

**Submission  
No 178**

## **COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES**

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## Introduction to the submission

We are a research team from the University of Newcastle, associated with the Social Sciences and social work programs in the School of Creative Industries, Humanities and Social Sciences. We are grateful to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on Law and Safety.

As a research team we bring diverse interests, backgrounds and experiences covering youth work, drug and alcohol research (including relevant policy), child protection, gendered violence prevention, creativity and community connection. Our team straddles experience in research and service delivery, bringing together these related domains to ensure that each informs the other on an ongoing basis. Our teaching and research also includes a focus on localised social policy.

In starting our submission, we wish to note that the current framing of the issues relating to young people, their behaviour and the experiences of local communities, appears to be building a problem-saturated and deficit-based perspective. Fogarty, Bulloch, et al. (2018) have identified this as a public health and policy approach applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia over many decades. Similar processes have occurred in other colonised countries. Through the operation of deficit discourses, policy makers and communities are invited to see First Nations people as ‘a problem to be solved’ (Fogarty, Lovell, et al. 2018). We believe that the same is true of young people and their communities in current public and policy discussion. Intrusive, and often punitive, interventions are more likely to be implemented when deficit models are operating. The alternative proposed by Fogarty, Lovell, et al. (2018) is to apply a ‘strengths-based approach’ to policy making. This approach does not deny the real problems that people and communities face but seeks to avoid an all encompassing negative perspective that fails to see what sits in contrast to the problem circumstance and could be built upon, with the community, to achieve a different outcome.

To offer an illustrative example from our current research examining community-based youth hub models, a young person we spoke with said:

*I know that when I've got a problem or dealing with something I can come here and talk to someone; talk to [youthworker] and its just like a place where I feel safe enough to speak about stuff, anything, I don't have to worry. Since coming here, just helping me out with my problem with authority, I've gotten myself a job, I've moved back home, I've gotten off drugs as well, it really does help. I was going to jail if it wasn't for the hub, I saw myself going to jail.*

## Our current research

Currently, we are conducting research for a local, not-for-profit organisation on the Central Coast of NSW. This organisation is Regional Youth Support Services, Inc. (hereafter, RYSS) and we are researching their 131 Youth Hub project (hereafter, The Hub). The Hub closed in April 2024 due to not being able to secure further funding. Our Youth Hub research was contracted by RYSS and much of the content in this submission is informed by this project. While the project is ongoing, and the final report has not been completed, we are drawing on the literature review, fieldwork data and indicative findings from the research to contribute to this submission. We are using this research as a case study to inform this submission. In addition, we have included

contributions to this submission from other areas of our research and experience as they are relevant to the remit of the inquiry.

The research informing this submission is being completed on the Central Coast of NSW. In making this submission, we recognise the Central Coast has a strong local workforce across the social and human services sector and has a higher level of service availability compared with other regional and rural areas. At the same time, it is possible that the Central Coast has distinct issues that come from this same proximity, including young people leaving areas such as Sydney or Newcastle, hoping there might be easier access to housing, escaping difficult family or community dynamics and being less known to police. The Central Coast also houses the Frank Baxter youth detention centre and often the young people exiting this facility remain living in the local area. While each and every location is distinctive, and policy-making should consider local conditions, we recognise the importance of ‘evidence-informed policy making’. In this field, the notion of ‘policy transfer’ recognises that approaches which are working in one area are often drawn across, in whole or in part, for application in other areas (Gavens et al. 2019). Thus, we present this localised information in awareness that the lessons are likely to have relevance and usefulness for other areas.

Our current research work leads us to believe that youth hubs can play an important part in responding to the needs of local young people and their community. As such, we believe there should be more services of this type across the state. Such services need to have a foundational model which is then adapted to fit with the local arrangements. To illustrate from our current experience, the RYSS Youth Hub included a café which provided a welcoming, non-clinical feel and was available for young people to learn employment skills. On the Central Coast there is a high need for hospitality workers, so the young people learning skills in the café had a good chance to get a local job with their new skills. In our research interviews many young people spoke highly about this situation. In a different region, with different employment needs and options, insisting that a youth hub incorporate a café for skills development may not be helpful. If youth hubs incorporate an aspect of employment related skills development, these should be locally relevant and locally valued.

The process of developing youth hubs (and all local service offerings) sets the tone for all that follows. Our research leads us to believe that service commissioning should be based on processes that centre the knowledge of local beneficiaries of the service (in this case, young people, their families and the broader community). In this process, agencies commissioning services should enhance the positive impacts on the local service ecology of establishing services and minimise the negative impacts from establishing and removing services.

## Recommendations

Based on the material that follows, we recommend that the Committee:

- Recognise the value of youth hubs as a model of service delivery for effectively connecting young people to the supports and services they need, connecting and coordinating local service providers and ultimately increasing community safety.
- Recognise that hubs need to be developed locally, with genuine partnerships at their core, to be responsive to the conditions of each location and community.

- Recommend that service funding needs to be secure and disincentivise destructive competition in order to strengthen and sustain local service ecologies.
- Recommend that appropriately designed evaluations, that understand outcomes services can achieve are dependent, in part, on the service context, are incorporated into program funding to ensure accountability and opportunities for continuous improvement.
- Recommend the application of strengths-based policy making when considering initiatives for responding to young people and their specific communities in order to engage positively with young people and their communities and reduce the likelihood of building a deficit-based perspective of young people and regional areas.

#### Terms of Reference that will be responded to in this submission

- 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;
- g) any other matter

#### Response: term of reference c)

Wraparound services refer to non-government, not-for-profit programs designed to support young people either as (i) a stand alone option or (ii) as part of a suite of supports integrated within a broader case plan, where that case plan is overseen by another organisation such as Juvenile Justice. The research we have been completing over the past 24 months has focused specifically on the 'hub' model of service delivery in the youth sector.

A youth hub is a welcoming, non-clinical space where young people can access a diverse range of support services at the same location (Hetrick et al, 2017; Settiani et al, 2019; Henderson et al, 2021; Hawke et al, 2021). Hubs can offer a relaxed space for young people to hang out while simultaneously having the option to speak with a youth worker. They can be a contact point for multiple external organisations to connect with young people and include programs for individuals and groups.

The RYSS Youth Hub, as we observed it, provided the following (and more):

- A lounge and café space where young people could hang out, charge their phone/device, meet friends, connect with youth workers
- A training café where young people could spend a small number of weeks learning hospitality skills alongside a youth worker with extensive hospitality experience
- Term by term group programs delivered by agency staff and, sometimes, by external service providers
- A unique range of youth-led activities where creativity was encouraged, with an opportunity for performance.
- Caseworkers who could provide individual, tailored assistance to young people, over multiple weeks, to meet goals the young person and their worker had negotiated

- A child-friendly group meeting space where (younger) mothers with young children could meet with workers to address their case planning goals
- Outreach activities into the local community in response to hotspots of youth presence and community concern
- A meeting point where external service providers, such as Centrelink, Service NSW, housing services, legal services and Police could connect directly with young people to complete transactions that might otherwise be difficult for young people to navigate, or require young people to go to spaces they find unfamiliar and/or overwhelming
- Regular meetings between service partners to facilitate flow of information and strengthening of working relationships

The hub approach recognises that young people's engagement with a service can take many forms and that access is increased when there are diverse pathways in. It also recognises that in some instances, professional relationships with young people can take time to build and that offering 'soft entry' options are important. A youth hub is an environment which fosters this. Our research project has shown that casual interactions allow young people to set the pace of their engagement with the service with these leading to individual, targeted support. We have also seen the value of young people being able to transfer between service types within the space with which they are familiar. That is, for example, starting by joining a group program and moving then to case management or the work skills, or vice versa.

While there is limited Australian research regarding service design and delivery, international research on youth hub models identifies 6 key elements. These six elements are listed below, followed by seventh point based on our research and a brief comment about contextualising services before moving on to discuss our existing lessons from the research field work we have undertaken.

## Key Elements of a Youth Hub

### 1. Rapid Access

Prompt inclusion into a service is connected to greater engagement. There is a window of opportunity to provide initial support to a young person, and services that are aware of the significance of rapid access are more likely to have the opportunity to make a positive impact on a young person's life (Settipani et al, 2019; Henderson et al, 2022; Hawke et al, 2021; Hetrick et al, 2017). The term 'Rapid Access' includes: walking into a youth hub and meeting with a youth worker, a professional referral from another service provider or community officer, outreach events, a parent/carer engaging with a youth hub regarding a young person in their care, or a referral from a young person's school. Ultimately, this key element emphasises that delayed access is detrimental to engagement with service providers.

### 2. Location and Transport

To enable engagement, a youth hub must be situated in a location that is local and simple to travel to (Settipani et al, 2019; Hawley et al, 2020; Hetrick et al, 2017). A central location also builds familiarity within the community, and the awareness of a local youth hub grows to be common knowledge for many. To illustrate this, there is a small yet notable level of comfort that can accompany a young person who is referred to a youth hub, and they already know where it is, how to get there and what the building looks like.

Getting to a youth hub is as important as knowing where it is. Over time, a young person may have their transport arranged with a youth worker, however, it is the overall location of the service and the transport available that this element is highlighting.

### 3. Youth Friendly Setting

A Youth Friendly Setting describes a service environment that is non-threatening, non-clinical and is space that is appealing to young people (Henderson et al, 2021). This may include music playing, having a range of seating available including couches, a television, and a place to eat. However, environments which are appealing to young people change over time, and an awareness of maintaining relevancy with the current groups of young people accessing a service is important.

### 4. Welcoming and Competent Staff

Welcoming staff create an opportunity for a young person to have positive relationships with an adult (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Positive and sustained adult-youth relationships can promote mentorship, goal setting and the encouragement of building life-skills (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016; Settapani et al, 2019; Hetrick et al, 2017). It is also essential that staff are sufficiently trained and equipped to provide ongoing support to young people with mental health and substance use challenges (Henderson et al, 2021).

### 5. Youth and Family Engagement

A youth hub that encourages and responds to feedback from young people and their families becomes a service built on the community's needs. By embracing such perspectives, a youth hub can become imbedded within a community, consistently amending programs where necessary through this ongoing collaboration (Hawke et al, 2021; Hetrick et al, 2017; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Methods for including the community will alter between services, however the core reasonings are constant.

### 6. Evidence Informed and Service Diversity

Evidence Informed and Service Diversity are two elements that coincide to demonstrate important steps in maintaining a youth service which is beneficial to young people. Academic literature, professional reports and government policies are continually evolving; it is vital for a youth service to show commitment to staying informed and being open to new knowledge. As a result, programs will be adapted when necessary to ensure ongoing relevance for the young people who use the service. Such adaptation demonstrates Service Diversity.

### 7. Partnerships and cooperation

While the literature we reviewed did not highlight the critical requirement for service partnerships in developing and delivering youth hubs, we contend that a service that meets the needs of a community, its young people and other services cannot be delivered effectively without cooperation and relationships with other service providers at its core.

### Comment

The research team is aware that the key elements of a youth hub are contextual, and that the weighting of each element or the specific form it takes will differ between services and locations. However, the foundation of what is key in providing an empowering space for young people is evident. These elements can form the foundation for a youth hub model as we currently understand it.

### Case study of a wrap-around service: Regional Youth Support Services Inc. (RYSS)

In our current research we have observed high levels of active cooperation between government and non-government services, with the RYSS Youth Hub often being a coordinating point for those activities. This cooperation has occurred at both an information sharing level – different services helping each other understand the changing landscape and what they are seeing in their day to day work – and at the level of service delivery cooperation.

Service delivery cooperation has taken on many forms, but we particularly highlight services calling on each other for their specific expertise to help address gaps in the nature of the support they can provide. As a small, specific example, we have observed a training organisation using the youth service's facilities to deliver tailored hospitality training to young people. These were young people supported by RYSS and the purpose of the training was to increase the young people's employability. When interviewing young people as part of the research, they discussed how much they valued gaining employment skills in a safe, supportive and protective environment.

As an additional example of cooperation, the RYSS Youth Hub was used on multiple occasions for youth justice conferencing. Not only was the venue welcoming and 'youth friendly' but often RYSS was providing support to the young person prior to and following the conference. Comments from the hub staff showed they believed the young person would more able to comply with the outcomes of the conference because of the relationship with the youth worker who was providing pre and post-conference support.

During data collection we observed police youth officers talking with young people in the RYSS Hub space. In this situation, it appeared that the police were discussing serious matters but the overall atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable.

During our data gathering process for the research we have heard of the mutual respect from police towards RYSS and the value they have placed on having the organisation as a point for referral and rapid assistance for the young people they (police) interact with in the community. We understand that RYSS assisted with the process of familiarising new police to the local area and resourcing them with readily accessible referral pathways for young people.

In the context of our research, we have heard examples of cooperative practice that has helped to address difficult behaviours of local young people in public spaces. This arose through mutual trust between the organisation and police as well as seeing each other as an ally in achieving positive ends for young people and the community.

During our time researching in this youth space, we have observed external service providers, particularly government (Centrelink and Service NSW) and legal services, using the Youth Hub as a point of contact with young people and as an efficient way to engage in-person, thereby facilitating more effective and rapid access to necessary assistance.

Young people we engaged with during the research process spoke of the importance of the support this organisation provided. This included specific discussion from a young person about how the support from the service gave them a reason to avoid offending again.

Our observation is that the development of these positive working relationships with other service providers has been intentional – they are not by chance. They have come from deliberate, purposeful, active steps being taken in the development of the Youth Hub project



model and structures. Those active steps were followed through the delivery period in formal ways such as quarterly 'partner' meetings and informal ways such as negotiation for service access on behalf of specific young people or to establish term by term group programs.

To close this section with the voice of a young person in our research:

*The hub has allowed me to do courses, helped me do the right steps with the right procedures to make the right baby steps the bigger picture is there rather than taking one giant huge leap. Maybe I'll help people instead, maybe get into youth work, try and get a job and slowly grow into a better person, maybe study. The hub has given me the baby steps with courses, Its up to me to do it, i say yes because anything I do is something positive.*

Term of Reference g): any other matter:

### What happens when effective services are discontinued

In April 2024 RYSS were forced to close the doors of their Youth Hub and cease that aspect of their service delivery. Funding for continuation of the program could not be secured in time to prevent that closure. We would like to comment on what we see to be the consequences of this process.

### The service sector as an ecology

We would like the committee to consider service delivery in any location to be akin to an ecology. That is, services do not operate independently. Services rely on other services to achieve the outcomes they achieve and, in turn, contribute to the outcomes of other organisations. In this way, the service sector is deeply interconnected and interdependent. When the different services are operating well and are collaborating effectively, with a high degree of service continuity, the ecology is healthy and stable. These conditions support positive outcomes for young people, their families and the broader community (or any users of the service sector). Conversely, ineffective collaborations, poor working relationships and service uncertainty leads to patchy support and territorialism from services which may be struggling to survive. The outcomes for young people, families and communities are lessened in this circumstance.

Funding processes and decisions have a significant effect on the local service ecology. When a new service is opened in an area, the existing ecology rearranges itself, to a greater or lesser degree, around the new body. New referral pathways may be opened up, thereby helping to meet unmet need and bringing new strength to the ecology. Or, a source of competition for scarce local resources may be created and the existing ecology is weakened by the new service. Similarly, when a service closes its doors, the ecology is changed again. The closure of a poorly functioning and negatively contributing services may allow a depleted local ecology an opportunity to regroup, heal and start meeting the needs of local people effectively. The closure of a positive service, that has contributed substantially to the ecology leaves a substantial gap. When this occurs, the outcomes for young people, families and communities are poorer.

Funding processes can support or diminish local service cooperation and relationships. Processes that deliberately, or inadvertently, promote winner and loser competition between services are likely to reduce genuine cooperation and collaboration, leading instead to tokenistic gestures towards partnership oriented towards an organisation's self interest rather than positive community outcomes.

The content here has been explored in greater detail in Krogh (2018).

### Using local knowledge for service system development and funding

Planning of new services for local areas is undertaken in many different ways and has been discussed in different language over time. Currently, the cultivation and development of the local service system is discussed as 'commissioning'. Commissioning can take many different forms. Our previous work in 'client-centric' commissioning (see, Davies et al. 2020) is used as the source for the comments here.

Involvement of people who are affected by a specific issue, and are local to the area being served, is a positive approach to developing new services for a local service system, to meet a locally identified need. Our rapid evidence review identified vital elements that contribute to positively to this approach such as a foundation in long-term commitments to local relationships and community connection and a commitment to hearing a diversity of voices with effectively supported options for access to the process.

Our research also identified the complexities and difficulties of such approaches such as reaching the most disadvantaged participants who may be the ones with the most comprehensive knowledge of the situation and the issues.

### Strengths-based policy making and service system development

Discourses are sets of ideas and practices that build what we believe to be true and shape social relationships in the process. While discourses can take many forms, discourses on public issues often take the form of a deficit discourse. That is, a negative way of viewing a particular group or location, seeing them as failing and being deficient (Candlin & Crichton 2010; Fogarty, Lovell, et al. 2018). This may be seen in current media and public discourse which is painting young people as 'a problem to be solved' (Fogarty, Lovell, et al. 2018: p2). Borrowing from Fogarty, Lovell, et al. (2018) we may see that

*Discourses of deficit ... occur when discussions and policy aimed at alleviating disadvantage become so mired in narratives of failure and inferiority that [young people] themselves are seen as the problem, and a reductionist and essentialising vision of what is possible becomes all pervasive.*

Combining with and reinforcing the above issues, current policy development strategies require a focus on, and creating a narrative about, the deficiencies of a group or place. In effect, in order for public attention and public resources to be allocated to a group, an issue or a location, the lack, deficiency, inadequacies and wants of the group or place in question have to be examined in-extremis and documented. Following from this, competitive funding models largely require services to argue amongst themselves about which group and which location is more deficient

than the other. These interlocking processes ensure that the public conversation about (in this case) young people as an self-reinforcing and amplifying narrative of problems.

As an alternative to deficit-based policy making and deficit-focused funding models, a strengths-based approach is possible. This is not simply a process of looking for different things through the same lens that created the deficit perspectives. It requires a conceptual shift to think differently and work differently, particularly by listening to young people and seeing young people and communities as part of the solutions to local issues. Where strengths-based policy making approaches have been argued previously there is the perspective that these may be more efficient approaches and more fair (Fogarty, Lovell, et al. 2018).

### Evaluation of services

If we accept the notion that the outcomes an individual service is able to achieve are reliant upon the nature of their own work as well as the availability and quality of services upon which they are dependent, then service evaluation should be based on models that account for this. Realist evaluation provides a model that recognises and seeks to understand both of these important elements – the mechanism (service elements) and context – in assessing outcomes achieved by a program.

Realist evaluation also proposes that any service works for at least some of the people it serves. The challenge for evaluators is to identify which of these service users are assisted effectively by the service and which groups of people might not be.

The evaluations produced through a realist evaluation model offer nuanced answers to the question of service ‘value’; answers that go beyond pass/fail results. Examining what works in preventing youth offending, the limitations of decontextualised program evaluations, and the need for contextualised evaluations, is argued by Case et al. (2022).

Resources for understanding Realist Evaluation include

- Westhorp (2014); Westhorp, Stevens and Rogers (2016)
- Kabongo et al. (2020); Linsley, Howard and Owen (2015)

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