

**Submission
No 69**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Youth Crime submission to NSW Govt 24.5.24

My submission to the increase in youth crime is based on my own personal observations, my involvement with community resilience programs, my friends' children and a long held interest in behaviour and communication.

There exists across many communities (especially regional ones) a great deal of trauma, fear and lack of feeling safe.

The widening gap in wealth in Australia and amidst all the trauma, is causing many youth to feel unsafe and feel they are doing it tough. But, they also see others doing it easy - owning many properties, big cars, expensive toys etc.

Some youth are being given these toys without supervision for their safe and proper use e.g. e-bikes which provide an easy means of escape.

Disaster impacts

In the past 5 years, many communities have experienced major disasters in the form of fires and floods.

These events brought homelessness, stress, loss of loved animals and possessions and many other challenges.

When the floods came, some people were still displaced from the fires. Some people became displaced for the first time from the floods.

Many individuals and families are still displaced. Now, nearly everyone of all ages, especially in regional communities, knows someone who is displaced. That is not ok and not enough is being done to positively address both the cause for displacement and the feeling of unsafeness.

The pandemic impacts

The fire and flood disasters occurred shortly before, during and following the global covid pandemic.

Amidst covid, many city people relocated from their traditional place of home to regional communities to escape city lockdowns.

That many city dwellers moved to regional areas has also transferred some of the crime burden. Some of those youth who've been relocated from their traditional place to a new environment may also be doing it tough having been forced to leave friends and what was their known home and community.

During covid and the disasters many youth had important stages in their personal development affected. School became online, fun events cancelled, freedoms denied, they couldn't visit relatives, friends or attend important events.

Housing displacement, vulnerability and lack of government support and good policy

Both the disaster and covid impacts have left many communities struggling as locals have been displaced and priced out of their local housing market.

Not just city dwellers but many international people also moved to Australia to escape covid impacts.

A huge housing issue now exists across Australia for the first time since the early-mid 1900's.

There appears to be little being done to address this housing crisis except State Governments trying to force local councils to accept more residents into their communities.

The 2021 shows a significant number of houses being vacant. In some regional communities this is 20-30% vacancy occupancy. That is an enormous watering down of community and also shows enormous opportunity to provide longer term housing rather than short term rental stock.

Potentially, this also creates youth who are more vulnerable to be preyed upon by those who use this vulnerability for altruistic reasons.

Government regulation around ensuring every person has access to a safe and stable home is terrible. An environment where investment and wealth creation is worshipped seems more important than the basic tenets for happiness and good health.

That housing has become a business for many investors is not ok and is affecting the safety and stability of many including families and older people. That many young people feel the futility of a safe and stable home and feel their future is also limited to afford that as adults is causing them to feel anxious and angry.

Voicelessness

An outlet for youth voices and frustrations was very limited during covid and because of the challenges mentioned previously about communicating with this group, very little has been implemented to allow their voices and frustrations to be heard or explored.

The youth group (14-24) is commonly a group that adults ignore. They ignore them because there is uncertainty around how to effectively communicate. They ignore them because that age group is in a state of development where they are still self-determining. They ignore them because it is all too hard.

It's a group that needs to be communicated with in ways where they feel safe and comfortable.

This is generally more so for male youth who tend to talk less than female youth. Female youth generally relate better to their peers and others. It's an age where all youth explore their sexuality. An increase in queer youth is also being realised.

Male behaviour also is generally more action based than talking based. Voicing up through actions is one way to be heard especially when the actions are socially abhorrent and create attention e.g crime.

Family structures

There is also a greater number of single parents today than ever before - with usually the parent being the mother and the father being absent. Tough for all genders but all youth need role models and for male youth the absent of a male role model leaves a big gap.

This doesn't mean that single parents can't successfully parent but the burden on the prime caregiver is significantly greater, more challenging during the youth phase and hugely tougher through the events of 2109-2024, especially if displacement has occurred.

Many parents also feel they can lighten their parenting load when their children start high school. This however is a time when so much physical, emotional, mental and hormonal change is occurring for teenagers, that they more than ever need good support just in a different way.

Vaping

Another terrible government decision was allowing vaping to commence in Australia. In the northern hemisphere some 5-10 years prior, vaping was widespread. But in Australia it was not existent. That the Federal Government allowed vaping into this country goes against every sensible policy pertaining to health, waste avoidance and youth (just to name a few).

It doesn't require a degree or anything greater than common sense to have realised the issues that vaping would present. Studies in the northern hemisphere (if conducted) would have confirmed any concerns.

Vaping has added an increase in solid waste, it has brought youth back in touch with anti-social and poor health habits and it underpins some of the crime issues with youth needing money to buy vapes. Vapes are being bought and sold within the schools. Vaping has brought huge challenges for both parents and schools.

Conclusion

My feelings and observations are that amidst a climate of trauma and depression within families and communities from displacement, covid and disasters, youth crime has surged because youth are using crime related activities as a means of giving voice to their frustrations and lack of being heard.

This is both a fallout of climate change (poor government environmental and economic policy) and also poor government social policy where the wealth gap is widening.

The introduction of vaping (another poor government decision) is also creating many issues– crime being just one. Vaping has become a huge part of youth social acceptance, and some youth therefore are resorting to crime to finance the purchase of vapes, either for personal use or to buy in bulk to sell at school.

Fixing the issue needs way more than a band-aid. Nothing less will result in any major changes.

It requires a strong mix of all of the following:

- finding youth acceptable means of communication and activities
- change in Australian federal and state government policy towards:
 - valuing and supporting community and grass roots actions
 - prioritising housing to long time renters and housing affordability
 - heavily taxing corporate and investors especially with regards to residential housing
 - banning vaping

My feeling is that governments won't have the courage to step up on enough to correct the problems that they have allowed to occur.

But, I'll be happy if they prove me wrong!