

**Submission
No 155**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Name: Ms Elizabeth O'Hara

Date Received: 31 May 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this vital discussion.

I have taught in High Schools for over 40 years and was involved in the introduction of the (then new) Aboriginal Studies Syllabus in both Junior and Senior School. I had the great privilege of working with inspirational Aboriginal Support Staff and experienced innumerable instances of Indigenous students being subject to unfounded suspicion by the forces of law and order. The Suspect Targeting Management Plan was just one of these institutionalised sources of alienation of students- decades of harassment were experienced by young people (who referred to the interactions forced on them by police as ‘having been stomped’) before it was finally abandoned in October 2023 (see *Highly intrusive: NSW police dump proactive policing of children after watchdog warns it could be unlawful*, The Guardian, 30 October 2023).

The violence perpetrated against the Traditional Custodians of our area is reflected in this facebook post from the Nēwara Aboriginal Corporation facebook page. Current issues of community safety cannot be considered properly without acknowledgement of grievous losses of land, language and culture previously inflicted, reparations yet to be made and intergenerational trauma still experienced.



I wish to briefly comment on the following terms of reference;

(a) **the drivers of youth crime across regional and rural NSW, particularly since the COVID pandemic**

- **Inability to navigate the means of redressing socioeconomic disadvantage which do exist**

Accessing Centrelink assistance and support is a challenge even for literate, computer-competent members of society- many young people simply give up

- **Homelessness**

As the Federal Government's Special Homelessness services annual report 2022-2023 (SHS Report), updated 13 February 2024 indicates, homelessness, or the credible fear of it, is a fearful reality for many young people. Evidence abounds that emergency placements in the local community are stretched past breaking point

- **Trauma**

Tensions created by intergenerational trauma, domestic violence and drug and alcohol issues were exacerbated by the Covid lock-downs and continue to be impacted by the ongoing effects of the pandemic

- **a feeling of not belonging** – of not being accepted, of not having a role to play in society or of being valued

- **Lack of mental health facilities and programs**

Waiting lists and facilities considerable distances away impede delivery of appropriate mental health programs; successful programs available, for example, to adult men in our community are simply available for young people.

- **education deficits** have been exacerbated by covid lockdown. The possibilities of schooling from home are vastly truncated when there is no easy access to the internet

- **increased potency of drugs**

(b) **how a whole of government approach can reduce the drivers and root causes of youth crime in regional and rural NSW**

Elements of a whole of government approach could include:

- an actively user-friendly, face-to-face Centrelink service provider
- well-funded and appropriate emergency accommodation
- affordable and plentiful social housing
- significant investment in regional and rural mental health facilities
- extension of mental-health programs available to adults to young people; adequate provision of mental health facilities

(c) **the wraparound and diversionary services available for youth and families in the regions and rural areas and how they can be better matched to individuals, measured, improved and integrated into a coordinated approach to divert youth from crime, having regard to the NSW Government's commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal people;**

The NSW's Government's commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal people should ensure that the senior partner, independently functioning and responsible for implementing programs, is the Aboriginal community.

Commitment to working in partnership must be genuine and set within the framework of Closing the Gap. Note below a quotation from a [Media Release from the Aboriginal Legal Service, 25 October 2023](#):

NSW Police must share responsibility for Closing the Gap, says the Aboriginal Legal Service in response to a [new report](#) assessing how police work with Aboriginal communities.

The Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT) Limited (ALS) is concerned that it was not consulted on the new blueprint for police engagement with Aboriginal communities before its launch in August this year, despite the NSW Government's prior commitment to align the plan with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap in partnership with Aboriginal communities and organisations. The Law Enforcement Conduct Commission's report into the impact of the previous Aboriginal Strategic Direction (2018-2023) found that NSW Police accountabilities for Closing the Gap are currently unclear and recommended that the NSW Government list the NSW Police Force as a responsible agency.

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(d) staffing levels and workforce issues, including police staffing, in regional and rural areas and how services can be improved to reduce youth crime in these areas;

Integrated community-based, appropriately staffed and well-resourced programs are required to reduce youth crime.

(e) recidivism rates in regional and rural areas, and related impacts on the community, services and law enforcement;

- **a local program to assist young offenders released from custody** to move back into the community and begin regular school attendance was successful- but funding was short term.
- **Circle sentencing and rates of recidivism**
See [NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research](#), April 2020
- Support for victims of crime could include, where appropriate, interactions with perpetrators

(f) the range of functions being performed by NSW police officers, including mental health assistance and youth welfare, on behalf of other agencies in regional and rural areas, and the supports required to assist police;

I remember the first time a local Police Liaison Officer entered a school (to talk about road safety) wearing a gun; it was shocking.

The message was clear to young people, especially the marginalised, but perhaps not the one intended; a policeperson had become less someone who could be approached for help and much more someone to be feared.

It is completely unreasonable to expect NSW police officers to be responsible for mental health assistance and youth welfare. These are specialised areas of expertise and it is our responsibility to ensure appropriate funding and community-based professionals are responsible.

(g) Any other related matter

Young people should not be held on remand

A Sydney Morning Herald report, *Children refused bail and held in prison for months, then found not guilty*, [Sydney Morning Herald](#), 12 June 2019

Includes the observations:

NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities

The imprisonment of innocent children is "unimaginable," Child Abuse Prevention Services' Tracy McLeod Howe said.

"It's never ok to incarcerate a child. We know that incarceration only perpetuates an underlying problem. What we would hope that in NSW we will start to see a much more empathetic and positive response to young people who commit offences," she said.

The number of people refused bail and then later found innocent has risen by 30 per cent since 2014, with more than 200 people, including 21 children, forced to wait in prison for sometimes more than a year before being acquitted.

Of the 204 innocent people who had been refused bail in 2018, stays stretched past 500 days for some adults in the District Court, the latest NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics data shows.

The 21 children found not guilty in 2018 waited for an average of 124 days, BOCSAR deputy director Jackie Fitzgerald said.

I would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on the comments made above and again express gratitude for this opportunity.