

**Submission
No 132**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Country Women's Association of NSW
Date Received: 31 May 2024

Partially
Confidential



Country Women's Association of NSW

*Incorporated in 1931 by an Act of NSW Parliament
Constituent Society of the Associated Country Women of the World*

ABN 82 318 909 926

31 May 2024

The Hon. Edmond Atalla
Chair Legislative Assembly Committee
Inquiry into Community safety in
regional and rural communities
Parliament House, Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Submitted: via [Committee Website](#)

RE: SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Dear Chair

The Country Women's Association (CWA) of New South Wales (NSW) is the state's largest rural issues advocacy group with well over 8000 members and close to 400 branches across NSW. There is no other rural, regional, remote member-based organisation that has the breadth and depth of membership on matters affecting country people.

CWA of NSW aims to improve conditions for country women, children, and families by advocating for its members, helping local communities, creating a network of support and meeting together in towns and cities across NSW. The CWA of NSW advocates for positive action on a range of issues that impact the lives of women, children and families throughout NSW and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Inquiry into Community safety in regional and rural communities (the Inquiry)*.

BACKGROUND

The CWA of NSW unanimously voted in their November 2023 state executive meeting to support a Parliamentary Inquiry into regional crime. This decision aligned with calls from the Country Mayors Association of New South Wales (CMA), the Police Association of New South Wales (PANSW), and NSW Farmers. Compelling evidence from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) highlighted the urgent need for a comprehensive review. BOCSAR's statistics underscored the stark reality faced by residents in rural, regional, and remote NSW, noting that they are at a higher risk of becoming victims of sexual assault, car theft, home break-ins, and domestic violence. A more detailed examination of BOSCAR data revealed that:

- *Property Crime*: From 2004 to 2023, property crime in regional NSW declined by 48%, compared to a 67% reduction in Greater Sydney. In 2023, regional property crime rates were 59% higher than in Greater Sydney.
- *Violent Crime*: While Greater Sydney saw a 20% decline in violent crime from 2004 to 2023, regional NSW's rates remained unchanged, resulting in a 57% higher rate in 2023.

- *COVID-19 Impact*: Crime decreased during the pandemic but surged in 2023, with motor vehicle theft rising by 20% and sexual assault reports increasing by 47%.
- *Domestic Violence*: Reports of domestic violence-related assault in regional NSW rose by 24% from 2019 to 2023.
- *Non-Domestic Assault*: Increased by 14% during this period, especially in residential and school settings.

In March 2024, in response to public pressure, the NSW Legislative Assembly's Committee on Law and Safety announced an *Inquiry into community safety in regional and rural areas*. This Inquiry is intended to investigate the drivers of youth crime in these communities and explore actions the NSW Government can take to enhance safety. The focus is on understanding the root causes of youth crime, evaluating the wraparound and diversionary services available for youth and families, and determining how these services can be better aligned to individual needs and effectively coordinated.

The Inquiry will also consider the NSW Government's commitment to partnering with Aboriginal communities, examine staffing and workforce issues, address the pressures on NSW Police officers, and assess the impact of recidivism on regional communities. The Committee is seeking input from regional communities to identify best practice prevention initiatives via public submissions.

CWA OF NSW POLICY PRIORITIES: COMMUNITY SAFETY

The Country Women's Association (CWA) of NSW has a longstanding tradition of advocating for community safety through a range of policy. These efforts have primarily focused on legal reforms, stricter enforcement of laws, and increased penalties for various criminal activities as follows:

- 1) ***Support for Victims of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault***: Amendments to laws governing victim support and treatment during legal proceedings. This includes calls for closed court hearings and restrictions on the admissibility of plaintiffs' sexual history in rape cases.
- 2) ***Law Enforcement and Penalties***: More rigorous enforcement of laws, as well as increased penalties for offenders committing horrific crimes. The CWA of NSW has also advocated for maximum penalties for rural crime offenders.
- 3) ***Legal Reforms and Sentencing***: Legislative action to exclude unauthorised persons from suing for damages incurred while unlawfully on property, and advocated for ensuring life imprisonment sentences are enforced without the possibility of release for serious offenders.
- 4) ***Protection of Children and Community Safety***: Admissibility of evidence from young children in court proceedings and expressed concerns about the sentencing of juvenile offenders, including advocating for equal treatment with adult offenders in some instances.
- 5) ***Responsibility of Guardians and Parents***: Parents or legal guardians of juvenile crime perpetrators be held financially responsible for compensating victims.
- 6) ***Immigration and Criminal Convictions***: Deportation of non-naturalised migrants convicted of violent crimes, emphasising community safety and the consequences of criminal behaviour.
- 7) ***Legislative Action and Policy Changes***: Governments to take prompt legislative action to address issues related to juvenile crime and to provide greater protection for affected communities.

The CWA of NSW has been steadfast in its commitment to combating domestic and family violence, advocating for meaningful policy change. In **2020** calling for governments to recognise domestic violence as a national emergency, a position finally recognised in recent government responses. In **2022**, calling for significant reforms in policing response advocating for the establishment of specialist domestic violence operative teams in all police area commands and districts, coupled with specialized training for operatives.

In response to recent tragic events the CWA of NSW 2024 state conference unanimously supported policy calling for a strengthening of protections for victims of domestic violence through amendments to the presumption of bail provisions of the NSW Bail Act. Calling for sustainable funding models for frontline victim support services to ensure stability and continuity in assistance for victims and urging the National Cabinet to expedite the establishment of a real-time system to record, track, and share domestic and family violence perpetrators across systems and jurisdictions.

CWA OF NSW RURAL REGIONAL REMOTE COMMUNITY SAFETY SURVEY

The CWA of NSW submission to this Inquiry reflects agreed policy positions outlined and in addition is the result of extensive engagement and consultation with individuals and communities throughout rural, regional, and remote NSW. The CWA of NSW has gathered valuable insights and feedback from residents directly affected by the issues of rural, regional, remote crime and community safety including through an online survey. This online survey gathered detailed information about the personal experiences and perceptions of crime in rural, regional, and remote areas of NSW and was open from 14.04.2024 to 15.05.2024 receiving over 300 responses.

Respondents were asked to provide their location and age to contextualise their responses. The survey respondents were from all regions of NSW with the following proportions: Central West and Orana (20.20%), Hunter (7.74%), Murray-Murrumbidgee (9.09%), North Coast (21.21%), Central Coast (1.35%), Far West (3.70%), Illawarra (3.37%), New England-Northwest (13.80%), Southeast and Tablelands (15.82%), and Metropolitan Sydney (3.70%). Respondents were predominantly aged 65 and over (71.04%), with smaller proportions in other age groups: 55-64 (19.53%), 45-54 (7.41%), 35-44 (1.01%), 25-34 (0.67%), 18-24 (0.34%), and no respondents under 18.

Participants were asked to specify the types of crimes they had encountered, providing insights into the most prevalent issues in their area. Additionally, the survey sought members' opinions on the biggest challenges faced by law enforcement authorities in tackling crime in these regions and how these challenges affect the ability to respond appropriately. To foster a dialogue on potential solutions, the survey included questions on what improvements or changes could be made to enhance community safety and help residents feel more secure.

ENCOUNTERS WITH CRIME: IMPACT ON FEELINGS OF SAFETY AND SECURITY

The survey responses paint a vivid picture of crime in rural, regional, and remote areas of NSW, highlighting various types of criminal activities and their impact on the community's sense of safety and security. Respondents reported experiencing a wide range of crimes, from property theft and vandalism to violent offenses and public disorder.

1. **Property Crime:** Break-ins, theft, and vandalism affected **40%** of respondents.
2. **Violence and Threatening Behaviour:** Was reported by **20%** of respondents, including assaults and home invasions.
3. **Public Disorder:** Accounted for **10%** of respondents, with incidents of brawls and youth violence.
4. **Drug-Related Issues:** Impacted **8%**, with concerns about drug use and dealing.
5. **Unauthorised Access and Trespassing:** Was reported by **15%** of respondents, including intrusions and drone activities.

These incidents have significantly affected individuals' feelings of safety and security, contributing to a pervasive sense of vulnerability and unease within their communities. The impact of these crimes extends beyond the immediate victims, influencing the overall well-being and cohesion of the community. Leading to:

- **Increased Anxiety and Fear:** Many respondents report heightened anxiety and fear due to rising crime rates.
- **Behavioural Changes:** Increased use of security measures and avoidance of certain areas.
- **Community Cohesion and Vigilance:** While some communities are rallying together, there is frustration over inadequate police response.
- **Impact on Daily Life and Mental Health:** Crime leads to stress, sleep deprivation, and reluctance to leave homes unattended.
- **Concerns About Law Enforcement Effectiveness:** Scepticism about police effectiveness and fairness in the justice system.

See Appendix 1 for sample responses to: Please share any personal experiences or encounters with crime in rural, regional, or remote areas of NSW and explain how they have affected your feeling of safety and security within your community.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS: LAW ENFORCEMENT IN RURAL, REGIONAL, AND REMOTE NSW

The second set of survey questions explored the perceived challenges faced by law enforcement authorities in addressing crime in rural, regional, and remote areas of NSW. Respondents identified several key issues that hinder effective policing in their communities, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of these challenges and their impact on law enforcement's ability to respond appropriately to criminal activities.

Among the prominent issues highlighted was the problem of understaffed police stations, which leads to delayed responses and a limited local presence, thereby undermining community safety. The reliance on regional centres for backup further exacerbates this issue, as distant support often results in untimely interventions. Additionally, respondents pointed to the lack of sufficient support from the court system, which they believe contributes to lenient sentences and repeat offending, undermining the rule of law.

Another critical challenge is dealing with juvenile crime, where ineffective policies and lack of consequences fail to deter youth from engaging in criminal activities. Fear of reporting crime also emerged as a significant concern, driven by a lack of police presence and apprehensions about retribution. The vast distances and isolation characteristic of these areas further strain law enforcement resources, affecting response times and coverage.

These challenges collectively contribute to a heightened sense of insecurity among residents, emphasising the need for strategic solutions to bolster law enforcement capabilities. Enhancing police staffing, improving local presence, ensuring timely backup, and reforming policies to address juvenile crime and court system support are essential steps in strengthening law enforcement and fostering a safer environment in rural, regional, and remote areas of NSW.

- **Understaffed Police Stations:** Leading to delayed responses and limited local presence.
- **Reliance on Regional Centres:** Backup from distant centres affects timely intervention.
- **Court System Support:** Insufficient support leading to lenient sentences and repeat offending.
- **Dealing with Juvenile Crime:** Ineffective policies and lack of consequences.
- **Fear of Reporting Crime:** Due to lack of police presence and concerns about retribution.
- **Distance and Isolation:** Affecting response times and coverage.
- **Respect for Rule of Law:** A need for stricter penalties.

See Appendix 2 for sample responses: What do you see as the biggest problems for law enforcement authorities in dealing with crime in rural, regional, and remote NSW? How do you think these problems impact the ability for appropriate responses?

INSIGHTS INTO ENHANCING SAFETY IN RURAL, REGIONAL, REMOTE NSW

The final survey question invited participants to share their thoughts on enhancing community safety in rural, regional, and remote areas of NSW, yielding a diverse range of suggestions for improvements. Key themes emerged from the feedback, offering a roadmap for developing comprehensive safety strategies tailored to these unique communities.

A significant portion of respondents (24.31%) called for an increased police presence, underscoring the importance of a visible law enforcement presence in deterring crime. Another 10.19% highlighted the need for robust community engagement, advocating for closer collaboration between law enforcement and residents to foster trust and cooperation. Concerns about rural policing were also prominent, with suggestions for local police stations and neighbourhood watch programs echoing the need for localised solutions.

Preventative measures were also emphasised, with 8.23% of participants recommending youth engagement and crime prevention programs to address issues before they escalate. Similarly, 34.90% stressed the importance of education, rehabilitation, and meaningful work opportunities as long-term strategies to reduce crime and enhance community well-being.

Stricter penalties and enforcement were advocated by 8.25% of respondents, while 5.88% focused on addressing underage offenders through tougher penalties combined with educational opportunities. Resource allocation and infrastructure improvements were critical to 11.37% of participants, highlighting the need for better distribution of resources to support community safety. Support for vulnerable populations was noted by 6.66% of respondents, who emphasised targeted services to assist those most at risk.

1. **Increased Police Presence:** 24.31% of respondents called for more police officers and a visible presence.
2. **Preventative Measures:** 8.23% suggested programs for youth engagement and crime prevention.
3. **Stricter Penalties and Enforcement:** 8.25% advocated for tougher penalties and better enforcement.
4. **Community Engagement:** 10.19% emphasised collaboration between law enforcement and communities.
5. **Addressing Underage Offenders:** 5.88% called for tougher penalties and educational opportunities for youth.
6. **Concerns About Rural Policing:** 10.19% suggest solutions like local police stations and neighbourhood watch programs.
7. **Education and Prevention:** 34.90% emphasised the importance of education, rehabilitation, and meaningful work opportunities.
8. **Resource Allocation:** 11.37% stressed the need for better resource allocation and infrastructure improvements.
9. **Support for Vulnerable Populations:** 6.66% highlighted the need for targeted support services.
10. **Community Empowerment:** 4.70% called for empowering communities to take ownership of their safety.

See Appendix 3 for sample responses to: **When thinking about community safety, what improvements or changes need to be made to improve outcomes and help people feel safer and more secure in their communities?**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Bringing together current agreed policy and feedback received through community survey a multifaceted approach to enhancing community safety within rural, regional, and remote NSW is recommended by CWA of NSW. Approaches that combine increased law enforcement presence, preventative measures, community

engagement, and better resource allocation. The CWA of NSW therefore advocates for the following actions to improve community safety in regional and rural areas:

Recommendation 1: Increased Police Presence: Boost the number of police officers and ensure a more visible law enforcement presence in rural communities to deter criminal activities.

Recommendation 2: Stricter Penalties and Enforcement: Implement tougher penalties for offenders and enhance enforcement of existing laws to reduce recidivism and deter crime.

Recommendation 3: Preventative Programs: Develop and support programs aimed at youth engagement and crime prevention, including educational and recreational activities.

Recommendation 4: Community Engagement: Foster stronger collaboration between law enforcement, social services, and community members to build trust and facilitate crime prevention initiatives.

Recommendation 5: Resource Allocation: Ensure adequate resources and infrastructure, including staffing, training, and technology, to support effective policing and community safety efforts.

Recommendation 6: Support for Vulnerable Populations: Provide targeted support and services for vulnerable groups, including the elderly and Aboriginal communities, to enhance their safety and well-being.

Recommendation 7: Empowering Communities: Encourage community-led initiatives and foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for local safety and security.

Appendices redacted