a place of inquiry into the allegation (O'Connor, 1991).*

*Young people in this study explained that their feelings of confusion and frustration were often exacerbated by court processes that hindered their ability to actively participate in the proceedings (O'Connor, 1991). When asked to describe their subjective experiences in court, young people recounted sitting and standing on command and being talked at and talked about by their lawyer, the prosecutor, or the judge, but rarely involved in any meaningful dialogue about their case (O'Connor, 1991). Research since consistently finds that young people struggle to have a "voice" in court (Appell, 2007; Natapoff, 2005).*

*Cox (2013) notes young people are frustrated by experiences of "voicelessness," remarking, "we can't even speak in the courtroom" (p. 141). Greene et al. (2010) found that when young people experience the court as confusing and unprofessional, they are more likely to view the entire justice system as less legitimate. Baker et al. (2014) added that having a voice, feeling you can "have your say" or have your questions answered is also a key determinant of whether young people perceive the court as fair and legitimate.*

*Ray agreed with these sentiments and offered a weary acceptance when we read these research findings to him, he shrugged dismissively reporting he (and by extension other young people like him) felt they couldn't speak in court : Half the time we think that we can't even talk to the judge, like, we sit there, we shut up, until, like, the only time we'll ever talk to them, is when he asks us "Do you understand that?". We don't even talk"*

## **Sentencing**

*White and Cunneen (2006) note intersections of age, disability, location, ethnicity, gender, and disadvantage contextualise the complex process of legal decision making about young people charged with a criminal offence, yet these same intersections also contextualise the often-protracted experience of going to court and how young people perceive the justice-system. This is relevant to evidence that guilty pleas and plea bargaining is extremely common for young defendants in the justice system (Grisso et al., 2003; Viljoen et al., 2005). Cabell and Marsh (2020) suggest legal, developmental, and social factors all influence young people's decisions on whether to plead guilty or enter into a negotiated plea. Like adults, young people are found to be more likely to plead guilty or enter into plea negotiations if they believe the evidence against them is strong (Viljoen et al., 2005), but more than adults their decisions are motivated by a desire to end the legal process (Zottoli & Daftary-Kapur, 2019). Feld (2013) suggest this reflects young people's developmentally (and possibly contextually) appropriate focus on more immediate than long-term consequences.*

*Both Ray and Jazz discussed their experiences of sentencing and specifically their decision making about whether to enter a guilty plea to a criminal offence.*

*Ray: So, they [plead guilty] to get a lighter sentence. 25% off. Cos half the time, they didn't do it. Or half the time it's just stupid and their mums and dads tell them if you don't plead guilty, you're gonna fucking wish you did when you get home. Like, I've sat there and plead guilty a few times, for something that I, like half the time it was not even me doing it.*

*Jazz: I reckon about half the time I plead guilty to stuff I didn't do just to get reduced time in case they found me guilty anyway.*

## **Youth Justice Conferencing**

*Based on both frameworks of dispute resolution and restorative justice, YJC endeavours to promote accountability and facilitate some form of resolution, including the reintegration of the young person who has caused harm back into their family and community (Zappavigna & Martin, 2017). YJC has been lauded for its relative successes compared to formal legal responses with favourable outcomes reported in relation to victim satisfaction and fairness (Trimboli, 2000; Zappavigna & Martin, 2017).*

*A closer review of the literature indicates that young peoples' positive receptions of YJC is perhaps underscored by their ability to actively participate in the process and influence the decisions made (Trimboli, 2000). Wagland et al. (2013) reported that a thematic consistency in young people's motivations for attending a YJC was the opportunity to speak with the person harmed and describe in their own words what happened. Yet, Webber (2012) cautions perceptions of greater procedural fairness associated with YJC may be specific to conferences that occur either early in the young person's engagement with the criminal justice system or quickly after an arrest is made. Similar findings were reported by Moore (2011), who found that the length of time it takes for court-referred conferences to reach finalisation appears to impact on perceived satisfaction with the process.*

*Ray was nonplussed about his experience of YJC, his reflections giving a different insight into the lived experience of accepting responsibility for your actions:*

*... I got locked up for a reason, like, you know? So, I'm not gonna sit there and apologise for it, and talk my way through it, it's just like, fuck off, leave me be, you go your way, I'll go my way. Stay in your lane, I'll stay in mine.*



*He further elaborated on the inherent power imbalance that can occur in YJCs, and how efforts made in the child's best interest might not necessarily be the best interests of the child:*

*... I've had them try and like, get me back into school and that, like with juvenile justice, um, I've sat there, and I've been around like, a table of adults and me being the only kid, and I was like 14. And then, yeah, it was like, fucking weird.*

### **Supervision orders**

*In Australia and around the world, a major feature of youth justice systems is the supervision of young people on legal orders by the state and territory agencies responsible for youth justice.*

*The experience of young people under supervision has been more commonly explored from the perspective of those in detention rather than community-based supervision. The Office for the Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW) (2019) highlight that justice responses are inherently biased toward assumed motivations, experiences and needs of men. Implications of this for young women span placement in mixed-gender facilities, having access only to programs developed for males, to being served meals dense in carbohydrates, often leading to weight gain (Advocate for Children and Young People, 2019). Young women interviewed for this report drew attention to time imposts on workers necessitated by bail conditions requiring secured housing prior to release: "caseworkers spend a lot of time consumed with trying to find accommodation for people on Section 28" (Advocate for Children and Young People, 2019, p. 32). In its harshest reality, some young women described having to "stay in custody because they were unable to meet the accommodation requirement of their bail conditions" (Advocate for Children and Young People, 2019, p. 7).*

*Jazz agreed with sentiments about food in detention, acknowledging weight gain and its impact on self-esteem and general wellbeing. Jazz also recounted positives about her experience in detention that were challenging to hear:*

*... My best Christmas ever was in [x detention centre], we got like a crop top bra and undies and body wash and deodorant and stuff, it was the best ever ...*

*Reflections on issues regarding housing were raw and immediate for Jazz, the experience of insecure housing having extended prior to and post her justice-involvement.*

*... Like the biggest issue in my life at the moment is housing, so what I feel like doing is chucking my hands up in the air and not worrying about, but I have to ... but ... sometimes doing something is positive, sometimes not doing something is positive too.*

*Ray and Jazz provide insights that highlight, with raw effect, the uneasy parallels between dynamics of the justice system and those intertwined with perpetuating experiences of adversity and trauma. These observations are worthwhile in considering responsive policy and practice forward.*

### **THE NNN TEAM**

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