

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Safer Coonamble Group

Date Received: 30 May 2024



SUBMISSION TO NSW GOVERNMENT INQUIRY:

Community safety in regional and rural communities

31 May 2024

INTRODUCTION

The Safer Coonamble Group was formed in early 2024 following a public meeting in Coonamble on 6 December 2024. It continues to be supported by local service clubs, the Coonamble Chamber of Commerce, the Aboriginal Community Working Party and Local Aboriginal Land Council.

The SCG membership is comprised of interested community members from a range of professions and backgrounds including business, health, justice, education, local government, farming, social assistance and Indigenous groups.

Our aim is to achieve change at the local community level to make our town and district safer by undertaking activities in areas where we believe we can have influence and make a difference as ordinary citizens.

Our action areas are:

- Lobbying & Advocacy – bail, sentencing, community services
- Awareness / Crime Reporting / Community Watch activities
- Youth Activities – diversionary, after school/weekends
- Physical Improvements for Crime Prevention – street lighting, target hardening, CCTV, security cameras

In relation to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference we submit the following points:

(a) Drivers of Youth Crime:

We consider unaddressed child neglect, trauma and untreated conditions such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, FASD, [add more here] are major contributing factors to local youth crime. This is often coupled with family dysfunction arising from inter-generational trauma and the tidal wave of illicit drug use swamping our region.

While our schools and preschools are doing their best, and staff of some NGOs are working hard in these areas, progress is stymied by lack of access to professional support from:

- (1) frontline child protection caseworkers,
- (2) medical services (esp paediatricians),
- (3) drug & alcohol counselling and rehabilitation, and
- (4) mental health services (counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists).

Our group has identified key areas of service which could protect children and our communities but where access is shrinking. Many critical services are:

- (1) at full capacity,
- (2) are intermittent, ineffective and unaccountable or
- (3) completely absent on the ground.

These 'ghost' services are a blight on our community in terms of lost opportunity to improve the learning and life outcomes for children and young people. This situation has been worsening since governments began centralising departmental staff and/or their managers to major regional centres (especially Dept of Communities & Justice Community Services, Department of Juvenile Justice) and outsourcing other services or programs to NGOs similarly centred in distant urban hubs.

(b) Whole of government approach

Governments repeatedly consult with our communities but do not listen well or partner effectively with communities. Visiting consultants are consistently told that positions and services need to be based in local areas with ongoing tenure, preferably with local community-based management in place by trusted and locally-accountable services.

Government-supplied services remain siloed and some NGOs/ACCOs operate in complete isolation while growing their taxpayer-funded mini-empires in major centres. Any 'whole of government' approach needs to include government-funded NGOs/ACCOs. It also needs to include accountability where services are judged by what is actually

delivered to local communities. Local families, businesses and other agencies need to be involved in reality-checking results claimed by funded services.

(c) Wraparound and diversionary services for youth and families

These services need to be:

- long-term staffing and fully embedded in the local community
- tailored to each community's needs and strengths,
- partner and collaborate with other services active in the community
- broad-based and 'colour-blind' to ensure that all children and young people within a locality are supported regardless of race, age, or other background and to help us build inclusive, united communities.
- Accountable to the communities they serve so that the quality and consistency of service is maintained and services can adjust to changing needs over time.

(d) Staffing levels and workforce issues and (f) range of functions performed by police

Staffing of police, DCJ CS and other services is major impediment to addressing youth crime.

There are currently **no Child Protection Caseworkers** based in Coonamble. We understand there are four vacancies and that this has been the situation for far too long. Having caseworkers travel from other centres is a waste of time and resources and does not allow for networking with other support services or enable caseworkers to build trust in the community to make their work effective. Who is keeping our children safe? Without intervention and appropriate support those are the children who are now on the streets and are being fast-tracked to juvenile crime, drug abuse and other adverse outcomes.

This is a staffing/resourcing issue. Privatisation, outsourcing and centralisation of services is failing our children and our communities.

Despite finally being re-designated as Special Remote, our Coonamble and Gulargambone **Police remain under-staffed**. Police are constantly drawn away from local duties to fill gaps in Gilgandra and Coonabarabran; to undertake prisoner transport; to undertake mental health transport. This needs to stop.

Centralised communications with operators who have no understanding of distances or local conditions create constant stress for callers and occasionally life-threatening delays. Part-time office staff means that our police stations are often closed if police are out on

duty – seriously hampering reporting of crime and other supports to the community. Ideally, we would have 24-hour policing.

Access to paediatricians, counsellors, psychologists/psychiatrists, are critical to unlock diagnosis and treatment for trauma, anxiety and other conditions which put our young people at greater risk of entering into a life of crime. Some local infants/primary children have literally been waiting years to see a paediatrician to kickstart the process of receiving support.

(e) Recidivism rates

Young people who offend without consequences or effective intervention will re-offend. Community members, police and other local support services are exhausted by the continued lack of effort in this area. There is a noticeable trend among groups of young people who are committing increasingly brazen acts of theft/intimidation/assault and bragging openly about it (including on social media). The incidents are being repeated and are escalating. Compulsory participation in behaviour-change programs, mental health/drug/alcohol treatment and other support services should be a priority and attached to bail conditions and sentencing of both juvenile and adult offenders. It has also been identified at our meetings that the failure of Juvenile Justice caseworkers (based in Dubbo or elsewhere) to effectively monitor and support young offenders is a significant factor in this.

(f) Recommendations:

- i) Work with the strengths of small communities - Rural communities have significant existing strengths and assets which, if recognised, supported and enabled by government, can create positive change and reduce crime. Our local 'booze bus' is one of these initiatives. There are other examples. They represent significant and low-cost opportunities for government and should be identified, protected, supported and incorporated into any crime prevention / safer community strategy. All government-funded positions should be encouraged to collaborate (in appropriate aspects) with community-based groups and agencies. Siloed services do not work and isolated government staff do not feel supported and will not stay in their roles.
- ii) Fill vacant local Child Protection Caseworker positions as a matter of urgency and provide better management support for on-ground staff. A review of the current mapping/clustering arrangements to ensure a fair

spread of resources is critical and the service mapping needs to involve workers on the ground. Incentivise these positions in the same way that other essential frontline services are now being incentivised. This small investment in early intervention will save an untold amount of damage and pain, support safer communities well into the future; and save money invested in crime, justice, treatment and recovery programs.

- iii) Ensure police are working where they are allocated and not diverted to other areas if their own station will be left short. Make admin positions full-time in smaller stations to enable stations to be open Monday to Friday 9-5. Make alternate arrangements with prisoner and mental health transport to leave police on duty.
- iv) Funding for locally-managed diversionary services - There are talented individuals within the community who could be employed to deliver comprehensive, well-rounded, responsive, locally-relevant and ongoing diversionary programs at the times and places our children, young people and families need. We have already identified a number of these individuals with a range of expertise to deliver a year-round program of activities and support, however there is no source of ongoing funding available to our community for this.
- v) Invest in models of delivery that work - The 'hub and spoke' model of delivering essential government services and the perpetual 'pilot programs' favoured by successive governments does not work. Our community has lost faith in these approaches and the unacceptable level of youth crime is a direct result.
Providing funding to external NGOs/ACCOs who have limited local community connections continues to result in lack of continuity/consistency and limited outcomes for young people, families and our community. We believe properly-resourced, locally-managed, community-based, collaborative, and fully-accountable organisations achieve the best results especially if police, schools, health services and other government and/or external agencies work with them while respecting their autonomy.
- vi) Preschool transport – many families may have 'access' to preschool but cannot attend because they cannot reliably transport their children each day. A bus should be available for vulnerable families.
- vii) Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) - this federal initiative ran for decades in our communities and had a multitude of tangible benefits in strengthening families and communities. It should be reignited

and refocused in consultation with local communities as a transition from Centrelink-dependence to permanent/full-time employment.

- viii) Reactivate a more relevant TAFE - Our local TAFE campus needs to be reactivated and resourced as a lifelong learning hub. The facilities could be used for (1) locally-relevant TAFE courses (rural, trades, aged care, counselling, hospitality, driver licensing, automotive, etc) plus be made available as a venue for other learning groups such as (2) Literacy for Life, (3) University support (4) high school VET and (5) Back on Track-style programs for young people. Similarly, the high school farm facilities could be used by these groups as well. One-venue-one-use is an unhelpful model for small communities like ours in terms of educational facilities.
- ix) Security training – Coonamble currently has no locally-based registered security company to provide services to licensed venues, major events or local businesses. Certified training for local people needs to be delivered urgently from our local TAFE. Graduates would find fast employment with the above employers.
- x) Focus on treatment not referral services – funding seems to be directed to creating new services who provide referral for local people, especially in mental health. Schools, local health services, and other existing agencies can and do provide referrals and support local people to access them. However, no-one can successfully refer if there is nowhere to refer to. Government effort and funds should be directed to ensuring the necessary treatment services are available to people from our area.

These are not the full extent of our ideas to make our community safer and to protect and nurture our young people. We invite the Committee of Inquiry and the NSW Government's decision-makers to continue the conversation with groups and communities like ours.

Please also note that we have many first-hand examples to demonstrate the frequency and severity of crime across our community and the associated impacts. We can supply this information if requested but would rather focus on what can be done to improve the situation.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Chairman

Dennis Glover

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Deputy Chair

Lee O'Connor

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[REDACTED]

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