

**Submission
No 138**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Police Association of NSW

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Police Association of NSW

Community safety in regional and rural communities

May 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry.

Police officers all across NSW go to work every day driven by a desire to keep people safe, prevent harm and investigate crime.

With significant understaffing and an ever-increasing demand for police services, it is off the back of the hard work of the men and women of the NSW Police Force that we continue to keep most categories of crime falling or stable.

That is a monumental effort and deserves recognition.

But those trends are not a reason for inaction, as there are major challenges to keeping people safe:

- There are significant exceptions to the crime categories stable or falling: domestic violence and sexual assault continue to have significant upward trends. The victims of these types of crime are overwhelmingly women and children. More must be done to stop people committing these crimes. Regional communities have higher rates of those types of crime, the gap with metropolitan areas is worsening, and those crimes are increasing.
- Understaffing, increasing work demand, and burnout means it is getting harder and harder for police to provide the same level of service. We need to ensure we retain the police of today and recruit the police of tomorrow, particularly in regional areas where there are unique conditions to make delivering policing services more challenging.
- Exacerbating understaffing is the pressure placed on police to perform roles that should be done by other agencies, particularly mental health response and prisoner transport.
- There are significant barriers to attracting current and future police to live and work in regional areas, most notably housing and child care. These barriers need to be removed to ensure sufficient police staffing in regional areas.

It is unacceptable that the people of NSW that live in regional and rural communities feel less safe than those in the city.

We commend this Inquiry for investigating these issues, and call on all sides of politics to support strategies to alleviate this.

Recommendations

Domestic violence

1. The NSW Government establish working groups of stakeholders to:
 - a. identify effective perpetrator behavioural change programs and related support services (eg educational, vocational, health, substance dependency, gambling and other factors that contribute to domestic violence).
 - b. design a system of pre-judicial domestic violence cautions, requiring perpetrators to participate in and complete such programs identified in (1)(a),
 - c. design a specialist domestic violence court, including appropriate eligibility, procedures and sentencing options
 - d. design collocated Coordinated Community Response Family Justice Centres.
2. The NSW Government fund the implementation of the strategies designed through the above process.
3. Funding be allocated for additional domestic violence specialist positions and teams in each Police District/Command. The filling of these positions be phased according to operational needs with the filling of the large number of current vacancies across the state.

Policing resources

4. The NSW Government must use the Award negotiations as an opportunity to implement a retention strategy, and make a pay offer to NSW police officers that is sufficient to address deteriorating pay satisfaction.
5. The NSW Government needs to urgently address the increasing workload and vacancies, to ensure the workload performed by police officers is safe and sustainable.
6. The NSW Government develop a strategy to address the concerning lack of trust in the NSWPF handling WHS concerns of the workforce.
7. The NSWPF modernise the FRPA policy, by agreement with the PANSW. Part of that modernisation process should include amending the assumption of one job per hour per car crew.

Mental health response

8. The NSW Government:

- a. Commence consultation on the review by the NSW Police Force into the UK Right Care, Right Person framework, and related mental health response reforms,
- b. Evaluate the South Australian model for ensuring a health response to mental health needs, and the reduction in police attendance, and
- c. Outline a plan to implement a NSW equivalent solution, with the primary objective being to significantly reduce the number of incidents that police attend and increase the number that are handled by health services.

Prisoner transport

9. The NSW Government ensure Corrective Services NSW immediately commence the transport of prisoners who have been bail refused, as has long been intended.

Housing

10. The NSW Government:

- a. Urgently address police housing that is of a poor quality, which will require increases to the annual budget for improving existing properties and acquiring, building or renting new properties.
- b. Increase funding to enable more locations to offer housing assistance to attract officers to fill vacancies.
- c. Develop a strategy that identifies the need for key workers in communities across NSW, and then ensures those locations have the housing facilities to attract and accommodate the key workers required. That strategy should:
 - i. Identify locations struggling with vacancies due to housing (not limited to special remote locations, but rather defined by need),
 - ii. Identify the property stock required to house key workers in that area,
 - iii. Have a process to acquire the required housing stock,
 - iv. Have a code and housing standard that is complied with in the provision of housing to key workers, and
 - v. Have sufficient budget to achieve those aims.

Childcare

11. The NSW Government:

- a. Secure priority placement in childcare and out of school hour care services for police officers and other key workers should be offered;
- b. Coordinate, in conjunction with the key worker housing strategy in Recommendation 9, a strategy to ensure there is sufficient childcare and out of school hours care needed for key workers to live in remote and regional communities.

This strategy should provide childcare and out of school hours care that is accessible, flexible, and affordable for key workers.

Health services

12. The NSW Government coordinate, in conjunction with the key worker housing strategy in Recommendation 9, a strategy to ensure there is sufficient access to health services required by key workers and their families.

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Crime Trends

Higher crime rates in regional and rural locations

Regional and rural communities currently experience higher crime rates than cities.

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research recently reported that in Regional NSW, the rate of property crime was 59% higher than in Sydney, and 57% higher for violent crime.

This disparity of regional crime rates compared to Sydney is long-standing, and the long-term trend is that gap is getting worse not better.

It is not sufficient or appropriate to answer this statistic by saying that crime overall is falling.

Firstly, violent crime in regional NSW has been stable for 20 years, compared to Sydney that experienced a 20% decrease. It is disappointing that people living in Regional NSW are not safer than they were 20 years ago.

Property crime in regional NSW has decreased in that time period, but that reduction has been considerably less than the reduction achieved in Sydney.

Concerningly, the 5 year trend shows increases in Regional NSW in domestic violence, non-domestic assault, sexual assault and motor vehicle theft.

A large proportion of the increases in motor vehicle assault and non-domestic assault is attributed to young offenders.

The Regional vs Sydney trend is also not the full picture; crime is not evenly distributed in Regional NSW, and there are particular areas of regional NSW that have even higher levels of crime, that continue to increase. In far Western NSW the rate of both property crime and violent crime is over 3 times the State average.

The attribution of crime in regional areas to young people would ignore the large bulk of offending, and so should not be the sole focus of efforts to improve crime prevention.

Acknowledging the potential for skewed data, adult males make up the large majority of both property and violent offenders proceeded against in Regional NSW, followed by adult females, then young males and young females.

Having said that, there are specific trends relevant to regional crime for which young people are a major factor.

The increase in motor vehicle theft in regional NSW largely attributable to more offences by young people. In particular the trend of breaking and entering into homes to steal car keys is a prominent cause of fear and frustration for people.

There is also scope to reduce reoffending amongst young people.
23.4% of adults found guilty in court reoffended within the next 12 months.

For young people, that figure is 44.6%.

It is worth noting that whilst that percentage figure is high and increasing, it still represents a decline in the *total* number of young people reoffending.

Domestic Violence

In Australia, a woman is killed every 9 days by an intimate partner, and a man is killed every 91 days.

Over 4,600 women over the age of 15 will be hospitalised each year as a result of domestic violence.

1 in 4 women has experienced violence, emotional abuse, or economic abuse by a cohabitating partner since the age of 15.

In regional NSW, the rate of domestic violence is, like other categories of crime, much higher than in metropolitan areas, and that gap is widening further. Worse than that still, domestic violence is also a category of crime that is consistently increasing in volume and rate.

Domestic violence is a category of crime that requires multi-disciplinary services, necessitating health, educational, vocational, housing and other services to support victims and maintain their safety, and change the behaviour of perpetrators.

This challenge can be exacerbated in regional areas that suffer from inequitable service access.

There is also a strong link between young people growing up in houses affected by domestic violence, and subsequently offending themselves.¹ In this cycle, victims can become offenders.

¹ Astridge, B., Li, W.W., McDermott, B. & Longhitano. 2023, 'A systematic review and meta-analysis on adverse childhood experiences: prevalence in youth offenders and their effects on youth recidivism', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 140.

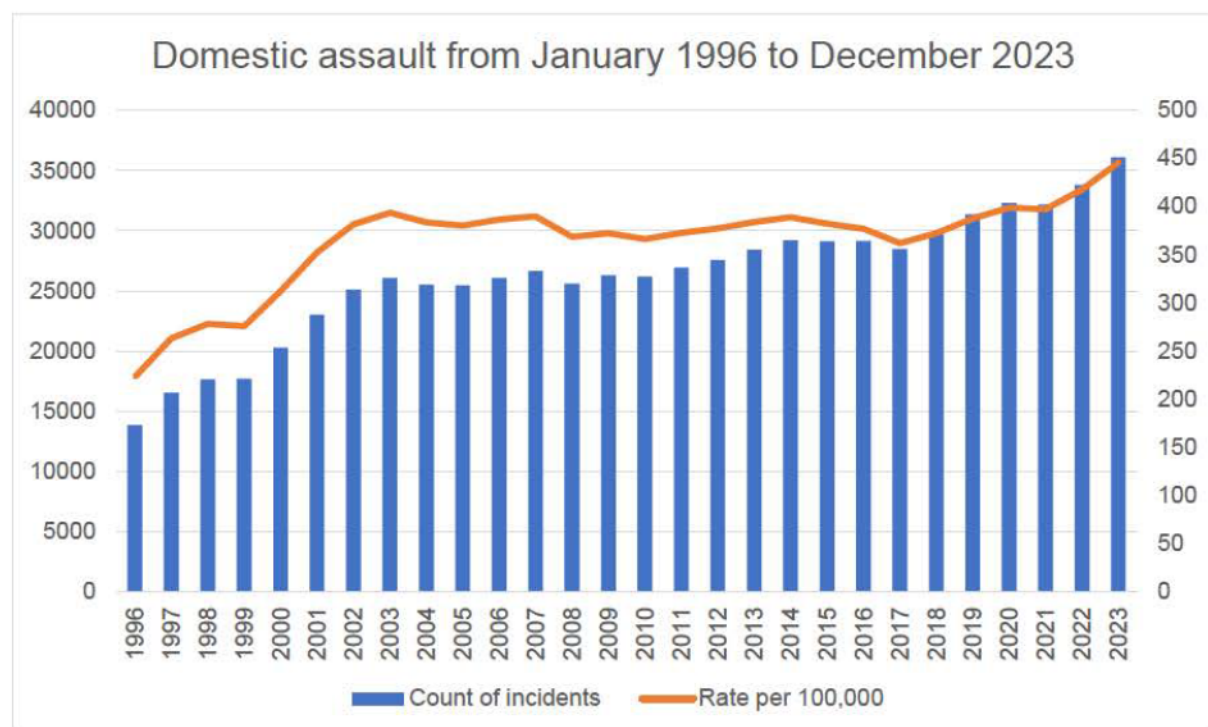
Although domestic violence is widespread, it is also a small group of offenders committing a large percentage of domestic violence offences.

A large proportion of domestic violence offenders commit further domestic violence offences within months of being charged, and often before the court proceedings for the original incident.

Police officers repeatedly attend these incidents, going to the same house, arresting the same person and putting together the brief of evidence, only to be back there, again and again.

It has cops questioning whether this is the approach needed to stop a cycle of violence.

The number of incidents detected by or reported to police officers has a long term upward trend: from 13,860 incidents of DV related assault in 1996, to 36,072 in 2023.



Police officers are also issuing more Apprehended Violence Orders, conducting more compliance checks, and proceeding against more offenders, year on year.

Police officers are doing what Parliament and Government ask of them: they are detecting/receiving reports of more incidents of domestic violence, investigating more offenders, issuing more orders, and proceeding against those offenders.

Police are creating more intervention points between the criminal justice system and the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

But that interaction with the criminal justice system is not having the desired preventative effect.

Crime survey data indicates the increased intervention by the criminal justice system is not moving the rate of victimisation: we are not reducing the burden of domestic violence on victims, their families, and the community.

More effective interventions to complement those police efforts need to be in place. Current strategies rely on arresting and commencing criminal proceedings against an offender, and providing services to the victim of the violence to assist them to leave violence.

These are important objectives, but the missing piece has been an onus on perpetrators to change their violent behavior.

That needs to change.

There is research that indicates arrest, prosecution and conviction is not a strong deterrent to many domestic violence perpetrators, and does not change their behaviour.² They have been through criminal proceedings before, they are familiar with the process and the consequences they may or may not face. The process of charge, trial and sentencing has very little relevance to the cause of their violent behaviour.

We know domestic violence often has a relationship with other factors, such as economic hardship, alcohol or other substance abuse, gambling, pornography, history of childhood trauma, and history of criminal offending.

Current criminal justice interventions do little to address the relationship between violent behaviour and these sorts of factors.

² Hurst, A. 2024, 'Prevention through intervention: transforming the behaviour of intimate partner violence perpetrators', Winston Churchill Trust.

Strategies to improve the current criminal justice interventions

Domestic violence cautioning system

With many domestic violence offenders reoffending prior to court proceedings for the original offence, it is clear the current criminal justice system needs a strategy to fill that gap.

We recommend the creation of a pre-court diversionary intervention – a domestic violence cautioning system.

A caution would carry with it a requirement to participate in behavioural change related programs.

It enables a prompt intervention much quicker than a slow court system that is currently not intervening quick enough to prevent reoffending.

If a case is not suitable for a caution, or where the conditions of the caution are not complied with, the normal process would proceed.

NSW Police Force Superintendent Andrew Hurst recently completed a Churchill Fellowship: “Prevention through intervention: Transforming the behaviour of intimate partner violence perpetrators”.

Superintendent Hurst’s project assessed a similar program in the UK, and found a huge reduction in reoffending, victims reporting positive change in perpetrator behaviour, and self-reported behavioural change by the perpetrator.

Specialised Courts

NSW is familiar with the concept of specialised courts, having implemented the Drug Court in 1999, and achieved long term beneficial effects on the total number of reconvictions and the risk of another offence.³

The impact and complexity of domestic violence now necessitates an equivalent specialty court: a domestic violence court.

A domestic violence court would enable appropriate domestic violence cases to be handled by court personnel with specific domestic violence expertise, adhering to procedures tailored to meet the needs of participants in domestic violence proceedings, and with sentencing options available that are specifically designed to bring about desired outcomes for victims of domestic violence.

³ Weatherburn, Yeongb, Poyntonb, Jonesa and Farrella (2020) “The long-term effect of the NSW Drug Court on recidivism”, Crime and Justice Bulletin, 232, Sept 2020.

Specific domestic violence related sentencing options should be designed for use by the recommended specialist domestic violence courts.

Behavioural change programs and related services for perpetrators

The success of the recommended pre-court cautioning system and a specialised domestic violence court is significantly influenced by the accessibility of effective perpetrator programs.

These programs should have the core objective to bring about change in the perpetrators' violent behaviour, with success measured by indicators established by victims, community providers and correctional personnel. ANROWS has already completed work to establishing program standards and monitoring systems.⁴

Governments in Australia (State/Territory and Federal) need to improve the standard of behavioural programs, establish evaluation indicators that meet victim needs, and ensure sufficient funding for these programs to remove barrier to access.

In keeping with reoffending timelines that are often shorter than the time taken to get to court, we have also heard reports of offenders who want to participate in these types of programs, but have waiting periods of 6 months or more before a spot in one is available. Their reoffending continues while they are in limbo in both formal criminal proceedings, and behavioural change programs. This is despite a demonstrated desire to change their behaviour, but no knowledge of the skills they need to do so because there is no avenue for them to learn them.

Alongside increases to victim services, we also need to see significant investment in programs that hold offenders to account in a behavioural sense (not just legally) and bring about a change in violent behaviour.

Improving wrap-around services for victims and perpetrators

Current family violent services are spread across multiple portfolios and service providers. This makes the service delivery and access point for those that desperately need these services fragmented and difficult to navigate.

This could be addressed by collocating family violence services in "Family Justice Centres" – single locations from which multiple agencies/service providers engage with those who need these services.

⁴ Day, A., Vlasis, R., Chung, D., & Green, D. J. (2019). Evaluation readiness, program quality and outcomes in men's behaviour change programs (Research report, 01/2019). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS

This would be particularly impactful in regional areas where service inequity is currently an exacerbating factor.

Bringing together “law enforcement investigators, victim advocacy services, case managers, counsellors, legal services, housing and shelter services, child welfare services, and medical professionals”⁵ would improve the holistic response to victims.

This could also co-locate the interventions and behavioural change programs that perpetrators participate in through the above recommendations.

Beyond co-location, a Coordinated Community Response model represents a health, educational, social services, domestic and family violence sector, law enforcement, judicial and community working to keep victims safe, hold perpetrators to account, and bring about a change in behaviour.

More devoted domestic violence teams in Police Area Commands and Districts
Premier Chris Minns recently stated that approximately 60% of police workload is domestic violence related.

There have also been a number of reviews that identified the need for specialist domestic violence training for police officers, and also uneven distribution of case load for special domestic violence resources across Police Commands/Districts.

The NSW Police Force has positions and teams with a devoted focus and skill set in domestic violence.

A “specialist policing team brings new capability that will improve responses to DFV through enhanced strategic oversight and optimizing the use of resources, with expansive core functions, including education and specialist training, monitoring and escalation of high-risk offenders and investigative strategy.”

Domestic violence liaison officers are specialist police officers trained to provide support and referral to other services. There is one or more in most Police Commands/Districts.

Currently, each region has a team of police officers that lead domestic violence response and target high risk offenders – the Domestic Violence High-Risk Offender Teams. DVHRTs received devoted funding through Government Grants

We want to see a wider availability of these specialist skills and expertise in all communities across NSW.

⁵ Hurst, A. 2024, ‘Prevention through intervention: transforming the behaviour of intimate partner violence perpetrators’, Winston Churchill Trust.

We therefore recommend that the NSW Police Force receive funding for a higher number of devoted domestic violence teams across the state, to ensure each command has sufficient resources to provide the highest possible service level for survivors and witnesses of domestic violence, and meet the workload of this prevalent crime.

We note that with large numbers of vacancies across the NSWPF, the creation of new teams/positions may not be possible to fill quickly. We recommend a staged approach so Police Commands and Districts are back up to full capacity as these new teams are created.

Recommendations: domestic violence

1. The NSW Government establish working groups of stakeholders to:
 - a. identify effective perpetrator behavioural change programs and related support services (eg educational, vocational, health, substance dependency, gambling and other factors that contribute to domestic violence).
 - b. design a system of pre-judicial domestic violence cautions, requiring perpetrators to participate in and complete such programs identified in (1)(a),
 - c. design a specialist domestic violence court, including appropriate eligibility, procedures and sentencing options,
 - d. design co-located Coordinated Community Response Family Justice Centres.
2. The NSW Government fund the implementation of the strategies designed through the above process.

These recommendations are consistent with the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*, and is informed by Superintendent Andrew Hurst’s report: “Prevention through intervention: Transforming the behavior of intimate partner violence perpetrators”, completed through the prestigious Churchill Fellowship.

3. Funding be allocated for additional domestic violence specialist positions and teams in each Police District/Command. The filling of these positions be phased according to operational needs with the filling of the large number of current vacancies across the state.

Police officer numbers and resources

NSW police officers all over the state are affected by increasing work demand and high vacancies. This is a state-wide problem, not specific to Regional Police Districts.

But there are unique circumstances to regional policing that interact and exacerbate the challenge of understaffing and work intensification for police in these areas.

Metropolitan Police Area Commands have 6,228 officers, spread over 71 stations.

Regional Police Districts have 4,961 officers, spread over 328 stations.

All over NSW, police officers are absorbing the tasks of vacancies or increased work demand.

Regional stations have fewer officers in each community to absorb that additional work.

It puts greater pressure on those officers and makes it harder to meet service requirements.

We can see this reflected in the number of stations that are 24-hour stations.

90% of stations in metropolitan NSW are 24-hour stations, compared to 14% in Regional NSW.

In addition, the 6,228 metropolitan officers cover 10,434.14 square kilometres.

The 4,961 regional officers cover 789,940.42 square kilometres.

The tyranny of distance in regional areas makes every police task take longer and exacerbates the challenges caused by vacancies and work intensification.

In Metropolitan Police Area Commands, the average response times to urgent calls range from approx. 4 to 12 minutes.

In Regional Police Districts, the response times to urgent calls range from 10 to 22 minutes.

It may seem obvious and inevitable to some people that response times are longer in regional areas than in metropolitan areas due to the tyranny of distance and the spread of resources.

But the urgency for the need for help from a police officer when you are the victim of a crime is the same whether you are in the city or in the bush. It is sad that for people in some

regional communities, the average response times are all double digits, and some greater than 20 minutes.

Regional police need more resources urgently to help them provide the exemplary service our police are capable of.

Pay dissatisfaction and burnout

Further in this submission, we highlight specific barriers to recruiting police to regional areas, and make recommendations to remove those barriers.

It is impossible to ignore two major problems with retention and recruitment in the NSW Police Force generally: burnout and dissatisfaction with pay.

The most recent People Matter Employee Survey was confronting reading about the strain NSW is putting on its police officers.

The survey question that deteriorated most drastically since the previous survey was satisfaction with pay.

Burnout and the handling of WHS issues also features frequently in the major concerns of police officers.

The lesson is that our police officers are tired from overwork, and feel their efforts and contribution have not been recognised with fair pay.

The result is more officers expressing an intention to leave the NSWPF, when attrition from the NSWPF is already high, outstripping recruitment.

It also resulted in a lower number of police officers that would recommend their workplace as a great place to work. Recruitment to policing is often most successful in cohorts that already have a connection to policing, so dissatisfaction amongst current serving officers is a recruitment obstacle as well as a drain on retention.

First Response Policing Agreements

A long overdue reform is to modernise policies applying to First Response Police Agreements (FRPAs).

FRPAs are agreements that set the acceptable levels of first response policing services required in a community to deal with calls for assistance in a timely manner.

These agreements are crucial to ensuring communities have sufficient police coverage, and that enough police are rostered on shift to meet that need.

One policy that undermines sufficient rostering under an FPRA is a decades old assumption that every police car crew can perform one job per hour.

This may have been true 30 years ago. But it is not true today.

Police involvement in crime is so much more complex and time consuming than it once was.

Domestic violence is a prime example. Premier Chris Minns recently stated that domestic violence takes up over 60% of police time. Domestic violence incidents are often dangerous, volatile and complex. The time that police officers spend at the scene resolving the situation, then gathering and processing evidence, supporting a victim, processing an offender, entering relevant data, and complying with accountability mechanisms has ballooned, making the idea that this takes an hour incredibly outdated.

Calculations based on one job, per hour, per car crew, is a problem across NSW. It is even more of a problem in Regional areas where every task takes longer because of travel times.

Recommendations: [policing resources](#)

4. The NSW Government must use the Award negotiations as an opportunity to implement a retention strategy, and make a pay offer to NSW police officers that is sufficient to address deteriorating pay satisfaction.
5. The NSW Government needs to urgently address the increasing workload and vacancies, to ensure the workload performed by police officers is safe and sustainable.
6. The NSW Government develop a strategy to address the concerning lack of trust in the NSWPF handling WHS concerns of the workforce.
7. The NSWPF modernise the FRPA policy, by agreement with the PANSW. Part of that modernisation process include amending the assumption of one job per hour per car crew.

Police officers diverted to non-core police duties

At a time when police officers are working with over 1,500 vacancies, when specialist duty types are being called in to supplement first response numbers, and when police officers are exhausted and at serious risk of health problems due to burnout, it is highly concerning the police officers continue to perform huge volumes of work that should be done by other agencies.

This is affecting service delivery, repeatedly calling police away from their core duties, and leaving regional communities without first response policing coverage for hours at a time, sometimes entire shifts.

Police still required to respond to mental health needs

People with mental health needs deserve a response from a mental health professional.

For all the qualities, skills and commitment to community safety of police officer, they are not mental health professionals, yet they are called to mental health crises daily.

No stakeholders in mental health policy want police to be responding to mental health issues and forced to be quasi-mental health service providers, except maybe some representatives of NSW Health that understand the volume of work police are currently performing for them.

For persons requiring mental health services: police attendance can be distressing and stigmatising. Police are not mental health professionals and so cannot provide them the help they need. Police vehicles are not appropriate to transport persons requiring health care.

For police officers: they are forced to attend an incident they know they do not have the qualifications, equipment or vehicles suitable for that purpose. They have to do their best to resolve the situation despite those challenges. They do not want to cause anyone harm, but they attend these incidents with the significant fear things will go wrong, resulting in harm to someone or themselves.

For the community: their service needs are not met. People with mental illness do not have access to appropriate pathways into care, instead interacting with police. The community suffers doubly because police time is spent at tens of thousands of these incidents, during which time those police officers are not available to perform other duties, including first response to urgent calls for assistance.

The situation is untenable. The fundamental reform needs a health response to a health issue. Any other models, like PACER or mental health training for police, is still a health system reliant on police intervention, and is not acceptable.

The UK solution: major overhaul for mental health incidents.

The UK solution to the major challenge of coordinating police and health services hit international attention in May 2023 when the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Mark Rowley wrote a letter to all health and social care services, giving notice he would direct his police officers to stop attending certain mental health related incidents by 31 August.

While it was the Met's actions that gathered international attention, the origins of this solution came in 2019.

Humberside Police

Humberside Police is about the size of a Region in NSWPF; approx. 2,000 officers.

In 2019, they were at dangerously low staff levels after years of austerity cuts.

At the same time, they were receiving 1,566 incidents per month about concerns for welfare, mental health incidents or missing persons. Estimates equated this to approximately 11% of police officers' workload.

75% of the calls they received to attend mental health incidents were not from the public, but from other government agencies or care providers.

Police were constantly being called to apprehend a person, and then sometimes having to hold them for 16 hours while a mental health bed was found.

This stretched police resources that were already cut to the bone.

Humberside Chief Constable Lee Freeman implemented what is now known as the Right Care, Right Person (RCRP) model that now underpins the UK reform.

By only deploying his officers to incidents that required police, and diverting the rest to health services, Chief Constable Freeman estimates Humberside Police reduced the number of mental health incidents that police attended by over 500 per month, saving 1,132 officer hours each month.

In a police force the size of a NSWPF Region, that makes a big difference - Humberside Police were able to redeploy those officers to core policing duties, and the results were significant for the community:

- they formed teams dedicated to disrupting drug dealing,
- Humberside Police quickly achieved the highest crime detection and arrest rates in the UK, and
- Humberside won the 'UK Police Service of the Year' award in 2022.

Jump forward to London in 2023.

London Metropolitan Police

With over 34,000 sworn police, the London Metropolitan Police is the largest police force in the UK.

In Commissioner Rowley's letter in May 2023, he outlined to health services that Met police officers spend 10,000 hours per month dealing with mental health issues. To demonstrate the point, he showed the urgent response call data from a day where the Met received a record number of calls; 9,292 calls, only 30% of which were categorised as crime related.

In his letter, he said:

"We are failing Londoners twice.

We are failing them first by sending police officers, not medical professionals, to those in mental health crisis, and expecting them to do their best in circumstances where they are not the right people to be dealing with the patient.

We are failing Londoners a second time by taking large amounts of officer time away from preventing and solving crime, as well as dealing properly with victims, in order to fill gaps for others."

Commissioner Rowley notified health services that on 31 August, he would direct his police officers to cease responding to emergency calls related to mental health, unless there is a real and immediate risk to life or serious harm.

Initially, health services were resistant to the move, concerned they could not coordinate the resources necessary to take over that work from police officers, and were worried it would leave people with mental illness without any response to assist.

But the Met Police had expert legal advice that there was no legal obligation for the police to perform that work, meaning any legal challenge by health services would be unsuccessful.

Since then, health services have been highly cooperative, getting around the table with police to work out a plan to transition the work from police to health personnel.

The deadline of 31 August was extended to 31 October, and the implementation was phased in.

The plan is built around the Right Care Right Person model developed in Humberside.

And now the UK has adopted the Right Care Right Person model as a national agreement.

Right Care, Right Person

“When people are in mental health crisis, they need timely access to support that is compassionate and meets their needs ... police are increasingly involved when they are not the most appropriate agency to respond, and they are not able to handover care to a more appropriate professional in a timely manner. This impacts on the ability of the police to carry out their other duties effectively, and importantly, can result in people with mental health needs experiencing greater distress and having poorer experiences of the mental health care pathway.”

UK - National Partnership Agreement: Right Care, Right Person (RCRP)

At its core, the RCRP is a decision-making tool to determine when police should attend a call relating to a person with mental illness, or when a health service should be responsible. The express purpose is to reduce the number of incidents that police attend and increase the number that are handled by health services.

The threshold for a police response to a mental health-related incident is:

- to investigate a crime that has occurred or is occurring; or
- to protect people, when there is a real and immediate risk to the life of a person, or of a person being subject to or at risk of serious harm.

There is a phased approach to ceasing police involvement in:

- initial response to people experiencing mental health crisis,
- responding to concerns for welfare,
- persons going missing from health facilities, and
- transport of patients in police vehicles.

To improve mental health services, the objective is also to ensure universal access to 24/7 advice, assessment, and treatment from mental health professionals, and address delays of handover to health facilities.

After the initial concerns from health services, health services are supporters of the principles of RCRP, even if they still hold concerns they do not have the resources to pick up the workload.

The RCRP has been expanded into a national agreement, with local police and health authorities now responsible for implementing the agreement within their community, developing working arrangements and timelines that meet their local needs.

It is crucial to the success of RCRP that health services have been brought onboard and developed working arrangements with police. That is required to ensure they meet the demand, and calls do not just fall through the cracks for police to pick up the pieces.

The signatories to the national agreement include the Mental Health Director of the National Health Service (NHS) and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health.

Application in Australia

The conditions in Australia are similar:

Police respond to a huge number of calls relating to mental health, but many of those calls do not involve an immediate threat or a crime. And yet police are still being called. Police are attending calls about people absconding from health facilities, people not showing up to appointments or not picking up medication refills.

Even in the cases where there is an immediate risk of harm, the risk is of self-harm by the person requiring mental health service, and not a risk to others, in the majority of incidents.

Police continue to be called to apprehend a person requiring mental health service, restrain them and transport them to a health facility. Most of those people are immediately released from hospital, with only a small percentage admitted to hospital. What was the point of the police involvement in the first place when they could have been assessed by a mental health professional in the field?

The NSW Police Force sent a delegation of senior officers to the UK to assess the suitability of the Right Care, Right Person model to be applied in NSW. The Commissioner of Police has stated publicly that the NSWPF recommends the implementation of the Right Care, Right Person model in NSW.

This joins a long list of reviews into mental health response across Australia that overwhelmingly call for Health, not police, to be the responding agency to mental health calls for assistance.

One of the more advanced jurisdictions in implementing that now universally accepted objective is South Australia.

South Australian solution

To address similar challenges, South Australia have implemented a model whereby Health personnel are the contact point for mental health needs, and there are new mental health specialist resources, including:

- paramedics with specialist mental health experience or training,
- “Mental Health CORE” teams, and
- an Urgent Mental Health Care Centre.

All these resources utilise health personnel, not police.

Only when Health assess an incident as requiring police assistance are police responses initiated, and at that point the police required are providing policing services in a co-response with qualified health personnel, rather than the NSW situation where police are the often the primary or only agency present.

NSW Parliament recently investigated the South Australian model, when the *Inquiry into Equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in NSW* received evidence from Mr Paul Lemmer, ASM, Executive Director of Operations, South Australia Ambulance Service.

Mr Lemmer stated:

“I think one of the things in South Australia is that a very clear decision was made that mental health is a health problem; it's not a police problem. We've been really, really clear as a State in trying to say response to mental health consumers should not be SAPOL led; it should be ambulance led or health led, and police come in and support, if there is a safety risk, but it's not a primary response.”

As a result, South Australia has seen:

- a large proportion of mental health calls being attended and resolved without police attendance required,
- a higher proportion of mental health calls being resolved within the community without the need to transport a person requiring support to a hospital,
- a very low rate of police attendance,
- a lower rate of involuntary admission,
- better patient engagement.

The health resources that attend those calls have a number of safety measures that assist in reducing the number of incidents which police are required to attend.

Mental health support is much bigger than this

As much as these issues are hugely important and require urgent solutions, we must acknowledge we are only talking about the tip of the iceberg.

People that reach a point of crises requiring an emergency response reach that point because for years, society has failed to meet their mental health support needs, failed to address socio-economic disadvantage, failed to provide sufficient support for alcohol or drug dependency.

Ensuring a health response to mental health needs will improve pathways to accessing support services, patient engagement with the health system, and reduce strain on police resources.

That is an incredibly worthwhile outcome, and one step in the right direction.

But it still makes that improvement in the context of a mental health support system that has consistently found to be inadequate to meet the mental health needs of NSW.

Recommendations: mental health response

8. The NSW Government:

- a. Commence consultation on the review by the NSW Police Force into the UK Right Care, Right Person framework, and related mental health response reforms,
- b. Evaluate the South Australian model for ensuring a health response to mental health needs, and the reduction in police attendance, and
- c. Outline a plan to implement an equivalent solution in NSW, with the primary objective being to significantly reduce the number of incidents that police attend and increase the number that are handled by health services.

Prisoner transport

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 are significantly delayed.

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

It has long been the intent of the NSW Government for this to occur.

However, in regional NSW, police are still performing a large volume of transport of bail refused prisoners.

This work is meant to be performed by Corrective Services.

They have the responsibility, authority, and resources to do this work.

But this work continues to fall to police to perform.

Recommendation: prisoner transport

9. The NSW Government ensure Corrective Services NSW immediately commence the transport of prisoners who have been bail refused, as has long been intended.

Barriers to police taking roles in regional and remote locations

Many police officers are interested and committed to serving in regional and remote locations. These places can be an attractive opportunity for many reasons: the professional and personal satisfaction of serving a community of which you are an important part, a new lifestyle and experience, and financial and career incentives.

But despite those attractions, officers cannot take up those opportunities if there is insufficient accommodation and services for the officer to move their life and family.

Housing and childcare are currently two significant barriers to officers taking up that opportunity.

Making great communities across NSW relies on people that are essential (like police, health workers, and teachers) to have a presence in the areas they serve.

If the NSW Government wants to make this a sustainable reality, it needs to ensure essential workers can access the housing and services they need to live in these locations.

We should not expect an essential worker making the decision to serve in a regional/rural location, is thereby making the decision to accept poor quality housing, long travel times, or inadequate services needed for their family.

Housing

There are some locations that, for a police officer to work in live in requires either:

- them accepting a very poor standard of employer provided housing,
- seeking to obtain housing privately in a market without suitable options or at great expense, or
- living in neighbouring areas and travelling long distances for work.

There is an absence of a central strategic plan to ensure all locations have sufficient housing facilities for the essential workers that are required in those location.

There are locations that have long-standing vacant police positions that cannot be filled due to the housing barriers. The Police Association, local Police Commanders and the communities often want officers to be provided with housing to help fill a vacancy, but either assistance is unavailable due to budgetary reasons, or the housing offered is of such poor quality that it dissuades an officer moving there, despite an interest to do so or financial incentives.

This creates the odd situation where we have police properties that are vacant, because they are of such poor quality no one wants to live in them, and yet we also have locations that cannot attract police officers because of the lack of housing.

PANSW staff and elected officials are often advocating on behalf of officers that need better quality housing, or for communities who want to attract a police officer to live there but cannot because there nothing is provided to assist police to move there.

In our experience, we mostly find NSW Police Force and Property NSW to be helpful and to share our motivation to solve the problem: it is in everyone's interests to do so.

But the barrier is repeatedly a lack of available budget, either in the budget for renovations/repairs, or the budget for offering housing as an incentive to fill a position.

The Western Region of NSW bears the brunt of this problem.

Common problems with existing housing stock

Many properties have problems that include:

- Mould, asbestos, lead and other contaminants: in some properties this has been left unresolved for so long, we have had members become ill as a result.
- Structural damage,
- Desperate need of refurbishment or renovation that are delayed for years due to insufficient budget,
- Housing falling into disrepair but repairs not being made promptly,
- Housing that is no longer inhabitable and needs to be condemned,
- Buildings that are ill-equipped to deal with extreme temperatures, other than by means that attract exorbitant power bills, with no solar panels installed. There was a program to install solar panels to such properties, but it ran out of funding.

It is unacceptable that an officer choosing to work and live in a regional or remote location requires them to live in housing that has these issues.

But that is the current reality.

We have also been involved in cases where it has affected service delivery: for example, in one location, the intended police house was not in a fit state for the officer that served there to live in. To make the best of the situation, he agreed to live in housing intended for the local teaching staff, as this was of a higher quality than the police housing, and was

vacant at the time. This affected service delivery because the teacher housing was not located close to the police station, so when the officer was called to duty late at night (eg for a break-in or brawl), he would drive from the teacher property to the police station, often passing the location of the unfolding crime, before returning with the required appointments and back up.

NSWPF and Property NSW are doing what they can to resolve issues like these, but too frequently do not have sufficient budget to do so. For example, we are often advised that NSWPF and Property NSW acknowledge the poor quality or deficiencies of a home, and have scheduled works, but that the work will not be done for months or even years, because the yearly budget is already allocated to other works.

We also understand that the funding for renovations and refurbishments is often dependent on asset recycling. This can achieve progress in Northern and Southern Region, where there are areas with high value properties. But it is not meeting the needs of Western Region.

We have been advised that the budget for refurbishments permits only about 4-5 major refurbishments per year. With a property portfolio of over 600, it is clear how long many properties will go without receiving the improvements they need.

Locations that cannot offer housing to officers

There are locations that have long standing vacancies, that cannot attract officers to the area because they do not offer any housing with the position, and suitable housing cannot be obtained by the officer privately.

We are aware of locations that do not offer housing to its officers (other than lock-up keepers) so the officers that work there must obtain housing at the closest neighbouring large town – over an hour's drive away.

This creates service issues, especially for a non-24 hour station. When officers are such a long way from where they work, it means nobody is nearby if needed, and officers have more than 2 hours of driving time per shift which contributes to fatigue.

Locations like this should be able to offer housing to their officers to ensure service delivery, public safety, and officer safety.

Management of police housing

Although the problems we identify above are serious and need rectification, we do acknowledge and appreciate that since the consolidation of police properties into Properties NSW, we have seen improvements to the quality of housing, and the timeliness

of repairs and maintenance, mainly in Northern and Southern Region where asset recycling has a greater benefit.

We do not seek to criticise this structure, given the progress we have seen, but we do identify some opportunities for improvement.

This new structure means that (with some exceptions) Property NSW is usually the owner and ultimate manager of a property. NSWPF is a tenant, and the officer living in the property is a subtenant. The management of the property is sub-contracted to a real estate agent.

This structure does have its benefits as officers have access to local points of contact and service providers, speeding up the process for simple repairs and maintenance.

Properties NSW is an effective and helpful manager of the properties.

One issue though is that for more complex issues with housing, it creates an uncertainty around whether the primary point of contact and decision maker on an issue is Property NSW, NSW Police Force, or the real estate agent.

For example, in the context of the budgetary blockages identified above, who is the primary decision maker for what properties are prioritised for major renovations?

This is a challenge for police officers to navigate, and they get bounced between the different stakeholders.

Even our staff, experienced in representing and advocating for our members in these matters, report that this slows the process and makes implementing significant improvements to housing more difficult.

Housing rights of key workers

Given the above management structure, most police officers in employer provided housing or rent assisted housing receive their rights as a tenant from the Residential Tenancies Act 2010.

It is beyond the scope of this submission and the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry to consider the suitability of that Act in its general application.

But we do submit the Residential Tenancies Act provides inadequate rights and housing standards to key workers who need to reside in any location that needs policing services, and who regional and remote communities are desperate to attract to the area.

There is no enforceable code or standard that the housing offered has to comply with, and be maintained in accordance with.

Key workers do not have the option to just reject a property and choose another: they are moving to a location to serve that community, and may only have one option available to them. NSW should ensure that option is suitable to attract and retain key workers.

There should be a housing code that sets a standard sufficient to achieve this, and enforceable across the housing portfolio.

Recommendations: housing

10. The NSW Government:

- a. Urgently address police housing that is of a poor quality, which will require increases to the annual budget for improving existing properties and acquiring, building or renting new properties.
- b. Increase funding to enable more locations to offer housing assistance to attract officers to fill vacancies.
- c. Develop a strategy that identifies the need for key workers in communities across NSW, and then ensures those locations have the housing facilities to attract and accommodate the key workers required. That strategy should:
 - vi. Identify locations struggling with vacancies due to housing (not limited to special remote locations, but rather defined by need),
 - vii. Identify the property stock required to house key workers in that area,
 - viii. Have a process to acquire the required housing stock,
 - ix. Have a code and housing standard that is complied with in the provision of housing to key workers, and
 - x. Have a sufficient budget to achieve those aims.

Childcare

NSW is desperate to attract police and other key workers to live and work in regional and rural areas.

And yet, in many locations, there is an unintended “do not come here” sign up for any key workers with a young family.

In combination with the housing barriers identified above, police officers find it almost impossible to secure childcare or out of school hours care.

This is dissuading officers from moving to these locations.

It precludes any officers with school-aged children from doing so. Or it requires them to have a partner that either does not work, or works alternating shifts from the officer to ensure at least one is home.

Many police families are dual emergency services families, making that impractical, or if achieved, means families never get to be together, as one is always working.

With limited places in care services, police families are often on a waiting list. They receive no priority, often meaning they can never access suitable childcare.

Recommendation: childcare

11. The NSW Government:

- a. Secure priority placement in childcare and out of school hour care services for police officers and other key workers should be offered
- b. Coordinate, in conjunction with the key worker housing strategy in Recommendation 9, a strategy to ensure there is sufficient childcare and out of school hours care needed for key workers to live in remote and regional communities.

This strategy should provide childcare and out of school hours care that is accessible, flexible, and affordable for key workers.

Access to health services

The Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 2 found in 2022 that:

“residents of rural, regional and remote New South Wales have poorer health outcomes and inferior access to health and hospital services, and face significant financial challenges in accessing these services, compared to their metropolitan counterparts. This is a situation that can and should not be seen as acceptable.”

This is another barrier to police officers accepting positions in regional and remote areas. Police officers are reluctant to move their families if they will not be able to access sufficient health services.

Police are also a category of worker that suffer high frequency of injury, both physical and psychological. We in the PANSW represent many police officers that require treatment for these injuries, and access to rehabilitative services to get back to work. This is a significant challenge for officers in regional and remote communities, where these services are not available or require long travel times at a time the officer is already dealing with the consequences of the injury and being off work.

We have recommended above that the NSW Government needs to have a central strategy for attracting and retaining key workers to regional and remote communities, including the provision of housing and childcare.

We also recommend this strategy include access to health services.

Recommendation: health services

12. The NSW Government coordinate, in conjunction with the key worker housing strategy in Recommendation 9, a strategy to ensure there is sufficient access to health services required by key workers and their families.

Conclusion

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

The safety of regional and remote communities is something that our membership, serving police officers, feel incredibly passionate about.

The recommendations put forward in this submission are important strategies to assist officers continue to provide outstanding service to regional and remote communities, overcome challenges that will enable further improvement, and help regional and remote place continue to be great communities to live and work in.

We thank you for your consideration of these recommendation, and are happy to assist the inquiry in any way we can.

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