

**Submission
No 142**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Date Received: 31 May 2024



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MEMBER FOR UPPER HUNTER
SHADOW MINISTER FOR REGIONAL TRANSPORT AND ROADS



31 May 2024

Mr Edmond Atalla MP

Member for Mt Druitt

Chair of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety

Chair of the Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities Inquiry

Dear Mr Atalla,

I appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to the Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities Inquiry.

This submission deals with the need specifically for more police and police resources in our region. Rising crime in the Upper Hunter Electorate is a significant problem. Equally important is combatting the perception of crime. It is a combination of combatting crime to keep our communities safe as well as ensuring people feel safe in their homes and communities. Unfortunately, there are parts of my electorate where people, especially the elderly, do not feel this is the case.

At the heart of the issue is the sense that there is a lack of a police presence within our communities. Statistics clearly show that there has been an increase in crime in regional and rural areas - not only in the Upper Hunter but right across New South Wales. It is clear that NSW Police cannot just change the situation by simply locking people up. The solution is more police on the ground, who become the critical part of a whole of government response.

The following issues are critical to the Upper Hunter Electorate and highlight how police resources are being diverted away from the essential job of keeping our communities safe:

The use of Police for transferring prisoners on remand

Police are incorrectly being used for prisoner and mental health transport responsibilities instead of spending time in the community. This is a consistent issue throughout the electorate and a major problem for regional towns. This is especially evident in towns such as Muswellbrook and Singleton where prisoners are brought back for court appearances.

There have been cases where Corrective Services has refused to take prisoners due to resource constraints such as vehicle availability for ongoing trips and therefore leaving the problem of ongoing transport to police.

There is a risk to prisoners as well because police vehicles are designed for short trips between arrest and a police station. They are not designed for long trips to correctional facilities. Therefore, the use of police vehicles - I fully endorse the advocacy document from the Police Association of NSW (PANSW) that states:

Police officers are frequently required to transport prisoners to and from police facilities, custody facilities or a court, sometimes hundreds of kilometres.

This means they are away from their Command for hours at a time, making them unavailable to perform their core duties like responding to emergency calls or conducting patrols.

In some locations, the demand on already stretched police resources is so great, multiple officers are away at the same time. When police officers are tied up transporting prisoners, they are not available to respond to urgent calls.

The PANSW have been informed of examples where so many police were busy transporting prisoners that police stations were closed to the public, and no one was available to respond to calls for assistance.

This places the community at risk, as their local police are unavailable, so response to calls for assistance will be significantly delayed.

The NSW Government must minimise as much as possible, the time police are required to spend transporting prisoners.

Recommendation

- 1. Prisoner escort duties to and from court be removed as a duty of the New South Wales Police Force and be taken over by Corrective Services NSW and Juvenile Justice NSW.*
- 2. Amend s33 of the Mental Health (Forensic Procedures) Act to provide a person subject to a s33 order will remain in the custody of Corrective Services NSW, not the NSW Police Force.*
- 3. Ensure all police custody facilities have suitable equipment to enable prisoners to make appearances via audio-visual link*

For example, there are cases when multiple prisoners are picked up from the Shortland Correctional Centre, Cessnock or Newcastle for court appearances in Muswellbrook. If there are Corrective Services protection prisoners involved then they require separate trucks to be used as opposed to general duties police patrol vehicles. The two types of prisoners cannot be mixed under the rules. As a result, they now require separate police vehicles to transport them to the court. This further diminishes the presence of police in the community.

These prisoners have already been remanded in custody, so why would police now have to be involved again. This seems to be a complete waste of NSW Police resources when Corrective Services are the ones who should manage persons in custody.

Muswellbrook Hospital is not a Declared Facility

Police cannot take mental health patients to Muswellbrook Hospital because it is not classified as a declared mental health institution. They cannot be taken to Muswellbrook under Section 20 (Ambulance) or Section 22 (Police) of the Mental Health Act.

Therefore, mental health patients with risk (or custody) are taken to Maitland Hospital. This removes police from the streets of Muswellbrook.

Court ordered mental health assessments also need to be taken to Maitland which again removes a police car from the area for a potentially a whole shift (two hour trip each way plus treatment time).

Singleton 24/7 Police Station

Currently the heritage-listed Singleton Police Station is scheduled for a \$12million upgrade to refurbish the facility. This is sorely needed and well overdue. This will update the facility for the current staff but will not allow an expansion of the police numbers to provide an open door for the community.

However, an option to build a new police station has been hampered by the fact that the town is in a flood zone. Therefore, a different location for a new police station has not been recommended by NSW Police.

The community requires a police station that is outward facing and part of the town. It needs to have 24/7 access for the community. It is as much about community sentiment as it is about crime management.

Vacancies in Regional Area

Vacancies in local Police commands are mainly due to absenteeism resulting from sickness, mental health leave, long service leave, maternity leave or injury. This is causing a large issue for regional areas where population centres are geographically separated from each other.

There needs to be a minimum staffing model that reflects the particular demographics and distances travelled in regional and country areas, rather than relying solely on CAD first response reports.

There are cases when the number of calls exceeds the ability of local cars available to respond. This can occur when the distances between callouts are large so the ability to respond with a single car is not possible. For example, detectives are used for General Duties activities at times.

Scone Police Resourcing Levels

Anecdotally, 25 years ago the Upper Hunter policing level at Scone was 17 officers, whereas currently there are only 10 police officers at full strength. Whilst there are some functions performed by regional officers, the reduced number of policing resources mean that frontline staff functions are affected.

Modern trends regarding social media

Social media inflates the perception of crime rather than what is actually happening. The use of community Facebook groups are increasing our knowledge of crime in the community. However, this knowledge also increases the sense of insecurity for many residents.

For example,

- Murrurundi incident of roaming youths on 27 May 2024 was detailed on Facebook group Murrurundi Life.
- Muswellbrook Community group often details groups of youths roaming the street at night which increases the level of concern.

The additional concern is that it encourages vigilante behaviour. Additional police measures should be used to counter potential vigilante behaviour.

Muswellbrook Youth Late Night Behaviour

Underage youth with a known record of late-night disturbances should not be allowed to walk the street in the early hours of the morning. This anti-social behaviour is causing considerable distress to residents of Muswellbrook. While the crimes committed may be minor in nature (e.g. vandalism or graffiti), a sense of insecurity is felt by residents. The crime statistics do not accurately reflect community sentiment.

Therefore, we need an ability to take youth off the street if they have a known record. There is no reason why youth should be on the street between the hours of Midnight and 5am.

Transit crimes are also committed because the area has two major highways that offenders travel. Therefore, crimes are often committed by offenders as they travel between metropolitan areas and major regional centres such as Tamworth, including the small towns of Murrurundi and Merriwa.

Local Crime Statistics

NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics data - Crime Latest quarterly and annual recorded crime reports:

Local Government Area	Offence type	5 year trend and average annual percent change (Jan 2019-Dec 2023)
Muswellbrook	Domestic violence related assault	Up 14.3%
Muswellbrook	Non-domestic violence related assault	Up 17.3%
Muswellbrook	Sexual assault	Up 10.7%
Muswellbrook	Intimidation, stalking and harassment	Up 10.5%
Muswellbrook	Motor vehicle theft	Up 15.3%
Muswellbrook	Steal from motor vehicle	Up 14.2%
Muswellbrook	Breach Apprehended Violence Order	Up 9.1%
Singleton	Non-domestic violence related assault	Up 5.5%
Singleton	Intimidation, stalking and harassment	Up 12.4%

In Muswellbrook, Domestic violence related offences are showing an increasing trend. **Domestic violence-related assault has gone up 49.6% in the past two years. Breach apprehended violence orders have accordingly gone up 28.9% in the past two years.** Non-Domestic violence related assault has gone up 17.3% as an annual percentage change in the past five years.

In Singleton, the two year trend for non-domestic related assault is up 22.5%. Intimidation, stalking and harassment has gone up over a five year period by 12.4%.

In Muswellbrook, car-related crime is dramatically trending up, the average five year trend shows that motor vehicle theft and steal from a motor vehicle has increased approximately 10%.

Dungog Shire Youth Issues

The Dungog Chamber of Commerce recently facilitated a community meeting in Clarence Town. The issue is clear to the community that the area of Clarence Town has a fast-rising population of families with young children. However, the availability of facilities to engage with teenage youth are non-existent. This will mean that in five years time, there will be a large cohort of teenagers without any local engagement. Without any means to engage the youth, it is highly likely the town will see a spike in youth crime. It is an issue that needs to be addressed now. Therefore, the town is seeking financial support to undertake trials of youth activities that involve volunteers and are similar to the PCYC programs available in other towns.

Conclusion

As the Member for Upper Hunter, I request the inquiry look into these issues and provide recommendations that address the surge in youth crime we have seen. The Police in the Upper Hunter are highly regarded and respected. The job of police is to fight crime but far more important is to provide a sense of security for residents in our communities. That can only be achieved with better visibility of Police in our towns.

I would encourage the committee to put recommendations in place to correct the imbalance so that more police and police resources are allocated to rural and regional towns.

Yours Sincerely,



Dave Layzell MP
Member for Upper Hunter
Shadow Minister for Regional Transport & Roads