

**Submission
No 176**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: BackTrack
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Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Areas, 2024

BackTrack welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on Law and Safety Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Areas. With an 18-year track record providing wraparound youth work, educational and diversionary activities to many hundreds of at-risk young people in Armidale and surrounding areas in rural NSW, we believe we have relevant insight and experience in the following aspects of the stated terms of reference:

- (b) how a whole of government approach can reduce the drivers and root causes of youth crime in regional and rural NSW;
- (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;
- (e) recidivism rates in regional and rural areas, and related impacts on the community, services and law enforcement;

We are also well placed to ensure that young people's voices are part of the conversation. Their safety and sense of belonging within the community is absolutely central to any meaningful solution to youth crime in regional and rural NSW.

About BackTrack

BackTrack was established in Armidale, NSW, when founder, Bernie Shakeshaft, saw vulnerable young people being left behind by a mainstream system that couldn't meet their complex needs. The young people we work with are disproportionately affected by intersecting challenges including early school-leaving, contact with the criminal justice system, homelessness and housing instability, trauma, multigenerational poverty, unemployment, substance use and severe psychological distress. They are often trapped in an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and incarceration, and they require holistic, flexible and long-term support to get their lives back on track.

With a shed, a passionate crew of volunteers, a pack of working dogs and a mission to keep kids alive, out of jail and chasing their hopes and dreams, Bernie established BackTrack in 2006. Today, our organisation is nationally recognised for its proven approach to helping vulnerable young people develop work and life skills, participate in learning and training, prepare for employment and connect with their wider community. We achieve this through a combination of educational, training and diversionary activities, transitional employment in our social enterprise (BackTrack Works), residential accommodation and flexible, wraparound youth work at multiple sites including The Shed and the BackTrack farm. We also support a growing number of like-minded organisations doing similar work in their own communities via the BackTrack Network.

Alternatives that Work - Our Holistic Approach

BackTrack provides an alternative to and a diversion from incarceration as well as meaningful and connected pathways post-release. We know that changing lives is a game of inches and we need to stand behind these young people for the long haul. The keys to our success lie in the longevity of our commitment to them, the 'whole of community' connections and support we have been able to engender and our holistic approach to youth work and a young person's wellbeing, which is based on



the Circle of Courage concepts of Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity. When young people (and communities) have these 4 quadrants in balance, they can access healing, wellbeing and change.

BackTrack offers a one-stop shop at our headquarters in Armidale, which includes education, housing, mental health and other supports, a working farm, paid employment via our social enterprise, and a broader Network which supports our dedicated and uniquely skilled staff. We have learned through real world experience that siloed, short term approaches will not solve anything when it comes to youth crime and mental health crises. We have also learned that locking young people up sets them on a path for a lifetime of crime, substance use and welfare dependency. These kids need genuine care to turn their lives around.

Crucially, in Armidale, we have been able to develop close long-term and mutually respectful relationships with police command and foster an environment where we are all looking out for the welfare and safety of our town's at-risk young people. To illustrate the depth of this work, the former Inspector of Police at the time of our establishment in 2006, still volunteers with us daily and is a much-loved member of the BackTrack family. At the same time, we are similarly embedded and respected among local First Nations communities and families, because we walk the walk with deep respect for Culture.

Listening to BackTrack Young People

Our young people are some of the most disadvantaged in the country. All have been disengaged from education, most have experienced trauma and early contact with the justice system. We use the connection of the BackTrack dogs to help to open these kids up for engagement and help, and then they show us their resilience, their potential and their hopes and dreams. We asked for some of their first-hand experience and input for this submission:

"Locking kids up doesn't help. They don't learn from it. The crime might stop while they're in there, but as soon as they're out and back in the same environment they go back to doing it because there is nothing else for young people to do, especially in small towns."

*"It can sometimes be better or safer inside [for young people], so it's almost a push to ***k up. You get fed well and looked after, so for those that don't have that or any better options outside, it can seem like a better choice."*

3 BackTrack young people wrote the following rap in lieu of a quote for this submission:

*I don't think jail is for everyone, only just for some.
However I believe the conditions should really be modified,
especially when it comes to the young.*

*It doesn't give you the necessary tools you need to help you grow and succeed.
You become isolated and alot of the ones you love tend to leave.*

*When you're inside, it starts to feel like home,
so you reoffend when you get outside 'cos you feel so alone.*

*Jail doesn't prevent crime. It helps you learn how to commit crimes better.
Before you know it, you're back behind bars, reaching loved ones through a letter.*



*I was going through some shit, so my Uncle mentioned this place.
He told me it would help me and potentially stop me from catchin' a case.
He said it would help equip me with skills to live a better life,
and since going there I know now that my Uncle was right.*

*I mean, just the other day, I was walking past this shop.
Saw this mad hat and was like; "I'm about to rack that."
Then I was like; "Suck that" and started heading down to BackTrack.*

Our Recommendations

1. **Belonging and long term, wraparound approaches** embedded in the community are essential to any solution to youth crime.
2. **There are alternatives to incarceration** in the community that require long term support without restricted timeframes and onerous reporting.
3. **Invest in innovative solutions in upstream services** to address the root *causes* of youth crime.
4. **Solutions need to match the problem.** The challenges faced by these young people are often extreme and always intersecting. The BackTrack way that has been changing young people's lives for almost 18 years, encompasses curriculum aligned 1:1 education, accommodation, accredited and-on-the job training and employment, justice support, mental health support, counselling, dog training, animal therapy, life skills, peer support, role modelling and more. We are providing the holistic and unconditional support of a family and *that* is what makes a difference and helps young people find the sense of safety and belonging in the community to turn their lives around.
5. **Invest in genuine, grassroots community-led solutions** like BackTrack and those we support via the BackTrack Network (currently operating in 8 towns, with many more in the pipeline).

Thank you for the opportunity to offer youth voices and on-the-ground experience to this inquiry.

We urge anyone looking for solutions to youth crime and the cycles of disadvantage and criminal behaviour to watch our recent documentary update, '[BackTrack: Chasing Dreams](#)'. It follows some of our young people years after their involvement in BackTrack and with the justice system, to see the profound intergenerational impacts of unconditional support and wraparound, relational youth work. Inch by inch and for the long haul – change is possible.

[BackTrack: Chasing Dreams | BackTrack](#)



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