

**Submission
No 21**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Inquiry Submission: Community safety in regional and rural communities

Introduction

I am a university student studying social work. My studies have focused on the experiences of young people, including issues that they face and possible support strategies. While I have not specifically focused on youth crime in my studies, I have examined other social issues facing young people that may lead them to be more likely to engage in criminal activity. I have also studied the role of government and other organisations in providing support to young people and their families. In this submission I will provide responses to three of the points listed in the terms of reference, as identified by the bolded headings.

(b) How a whole of government approach can reduce the drivers and root causes of youth crime in regional and rural NSW.

Based on my experience studying a variety of the issues faced by young people as part of my university course, it is clear to me that a holistic approach would be most effective in addressing youth crime. There are currently an array of resources and policies identified on the NSW Government website¹ related to youth justice. These policies are diverse in their nature, including information on child protection in circumstances of abuse and neglect, substance use and bail policies. Additionally, the page identifies certain organisations and departments that are stakeholders in youth justice, including the Department of Education, the Department of Communities and Justice and the NSW Police. In order to effectively approach the issue of youth crime, it is important that all of these stakeholders have a role to play and collaborate on strategies. It is additionally important that multiple levels of government engage in addressing youth crime, particularly in regional and rural areas where local initiatives, in combination with broader state and federal policies, may be more effective.

For example, a report by the Justice Reform Initiative² indicated that community-led programs and approaches to justice system involvement have been proven to be an effective measure, yet often lack adequate resources. Thus, increased funding and resource allocation for these local and community-led programs from other levels and departments of government may be able to address some of the causes of youth crime and therefore reduce the occurrence of youth crime. These community led programs may educate young people on the risks of getting involved in criminal behaviour, create a support network for them, or simply give them events and activities to participate in

¹ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/legal-and-justice/youth-justice/resources-and-policies>

²

https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/337/attachments/original/1710872167/JRI_Alternatives_Report_NSW_Highlights_EMBARGOED_32_.pdf?1710872167

that would divert them from engaging in crime. However, as previously stated these programs will require resource allocation from other levels of government and would be most effective in combination with systematic reform in how youth crime is dealt with. By which I mean that the current tough approach to youth crime that focuses on detention does not address the reasons why young people are engaging in crime, and therefore primarily serves as a way to punish them without supporting them to change their behaviour.

Additionally, broad governmental reform which works to comply with the Australian Human Rights Commission's statement that called for the governments to address the "national crisis in youth justice"³ would be influential. The statement focused on the human rights of children in detention, and the fact that punitive and tough approaches to youth crime are ineffective. A response from all the levels of Australian government which worked to focus on early intervention and more supportive measures would likely be a positive step towards decreasing youth crime.

(c) The wraparound and diversionary services available for youth and families in the regions and rural areas and how they can be better matched to individuals, measured, improved and integrated into a coordinated approach to divert youth from crime, having regard to the NSW Government's commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal people.

Based on my research, I believe the main issue in regard to wraparound and diversionary services is primarily their lacking availability. It seems that community sentiment is focused on punitive approaches towards youth crime, which is reflected in policies and law changes which create harsher punishments for young people (for example the recent announcement of an introduction of extra penalties for people who post online about crimes they commit⁴). Thus, a big part of improving these wraparound and diversionary services may be in increasing public awareness of them and increasing education on the benefits of non-punitive measures in decreasing the occurrence of youth crime.

Particularly for First Nations youth but also young people more generally, having wraparound and diversionary services that are community-led may increase the effectiveness of those services. In my university studies I have observed that for Indigenous people often the most effective interventions come from their own Indigenous community or Indigenous-led services. For example, the Deadly Connections⁵ organisation is created by and for First Nations people and aims to

³ <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/governments-must-urgently-address-youth-justice-crisis>

⁴ <https://www.mondaq.com/australia/crime/1443844/posting-and-boasting-laws-and-penalties-in-new-south-wales>

⁵ <https://deadlyconnections.org.au/>

provide culturally responsive and holistic programs which in part focus on decreasing youth crime. Deadly Connections is based in Sydney but allocating funding to create similar organisations and/or programs which are based in regional and rural areas would likely contribute to decreased youth crime.

(e) Recidivism rates in regional and rural areas, and related impacts on the community, services and law enforcement.

Research indicates that recidivism is unfortunately quite common in young people, with a report done by the Youth Parliament⁶ indicating that in NSW 63.9% of young people who received a prison sentence and 46% of young people that received a punishment other than a prison sentence re-offended with 12 months of release or penalty. It has also been suggested that younger offenders are more likely to reoffend than older offenders, and each penalty for reoffending increases the likelihood of further offences⁷. Reasons for this may include the incomplete development of young people's brains which results in increased vulnerability to social pressure and poorer decision-making abilities and impulse control⁸.

It is my belief that these high recidivism rates negatively contribute to current community attitudes towards youth crime, as there seems to be a belief that young people who commit crimes are somewhat 'lost causes'. I feel it is this attitude that leads people to believe punitive measures are the best option, as it is assumed that these young people cannot change and will only keep offending if not placed in some form of detention. However, this assumption is ultimately unproductive, as if young people feel they have been given up on they likely will continue to reoffend, continuing the cycle. This would likely be particularly salient in regional and rural areas, as smaller populations and more conservative attitudes may increase the negative spotlight on young people who have committed crimes and ultimately worsen their outcomes as I have described.

Thus, while high recidivism rates are certainly a cause for concern, as they will impact on the workload for the criminal justice system and the feeling of safety in the community, in regional communities it is important to consider how the issue is approached and handled. Increasing support and providing young people with services

⁶ https://d2zvqky3pkh4r9.cloudfront.net/uploads/YaC/Youth%20Parliament/YP2022%20-%20Reports/justice_-_an_investigation_into_nsw_state_programs_in_reducing_youth_crime_-_yp22_report_final.pdf

⁷ <https://www.oics.wa.gov.au/reports/recidivism-rates-impact-treatment-programs/key-findings/recidivism-young-adults/>

⁸ <https://www.oics.wa.gov.au/reports/recidivism-rates-impact-treatment-programs/key-findings/recidivism-young-adults/>

that divert them from crime will likely be more impactful in reducing recidivism than creating harsher punishments and increasing social stigma.