

**Submission
No 145**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Border Regional Organisation of Councils

Date Received: 31 May 2024



30 May 2024

Mr Edmond Atalla MP
Committee Chair
Legislative Assembly
Committee on Law and Safety

Dear Mr Atalla,

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES INQUIRY SUBMISSION – A NSW/QLD BORDER REGION PERSPECTIVE

The Border Regional Organisation of Councils (BROC) considered a report regarding policing and crime prevention at their April 2024 meeting. It was subsequently resolved that:

- 1) *BROC make a submission to the Legislative Assembly Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities regarding the level and impact of crime in the Border Region;*
- 2) *BROC encourage member Councils to make submissions to the Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities.*

This correspondence focuses on the level and impact of crime in the border region.

Introduction

The wave of crime, in particular youth crime, that has swept across our states in recent times has had a significant negative impact upon the residents of our border communities.

The Border Regional Organisation of Councils (BROC) incorporates the following councils on either side of the QLD/NSW border:

- | NSW | QLD |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Gwydir Shire Council○ Inverell Shire Council○ Moree Plains Shire Council○ Tenterfield Shire Council○ Walgett Shire Council○ Bourke Shire Council○ Brewarrina Shire Council | <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Goondiwindi Regional Council○ Balonne Shire Council○ Southern Downs Regional Council○ Bulloo Shire Council○ Paroo Shire Council |

BROC Councils cover a land area of 305,339km² and serves a population of approximately 97,500 people.

Similar to many regions across Australia, the BROC region faces significant challenges due to its vast distances, extreme weather, small population base, social disadvantage, underdeveloped infrastructure and limited funding support from other levels of government.

However, unlike many other regions, the BROC region faces a unique set of challenges associated with servicing its border towns and communities. These challenges relate to intergovernmental coordination across multiple jurisdictions and are often associated with infrastructure planning and provision; workforce movements; disaster management; health, education and policing/crime prevention to name but a few.

The objectives of the organisation are to:

- Provide a forum for member councils to consider and discuss matters affecting the region,
- Advocate for the best outcomes for the region at a state and federal government level,
- Ensure the sustainability of the region through contributing to the effectiveness of all member councils,
- Undertake projects that have a material benefit to some or all member councils of the organisation to promote regional cooperation and the efficiencies of individual councils.

A recent report prepared by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research indicated that one of our NSW border regions had a property crime rate 1.9 times above the state average and a violent crime rate 1.8 times the state average for 2023. Such outcomes have a clear impact on the quality of life of those living in the region.

Crime Rate

Over the last 5 years the border region has on average seen significant increases in the following reportable crime categories:

Motor vehicle theft

Non-domestic assault

Sexual assault

Domestic Violence related assault

For example, motor vehicle theft in one of our cross-border communities which averaged 21 offences per year between 2014 and 2020 has now increased 300% with 63 offences in 2022 and 65 offences in 2023. Crime statistics for regional NSW would suggest the increase in motor vehicle theft over the last 5 years appears to be due to an increase in offending by young people; legal actions for this group increased by 188% from 2019 to 2023. Police data also shows an increase in vehicle theft incidents co-occurring with break-ins and an increase in keys being stolen in break-ins.

Service Mapping in the Border Region

The need for service mapping for the BROC region to ensure the government services which are currently in place as interventions to prevent youth crime are adequate and fit for purpose, and if not, necessary structure adjustments implemented.

The state government must take the lead in ensuring that adequate programs are in place to prevent youth related crimes and to divert youth at risk away from becoming criminals. The coordination of agencies providing services in this space is vital to ensure that scarce public funds are being wisely allocated. The Committee would likely be aware of the recent analysis of service provision for community services in the domains of crime prevention and justice, education, health and healing, housing and youth undertaken by Moree Plains Shire Council. The analysis clearly highlighted inefficiencies, duplication and a lack of coordination amongst agencies. Resolving this issue must also be a priority for the government and ideally should include the cross-border region.

Cross Border Jurisdiction

The NSW/Queensland border poses significant challenges for the police and the court systems. The need for a single cross border jurisdiction which will enable offenders to be dealt with by either state police enforcement agency and either court system is required. For example, a person steals a car in NSW, enters Qld and the vehicle is burnt out - linked crimes that are dealt with in different states under different jurisdictions. The seriousness of what the offender has done may never get back to the court in the other state. The offender is not made accountable for what they have done. This is a source of much frustration for our police, the courts and our communities.

Cross Border Commissioner for Queensland

BROC continues to advocate on the need for a Queensland Cross Border Commissioner who can assist with creating safer and more resilient cross-border communities, with improved health and social outcomes, including child protection and improved access to vocational education and training.

Cross Border Commissioners in Victoria and New South Wales have provided a unique opportunity for their respective governments to ensure that constituents in their border communities can have their issues raised and dealt with in an accountable manner, which has led to positive outcomes and benefits.

A dedicated Cross Border Commissioner would provide opportunities for the Queensland government to further build and strengthen their ties with border constituents by ensuring border communities are getting the services and support they need, now and into the future.

Policing

According to the NSW Annual Police Report, in 2022/23 there were a total of 17,062 police officers which equates to a police officer to resident's ratio of 1:489. The lack of resources is evident when comparing with other states (Queensland 1:326, Victoria 1:319, South Australia 1:301) for the same period. The lack of police resources is further exacerbated in rural and regional areas where there are significant difficulties in attracting officers to fill roles.

A lack of police in larger centres impacts on other smaller stations in our Shires. Often stations in villages and smaller towns are left without a police presence as officers assigned to those stations are seconded to larger centres for duties. Alternatively, police officers are undertaking duties on behalf of other agencies such as prisoner transfer, mental health assistance and all other support functions that distract from front line and proactive policing and impacts on the response time to criminal activities in regional communities.

In the case of NSW Police in particular, much of the communication is from their centralised media unit with little if any comment coming from local officers. It is considered important that the local Officer in Charge be given the autonomy and encouraged to engage with the local community. The people in our border communities want to hear from an authoritative source and understand the police response to crime in their local area.

Building trust between law enforcement agencies and the community is also essential for effective crime prevention and response. Community policing initiatives that involve local residents in crime prevention efforts can help foster trust and cooperation.

Reoffending and the Justice System

In many instances, particularly in the case of youth crime the deterrent handed down by our local court simply does not reflect community expectations. A large percentage of youth (those aged under 18) then go on to reoffend after a court appearance and/or breach their bail conditions.

Operation Mongoose is a high visibility response to property crime in regional areas. In March 2024, police reported that of the 150 persons that had been charged in the preceding 6 months of the operation 109 of those were juveniles and 67% of those charged were already on bail.

Whilst it is acknowledged that corrective actions only form part of the response to the current regional crime epidemic, the community must be adequately protected from serious and repeat offenders. In instances where there is a high degree of confidence that an offender will reoffend, then bail must be refused.

It is important that the government deliver upon the proposed legislative reform to the Bail Act and strengthen the test for bail including for youth charged with serious offences.

Social Considerations

It has been broadly acknowledged that policing alone will not overcome the current crime problem confronting the region. The arrest comes after the crime is committed and post the physical, psychological and financial impacts suffered by the victims of crime. The region has been badly shaken by the brazen, intimidating, at times violent and repeated nature of crime on their doorstep in recent years.

The over representation of youth in regional crime statistics has been significantly attributed to the 'post and boast' phenomenon. This sees young offenders recording their crime and pursuit and posting such to social media. This was highlighted by Moree Plains Shire Council during a recent BROOC presentation in which they displayed a TikTok clip of a break & enter into a room of a guest staying at a motel in Moree. This was very disturbing and all meeting attendees were sobered by the viewing.

It is noted that much of this sort of crime committed by young people appears to be opportunistic with them subsequently uploading videos to social media showing themselves joyriding at high speeds, involved in police pursuits and breaking into people's homes to steal cars and keys. It is considered important that the legislative reform around new 'post and boast' laws are implemented by the government.

Unfortunately, it is often vulnerable and disadvantaged youth that are disengaged with their community and responding to negative peer influence getting involved in substance abuse, anti-social and criminal activities. Sometimes for these young people, home is not a safe place and they therefore escape onto the streets with their peers committing crimes. It is vitally important that there are adequate resources to re-engage such youth in pro-social activities in the community such as employment, education, training, cultural and sporting activities. The sad reality is there are currently insufficient services and supports for vulnerable and disadvantaged youth in our region. Unless engagement and diversionary services are adequate these youth will continue to commit crimes into adulthood, continuing a cycle of disadvantage and criminal offending. There is definitely a need for youth services officers as a prevention method who monitor known youth offenders within the first 72 hours after a crime has been committed.

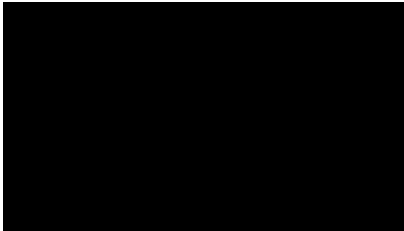
The state government must take the lead in ensuring that adequate programs are in place to prevent youth related crimes and to divert youth at risk away from becoming criminals. The coordination of agencies providing services in this space is vital to ensure that scarce public funds are being wisely allocated. The recent analysis of service provision for community services in the domains of crime prevention and justice, education, health and healing, housing and youth undertaken by Moree Plains Shire Council is a great example. The analysis clearly highlighted inefficiencies, duplication and a lack of coordination amongst agencies. Resolving this issue must also be a priority for the government.

Conclusion

The crime problem currently facing NSW and our cross-border communities is a complex social issue that will require a multi-faceted response led by the state government. It is totally unacceptable that people residing in rural and regional areas of our states are subjected to crime rates well above that of our city peers. The response must be swift and comprehensive looking at all aspects including policing, cross border anomalies, the judicial system, youth support services and support for victims of crime including domestic violence.

I would be only too pleased to attend one of the public hearings on this issue once details are announced. In the interim, please do not hesitate to make contact should you have any queries or concerns about any aspect of this submission.

Yours faithfully



CR KATE DIGHT

CHAIRPERSON