

**Submission
No 129**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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I would like to make a submission to NSW Parliamentary Committee Enquiry into youth crime in rural areas.

I live in a medium sized rural town and there are reports of youth crime in the media, predominantly break ins. In my 30 years living here I have personally experienced only one incident of crime: a break-in in the early two thousands. It was perhaps children/young teenagers who broke in as only coins were taken but this was not proven. I mention this because the picture painted by the media is often based on the negative experiences. However, I understand the concerns of people whose dwellings have been broken into or who have experienced threats of violence. Nevertheless, I do not believe the wellbeing of young people or of the community as a whole is best served by bringing them into the judicial system. Young people should be kept out if at all possible. I also think that greater efforts need to be made to educate us, the public, that magistrates' legal obligations are required to keep young people out of prison as much as possible. In the absence of this, magistrates will simply be criticised for giving warnings to young people rather than putting them on bail. The public should be educated to understand that it is in the interest of the common wellbeing that young people be given opportunities rather than having them taken away.

What are contributory causes for crime by young people?

It is generally true that rural youth have less access to activities and entertainments than their urban counterparts. The difference is even greater for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Young people whose families are on social welfare benefits or live in social welfare housing or whose parents/ carers/ relatives are suffering from substance abuse, often are bored because they cannot afford to engage in the sporting or cultural activities that those from more affluent families can.

Whether they have one or more children, families may not be able to afford entry fees— one-off or regular— to the public pool in summer or to the private pools — at the University of New England or The Armidale School —in winter. They may not be able to engage in football, soccer, cricket, hockey or gymnastics for the same reason: the inability to afford sporting equipment, uniforms or to travel to away sporting events. The same applies to music lessons, dance, and going to the movies.

The lack of activities for indigenous children is particularly evident and has been commented on by the indigenous Councillor of the Moree Shires Plains Council, Mekayla Cochrane.

At the same time, young people are in a stage of life where they engage in risk-taking. I mean risk-taking in a positive sense, that is, taking risks and trying new things in order to establish boundaries, to see if they can master a skill or an activity and enhance their self-concept. However, disadvantaged youth generally do not have the means or the access to engage in risk-taking behaviours safely.

Programs need to be developed to help prevent young people from committing crimes. For example, activities need to be offered that cater for young people's desire to test themselves. These activities would acknowledge the needs and concerns of young people, not those of the older generation. Activities such as a course in trail bike riding could be

funded where young people could access trail motor bikes, learn to ride them safely with helmets etc, and also learn about motorcycle maintenance. Both sexes should be eligible if interested. I did not come up with this idea, but I find it an excellent example of an activity that would provide skills and enable disadvantaged young people to participate on an even playing field with more affluent young people. Other activities would be desirable for different sub-groups of young people (the disabled, those with mental health issues etc, girls not interested in sport) rather than assuming all young people are the same. These activities would have an intention of broadening the experience of young people, strengthening their sense of self and self-esteem so that they can envisage a future for themselves.

What's working In combating crime by young people and helping them not to offend again?
There is evidence that working with young people at risk can lead them to new life trajectories. Evidence is provided by the success of the Back Track Youth Works Program. It was set up in 2006 by Bernie Shakeshaft, 2020 Australian Local Hero, to work with disadvantaged young people, many of whom were in danger of ending up in juvenile detention. Youth crime rates in Armidale have been reduced by more than a third since the program came into being.

This sort of program may be resource intensive but Back Track's success points to the necessity of spending our money on this sort of intervention and support. Rather than more police and larger prisons, more social workers and activities are needed for these young people so that they can see a meaningful future for themselves.

The Youth Koori Court is successful in reducing the probability of a young indigenous person being sentenced to a Juvenile Control Order. However, Armidale, Moree or Tamworth do not have a Youth Koori Court.

If police were to be given this role, they would need to complete further education in social support programs, evidence based programming for rehabilitation, non-judgemental behaviour, and meaningful courses on empathy. This may seem too costly, but it is money being positively spent to promote better and productive relations between youth and the police, and ultimately the community. Also, I believe that paying to support a person in prison is just as costly if not more so, and it does not result in an improvement in the well-being of the individual or the community, which should be our goal.

If it is essential for a young person to be put on bail, every attempt should be made to support their continuing education. I have heard that the requirement to be at home so that their adherence to the bail conditions can be checked by the police means they may not be able to attend school. Bail conditions should take school attendance into account. Being deprived of the opportunity to continue their education further exacerbates the situation of being bored, finding life meaningless and does not enable them to see any better future. If it is not possible for them to go to a physical school, participation in an online learning centre should be organised.

If a young person has to be sent to prison—and this should always be a last resort—meaningful programs offering education and support must be offered. It is criminal of the state to have young people in cells for long period with no exercise, activities or education as was recently reported to be occurring in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Furthermore, such treatment does not lead to the young person turning their life around and opting for a better future but to recidivism.

Dr Kerry Dunne