

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Community Industry Group

Date Received: 7 June 2024

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a red and blue plaid shirt, smiling and holding a young child with brown hair in a field of tall grass. The image is partially obscured by a dark blue diagonal overlay on the left side.

SUBMISSION

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL
AND RURAL COMMUNITIES



COMMUNITY INDUSTRY GROUP ARE THE LEADING PEAK BODY SUPPORTING AND ADVOCATING FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT COMMUNITY AND HUMAN SERVICES IN SOUTHERN NSW.

WE WELCOME THE OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE A SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES TO INFORM THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LAW & SAFETY INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES WITH AN EMPHASIS ON DRIVERS OF YOUTH CRIME.



Voice Influence Leadership



We wish to acknowledge and respect the Traditional Lands of all Aboriginal people and to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Australian people of the land that we work and live upon. We pay our respects to all Elders past, present and those of the future and ask that all those who walk, work and live on Traditional Aboriginal Lands to be respectful of culture and traditions.

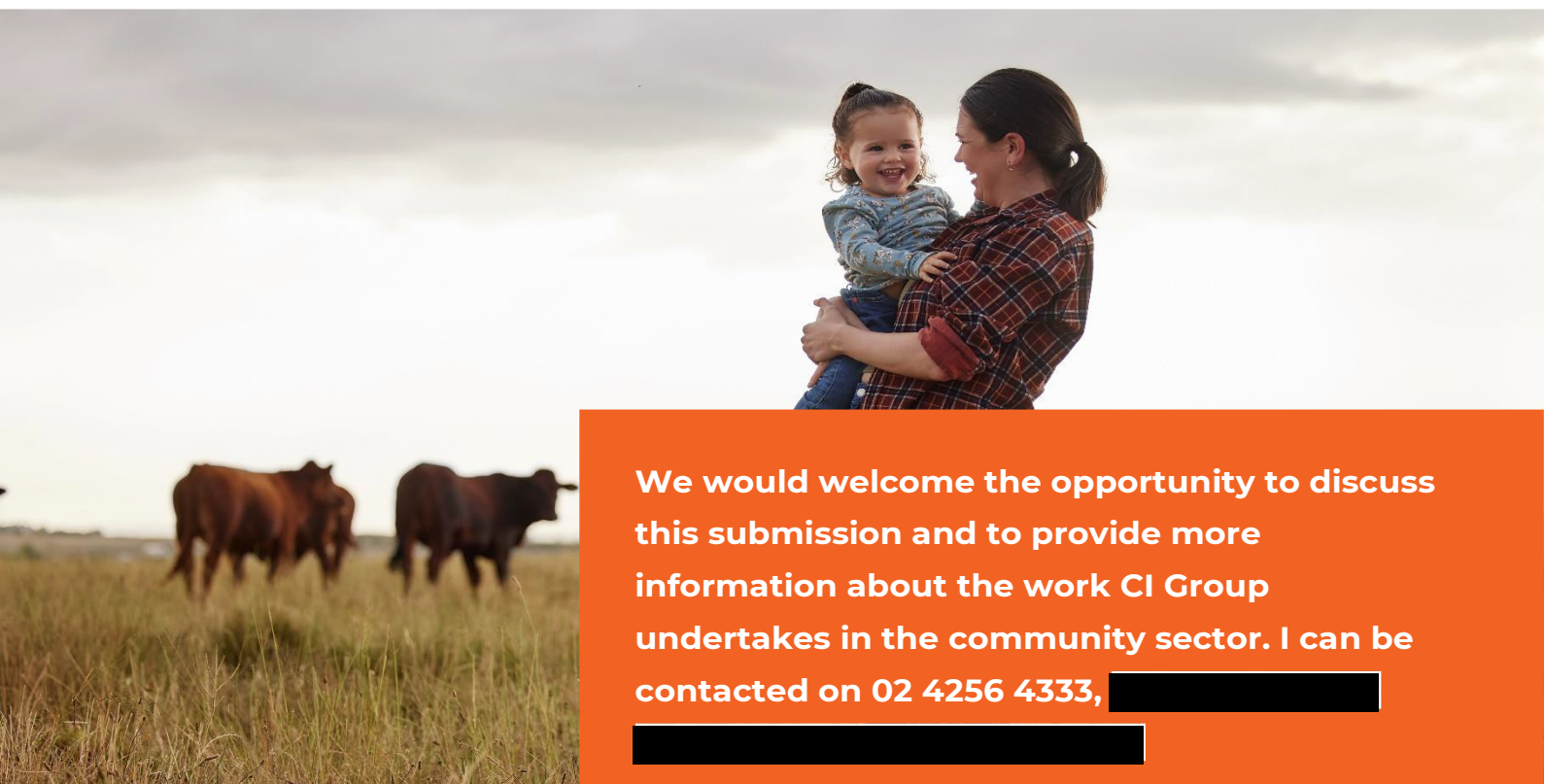
About Community Industry Group

Community Industry Group is the peak body working for community services and organisations in southern NSW. We support community organisations, promote expertise and innovation in community development, foster industry development and advocate for social justice.

For 30 years, Community Industry Group (CI Group) has taken a leadership role in the local community services sector. We regularly engage with those organisations, services and individuals who work with disadvantage and vulnerable children, families, and communities. We also advocate on behalf of community organisations and vulnerable communities to raise awareness of the issues which are impacting service delivery and affecting the lives and outcomes of disadvantaged communities.

Our members include not for profit service providers who deliver:

- Youth Services
- Child and Family Services
- Homelessness Supports
- Disability Services
- Women's and Domestic Violence Support Services
- Generalist Community Neighbourhood Centres
- Aged Care

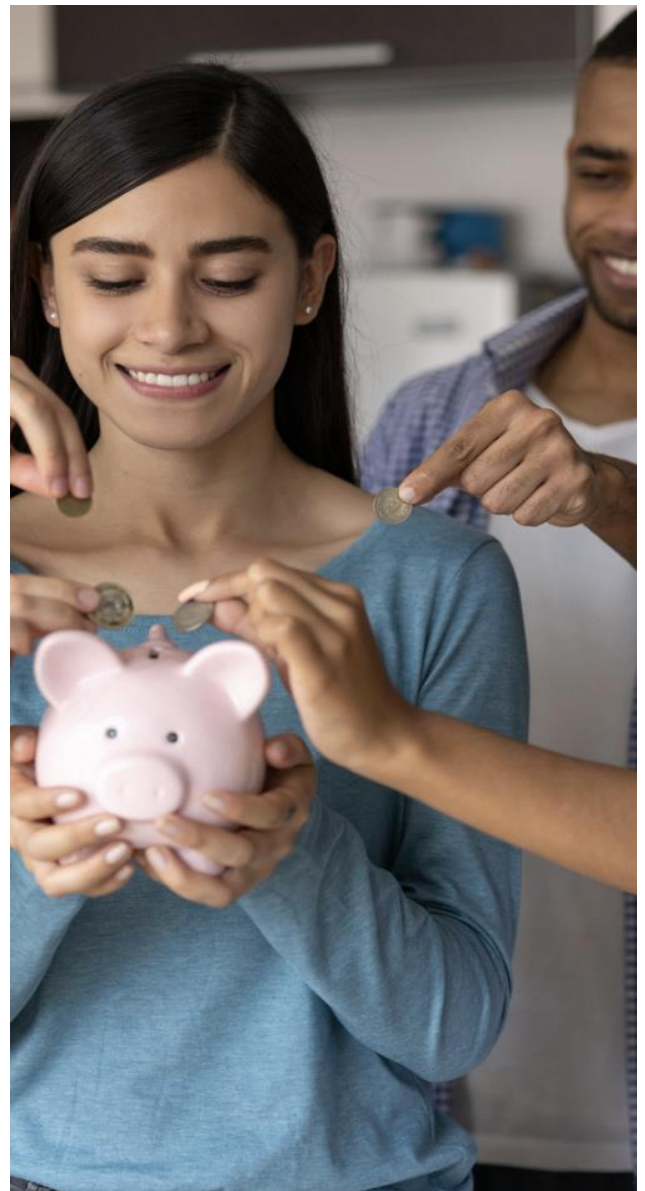


We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission and to provide more information about the work CI Group undertakes in the community sector. I can be contacted on 02 4256 4333, [REDACTED]

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Recommendations

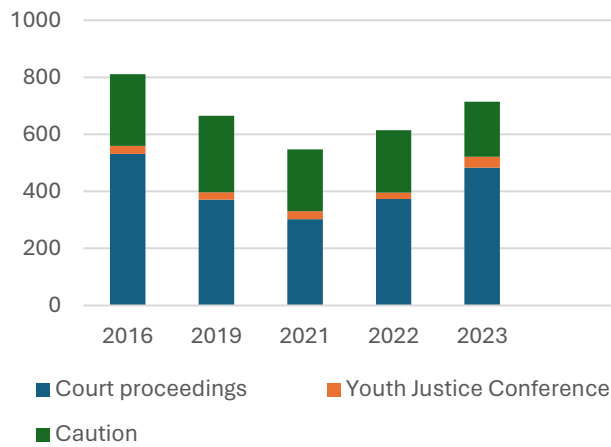
- Invest in community development programs and activities which build community connectedness and involve the wider community in community safety initiatives. Delivered in partnership with police, businesses, and community, these initiatives can include intergenerational activities, educational campaigns, and crime prevention strategies.
- Expand and adequately fund targeted youth engagement programs in regional and rural communities to offer structured activities and opportunities for skill-building and social interaction during non-school hours. These programs should be accessible to all young people with a focus on reaching those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Allocate additional funding to support existing youth crime prevention and intervention initiatives which have demonstrated effectiveness in rural and regional areas in Southern NSW. This funding should prioritise programs that address the root causes of youth crime and provide targeted support to communities most in need.
- Expand coordination efforts and resources across government departments, community organisations, stakeholders, community members and most importantly, young people. Develop collaborative initiatives which address root causes of youth crime, such as family dysfunction, substance abuse, and lack of educational and employment opportunities.
- Address transport challenges by providing adequate, affordable and accessible public transport services to enable them to access



essential services and programs in rural and regional areas, and by funding initiatives which enable young people to gain their driver's license.

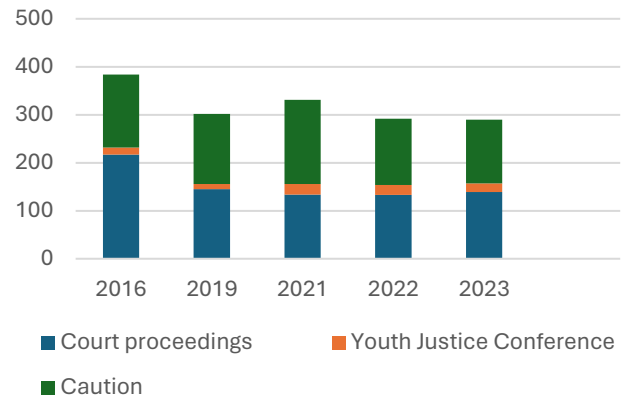
- Allocate additional resources for recruiting and retaining police officers in regional and rural areas. Provide incentives like housing assistance and professional development opportunities to attract officers to these areas. Invest in technology and infrastructure to enhance operational capabilities and response times.
- Increase funding for wraparound and diversionary services in regional and rural areas, focusing on culturally sensitive and community-based interventions. Foster collaboration between service providers, Indigenous communities, and government agencies to ensure programs meet local needs.

Illawarra Region Youth Offending Rates



- Establish Police Citizens Youth Clubs (PCYCs) in high crime areas staffed with a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers. Provide a PCYC bus to address transport challenges and increase accessibility for young people in rural and regional areas.
- Expand community-based support and rehabilitation programs for young people involved in the justice system. Prioritise early intervention and prevention strategies which address the underlying factors which drive recidivism, such as mental health issues and lack of educational opportunities.
- Enhance training for police officers in regional and rural areas to better equip them for diverse roles, including mental health awareness and support strategies and youth welfare support. Establish partnerships with mental health professionals and youth service providers to offer comprehensive support to vulnerable young people.

Shoalhaven/Southern Highlands Youth Offending Rate



- Invest in critical community infrastructure such as community centres, youth facilities, and recreational spaces in rural and regional areas. These facilities serve as vital hubs for delivering youth-focused services and programs.
- Expand youth homelessness services to ensure young people experiencing homelessness in regional and rural areas can access shelter and supports in their local area to maintain access to family and community connections and supports.
- Engage with local communities, including young people, families, schools, and law enforcement agencies, in the design and implementation of youth crime prevention initiatives.
- Promote community-led approaches that reflect the unique needs and strengths of each community in Southern NSW.
- Invest in local place-based and responsive mental health services which provide a range of mental health support services, from early intervention to intensive support to enable young people to access mental health supports in their own community.

Introduction:

Community Industry Group (CI Group) promotes a vision of community safety which focuses on the collective wellbeing by building community connectivity and cohesion, and which promotes this wellbeing through culturally appropriate wraparound systems. To achieve this vision, we recommend investment in practices which maintain safety and minimise harm to individuals, families and communities experiencing vulnerability, disadvantage, or marginalisation.

Community safety should be based on the premise of belonging, and the recognition that individuals need the sense of belonging to their community on many levels – not just through the location of their dwellings, but through their social connections, employment, recreation activities etc.

Currently, the indicators of community safety focus on crime rates, recidivism, and police activity, or on public perceptions of fear of crime. These indicators tend to focus on negative outcomes. We encourage the Committee to take a broader view of community safety and develop measurement metrics which also focus on community perceptions of belonging and connection.

Feedback from our members in the development of this response has indicated a high degree of concern that the Terms of Reference focuses strongly on young people and youth crime as drivers of negative experiences of community safety in regional and rural areas.

Our members strongly recommend that the Committee recognise the many drivers of community safety and develop a wholistic policy position in addressing community safety moving forward.

Having said that, CI Group has consulted with our members on the basis of the Terms of Reference to develop the response below.

“Healthy young people build healthy communities build healthy young people. Young people are our greatest natural resource.”

Feedback provided by a Youth Health Educator in the Shoalhaven

Response to Draft Terms of Reference

a) Drivers of Youth Crime in Regional and Rural NSW:

Rural and regional communities in Southern NSW are impacted by a range of challenges which contribute to young people's interactions with the justice system. One glaring issue is the limited and unequal access to essential services, especially when compared to urban areas. Vital supports which can address issues and impede key drivers of criminal behaviour such as mental health support, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and comprehensively funded youth services are often limited.

For young people dealing with complex issues such as domestic and/or family violence, social isolation, or economic disadvantage, the absence of these resources leaves them without a hope of intervention. Consequently, the path towards the justice system i seems almost inevitable, as unmet needs and support gaps steer them towards undesirable outcomes.

Economic disparities are another fundamental aspect of this complex problem. While rural areas may appear idyllic, they often conceal pockets of poverty, unemployment, and educational voids. Many young individuals filled with potential but lacking opportunities are drawn to illicit activities as a means of survival or escape from their harsh reality.

Educational and employment opportunities are often limited in regional and rural NSW leading to intergenerational disadvantage and a sense of isolation and detachment for many young people. Added to this is the impact of natural disasters and the Covid 19 pandemic. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) noted that young people were significantly impacted by the pandemic, experiencing high rates of unemployment and financial instability, which intensified their vulnerability to criminal activities (AIHW)¹.

Cook and Fitzgerald (2024)², highlight a significant disparity in crime rates between Regional NSW and Sydney, despite long-term declines in property crime and changing patterns of violent crime. Over the past two decades, property crime decreased by 48% in Regional NSW, compared to a 67% reduction in Greater Sydney. This resulted in a 59% higher property crime rate in Regional NSW in 2023. Similarly, while violent crime remained stable in Regional NSW from 2004 to 2023, it declined by 20% in Greater Sydney, leading to a 57% higher violent crime rate in Regional NSW in 2023.



Cook and Fitzgerald (2024)³ further highlight that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Regional

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young Australians.

² Crime in Regional and Rural NSW in 2023: Trends and Patterns, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2024

³ Crime in Regional and Rural NSW in 2023: Trends and Patterns, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2024

NSW had a decrease across most offense categories except for notable increases in motor vehicle theft (20%), non-domestic assault (14%), sexual assault (47%), and domestic violence-related assault (24%) from 2019 to 2023. These increases are primarily attributed to factors such as rising offending by young people, a surge in sexual assault reports involving adult victims, and a rise in reported family violence and intimate partner assaults.

Specifically, the 20% increase in motor vehicle theft appears linked to young offenders, with legal actions against this group rising by 188% during the same period. Additionally, the 47% increase in sexual assault reports involves incidents with adult victims, while domestic violence-related assault reports show a rise in family violence and intimate partner assaults.

Non-domestic assault increases are primarily seen in incidents occurring on residential and school premises, with legal actions against young people accounting for most of the increase.

Research by McCarthy et al. (2021)⁴ highlighted how the pandemic disrupted regular social and educational activities, leaving many young people with increased idle time and limited supervision/access to support systems, which can lead to delinquent behaviour. Research by Weatherburn and Lind (2020)⁵ identifies how these disruptions have contributed to a surge in delinquent behaviours among young people. Extended periods away from school, coupled with boredom and lack of supervision, create opportunities for engaging in risky activities, leading to a rise in criminal behaviour.

The economic hardships stemming from the pandemic, such as job losses and financial strain on families, have also been linked to heightened youth crime rates. Studies indicate that young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to engaging in criminal behaviour as a means of coping with economic stressors.

Likewise, social isolation and restricted access to recreational activities and positive peer influences during lockdowns have worsened existing vulnerabilities among young people resulting in increased involvement in antisocial behaviours.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that provide constructive outlets and support systems for young people. Initiatives that engage young people in meaningful activities such as sports, arts, mentorship programs, and vocational training can help steer them away from criminal behaviours and towards more positive pathways. Collaboration with community organisations, community members and stakeholders is essential to ensure these programs are culturally relevant and accessible, eliminating barriers such as cost and transport (AIHW)⁶ Engaging youth in meaningful activities and providing positive role models and mentors can help steer young people away from criminal behaviours and towards constructive

⁴ McCarthy, B., et al. (2021). "The impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on youth: A review of evidence." *Frontiers in Psychology*,

⁵ Weatherburn, D., & Lind, B. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Crime in Regional and Rural Areas*. Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR).

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young Australians*.

Feedback provided by a representative from a local Community Housing Provider

pathways. s.

A considerable proportion of complaints regarding anti-social behaviour from our tenants during the fiscal year 2023/2024 were attributed to youth offenders, comprising around 50% of reported incidents. These complaints span a spectrum from minor disturbances, such as playing loud music late at night, to more serious offenses like aggravated assaults, with incidents of youth-involved knife crimes notably frequent in the Northern Shoalhaven region.

The root causes of these challenges are deeply intertwined. For children and young people raised in social and community housing environments, there exists a fundamental level of disadvantage that permeates every aspect of their lives. Often, disabilities and mental health issues go undetected or unaddressed, and when identified, families frequently lack the resources or knowledge to adequately support their children or manage their behaviours in a socially constructive manner.

Access to proper healthcare and nutrition is often lacking, leaving tenants unable to make informed and healthy dietary choices. Educational achievement rates are low among our tenants, as is workforce participation, fostering a cycle of intergenerational disadvantage where young people lack role models and opportunities for advancement.

Many of these young people become disengaged from education, with limited aspirations for further study or vocational training, and face barriers such as lack of access to transportation, hindering their ability to secure employment. Substance abuse issues, particularly alcohol and drugs, are prevalent within lower socio-economic groups, with such behaviour normalised in certain tenant communities, notably East Nowra and Bomaderry.

It is the merging of these multiple disadvantages that drives youth involvement in criminal activities.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

It is the merging of multiple disadvantages that drives youth involvement in criminal activities.

For children and young people raised in social and community housing environments, there exists a fundamental level of disadvantage that permeates every aspect of their lives.



Feedback provided by a representative from a local Community Housing Provider

Youth crime in our region stems from a combination of factors, including boredom and limited access to positive, pro-social activities.

Many young people in our community are facing challenges due to a lack of essential life skills, as well as insufficient leadership, respect, and support from the broader community. There appears to be a lack of understanding and acceptance of criminal responsibility among some young individuals involved in criminal activities. Addressing these underlying issues is crucial to fostering a safer and more supportive environment for our youth.

In a recent example, a young person received support and mentoring through a program to complete a photo card application. Despite having essential documents such as a Birth Certificate, bank card, and Medicare card, the young person faced challenges with the ID verification process at Service NSW.

Upon application, the young person encountered issues with the acceptability of their ID due to discrepancies such as having only one initial listed on their bank card, having two middle names on their Birth Certificate, and lacking an initial on their Medicare card. Despite efforts to rectify the situation by

attending their bank to request a statement with both middle names, the process was met with frustration, leading the young person to feel disheartened.

Through rapport building and ongoing support, the young person was encouraged to make a second attempt to access Photo ID. However, even after addressing the ID requirements, the young person faced another obstacle when informed that the account name change would not take effect immediately, requiring them to return after 24 hours.

On the second day of attempts, the young person successfully completed the ID process at the Service centre, albeit at a cost of \$61.26. This financial burden highlights the challenges faced by young people, particularly a 16-year-old, in meeting such expenses independently.

The young person's aspirations to enrol in a Barbering course were hindered by financial constraints. Despite not meeting the criteria for Smart and Skilled funding and facing difficulties in accessing Centrelink due to ID issues, the young person's determination to pursue education and training demonstrates their resilience amid systemic barriers.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Many young people in our community are facing challenges due to a lack of essential life skills, as well as insufficient leadership, respect, and support from the broader community.



Feedback provided by a representative from a Youth Centre

Truancy and school refusal remains a significant concern among youth in our community.

The absence from school not only affects their education but also increases the likelihood of involvement in criminal activities. Addressing truancy requires proactive measures to encourage school attendance and provide support for students facing barriers to regular schooling.

Boredom and peer pressure contribute to the vulnerability of young individuals to criminal behaviour. Without constructive activities and positive influences, youth may succumb to negative peer pressure, leading to engagement in unlawful activities.

Creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and positive social interactions is essential in diverting young people away from criminal pathways. Youth drug addiction, particularly involving

marijuana, presents a pressing issue. The excessive cost associated with maintaining a drug supply can drive individuals towards criminal activities to fund their addiction.

Addressing drug addiction requires a multifaceted approach, including accessible treatment and support services, as well as efforts to reduce the demand for illicit substances through education and prevention initiatives.

The rising cost of living adds to the challenges faced by youth and their families. Economic pressures can exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities, leading to financial strain and instability.

Government initiatives aimed at reducing the cost of living and providing economic relief can alleviate financial stressors and create a more equitable society, thereby reducing the risk factors associated with youth crime.

Feedback provided by a representative from a Community Hub

The community faces several significant challenges. There are limited cost-free activities available for young people, which restricts their opportunities for engagement and recreation. The police station is unmanned, requiring officers to travel from Oak Flats, which can delay responses and reduce police presence.

The high Indigenous population in the area experiences limited community engagement, which can lead to feelings of isolation and unmet needs.

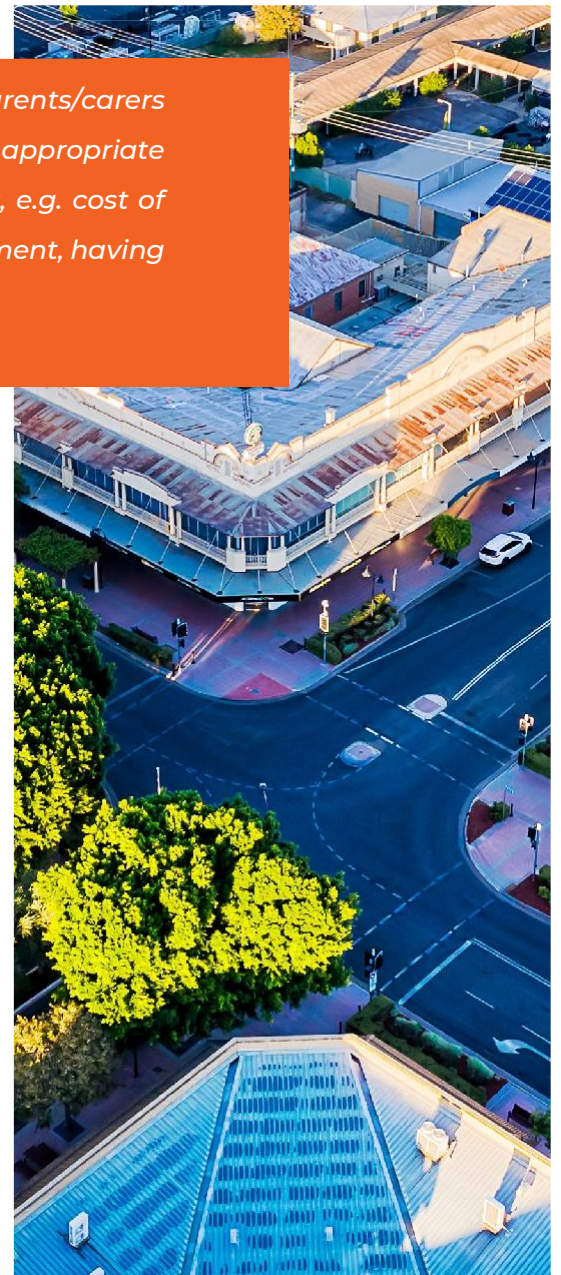
Many young people are being cared for by grandparents or other carers who often struggle to keep up with the demands of looking after multiple children. Additionally, the public transport system isolates families, confining them to their postcode and limiting their access to broader services and opportunities, financial strain and instability.

Government initiatives aimed at reducing the cost of living and providing economic relief can alleviate financial stressors and create a more equitable society, thereby reducing the risk factors associated with youth crime.



Lack of whole of family support and services – parents/carers seem to not have the time and or capacity to provide appropriate supervision and or care, due to a variety of reasons, e.g. cost of living/housing, unemployment and or underemployment, having to work extra jobs, addictions.

Shoalhaven Community Services Organisation



b) Whole-of-Government Approach to Reduce Youth Crime:

Government must allocate additional ongoing funding to programs which address youth crime prevention and early intervention. Funding should be flexible and tailored to address the diverse needs of different communities, prioritising evidence-based programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing youth crime and addressing its underlying causes. Grants should be made available to community organisations and local governments to develop innovative solutions that are responsive to the unique challenges faced by rural and regional communities.

Investment in infrastructure is crucial to support the delivery of youth-focused services and programs in rural and regional areas. Government should prioritise the construction, renovation, and maintenance of community facilities such as youth/neighbourhood centres, recreational spaces, and sporting facilities, and ensure they are accessible, safe, and equipped with amenities that cater to the needs and interests of young people.

Collaboration with local communities is essential to identify priority areas for infrastructure development and ensure that investment aligns with community needs and aspirations.

Collaborations must be fostered for stakeholders to codesign interventions and share knowledge, resources, and best practices. This includes financial support for initiatives that demonstrate strong partnerships and a commitment to addressing youth crime effectively in rural and regional areas.

Investment must be made into the capacity of service providers to provide high-quality support and interventions. Free training programs should be available to not-for-profit service providers to develop the skills and knowledge needed to address youth crime effectively, such as youth development, trauma-informed care, and cultural competency. Resources and toolkits should be provided to support the implementation of evidence-based interventions and programs. Funding should be made available for

mentoring programs or peer support networks which can facilitate knowledge exchange and professional development among service providers.

Improve access to technology and digital infrastructure, which is essential for delivering remote services, collecting data, and communicating with young people in rural and regional areas.

Investment in telecommunications infrastructure and funding for the purchase of equipment such as computers, tablets, and mobile devices will support service delivery for youth-focused organisations and service providers and enable virtual support services and resources which will increase accessibility for young people living in remote areas.

Reliable transport is critical for ensuring that young people can access essential services and programs in rural and regional areas. Needs assessments are required to identify gaps in public transport services, particularly in the Shoalhaven and far south coast region. Funding is required for transport programs tailored to the needs of young people.

In addition, fund innovative solutions such as mobile outreach units or pop-up service hubs which can bring support services directly to communities with limited transport access to address accessibility and barriers to participation.

Government must adopt a strengths-based approach that recognises and builds upon the assets and strengths of rural and regional communities, promoting collaboration and resilience to address youth crime challenges. Community engagement is essential to ensure that government initiatives are responsive to the needs and priorities of local communities. Establish mechanisms for ongoing consultation and engagement with local stakeholders, including young people, families, schools, and Indigenous elders. Support the development of community-led initiatives and grassroots organisations which empower young people to be active participants in decision-making processes and community development activities.

Feedback provided by a representative from a local Community Housing Provider

The current state of NGO service funding appears fragmented and lacking in long-term sustainability. This piecemeal approach prevents service providers from implementing comprehensive, ongoing responses to the issues at hand.

With funding subject to uncertainty and staff unable to secure job stability due to fixed-term contracts, providers are forced to operate in a reactive, short-term manner.

To address the root causes of youth crime effectively, it is imperative that diversionary programs, case-management funding, rehabilitation initiatives, and mental health

support receive funding with longer timeframes. This would afford service providers the necessary time and capacity to conduct thorough and sustained interventions. Within the Shoalhaven region, there is a pressing need for increased investment in TAFE, universities, and public transportation infrastructure.

These investments would provide children and young people with opportunities and pathways to break free from the cycle of recurring criminal behaviour and intergenerational disadvantage.

Feedback provided by a representative from a local Youth and Family Support Worker

A minority of our clients aged 12 to 18 express a desire to rely solely on Centrelink payments, while the majority are eager to pursue employment opportunities. One significant barrier to employment for young people is the challenge of obtaining the required 120 hours of driving experience. This task is particularly daunting for families facing financial hardship, as they lack the resources and support necessary to accrue driving hours.

The cost of driving lessons, typically ranging from \$65 to \$85, is prohibitive for those receiving youth payments of just over \$300 fortnightly. Although the Driver Licence Access Program (DLAP) holds promise, it is often inaccessible or inadequately managed, as evidenced by the four referrals I have submitted over two months that remain unaddressed.

There is a need to lower the driving hours requirement and introduce driving skills programs in schools, encompassing basic vehicle maintenance tasks like tire changing and oil checks. Safe driving and defensive driving workshops can also enhance road awareness among young drivers.

Many apprenticeships and labouring roles require a minimum license or reliable transportation presenting significant barriers

for youth in rural and remote areas. Incentives for employers, such as reduced liability costs, and access to pre-apprenticeship courses at TAFE or external providers can mitigate these challenges. Traineeships in various sectors, coupled with workplace support to complete certifications, offer valuable pathways to employment for young people.

Recognising that traditional education pathways may not suit every individual; it is essential to provide alternative avenues for skill development and employment. Life skills training, including budgeting, cooking, and employment readiness, can equip young people for success in the workforce. Additionally, affordable, or subsidised short trade courses offer valuable opportunities for skill acquisition and career advancement.

Engaging young people in skills-based programs as a form of accountability for their actions, such as through a revamped "Green Corps" initiative or trade-based programs, can instil a sense of responsibility while providing practical experience and qualifications. Rather than imposing fines that young people may struggle to pay, structured tasks that promote skill development and accountability offer a more constructive approach to address offending behaviour.



Feedback provided by a representative from a Youth Centre

There should be significant investment in youth re-engagement programs. These initiatives provide young individuals with opportunities to develop skills, pursue education, and integrate positively into their communities.

By offering meaningful pathways to personal and professional growth, such programs can divert young people from criminal behaviour and guide them toward more constructive paths.

Collaboration among community services is vital. Recognising the multifaceted nature of youth crime, different organisations must work together in a coordinated manner.

By combining resources and expertise, community services can deliver comprehensive support tailored to the diverse needs of young individuals.

This collaborative effort ensures that no young person falls through the cracks and that interventions are effective and sustainable.

Building positive relationships between young people and the justice system is essential. Often, there is a gap between young individuals and the institutions meant to support and rehabilitate them.

By fostering trust, understanding, and open communication, the justice system can better engage with young people and provide them with the guidance and support they need to avoid criminal activities in the future.

The provision of case management services is crucial. One-on-one support allows for a personalised approach to addressing the needs of young individuals.

Through comprehensive assessment and tailored interventions, case managers can help young people access the resources and assistance necessary to address the root causes of their involvement in crime.

By offering guidance, support, and advocacy, case management services empower young people to make positive choices and lead fulfilling lives.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

It is the merging of multiple disadvantages that drives youth involvement in criminal activities.

For children and young people raised in social and community housing environments, there exists a fundamental level of disadvantage that permeates every aspect of their lives.



Feedback provided by a Youth Health Educator

Implement prevention programs that target at-risk youth, providing them with mentorship, educational support, and opportunities for constructive engagement.

These programs might include after-school activities, sports programs, arts programs, and vocational training. PCYC 's should be funded at an appropriate level as should youth centres, there has been a huge reduction in youth services over the last 10 years.

Involve young people in the design and implementation of programs aimed at preventing youth crime.

Empower them to be leaders and advocates for positive change in their communities.

Community planning days with police, young people, councils and other stake holders.

Promote restorative justice practices that focus on repairing harm, addressing the needs of victims, and holding young offenders accountable in ways that promote rehabilitation and reintegration into the community.

There does need to be a review on bail laws...whilst I acknowledge and see the harm that can be done for a young person to be locked up, I also see other young people hero worshipping group members that continually "get out on bail" and don't appear to have any consequences.

This gives other young people the confidence to keep breaking the law.





Feedback provided by a representative from a Community Hub

There is a need for more police stations in areas with high crime rates to ensure quicker response times and a stronger police presence.

Establishing PCYCs staffed with a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers would help build trust and engage more effectively with the community.

Investing in a free bus system, like those in city locations, would greatly improve mobility and access to services for residents.

More funding should be allocated to organisations that have already built trust within the community and have successful programs in place.

There should also be increased scholarships, training, and opportunity initiatives to support personal and professional development.

It is important to offer more activities that appeal to young people who are not interested in or cannot afford to participate in traditional sporting clubs.

Wraparound and diversionary services should be expanded and customised to meet the unique needs of regional and rural communities.

b) Wraparound and Diversionary Services for Youth in Regional and Rural Areas:

Wraparound and diversionary services are essential in steering youth away from the justice system and addressing the core issues that drive criminal behaviour.

A review by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in 2021⁷ highlights the critical need for comprehensive, community-based interventions that offer support to youth and families, particularly in regional and rural areas.

These services should be culturally sensitive and tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous communities in line with the NSW Government's commitment to partnering with Aboriginal people.

By integrating cultural perspectives and traditional practices into service delivery, providers can enhance engagement and outcomes for First Nations' young people.

Wraparound and diversionary services should be expanded and customised to meet the unique needs of regional and rural communities, with a particular emphasis on cultural sensitivity and community involvement.



⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report young people in child protection and under youth justice supervision: 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020

Increased funding should support the development and implementation of culturally appropriate programs responsive to the needs and preferences of Indigenous youth and other marginalised groups.

Collaboration among service providers, Indigenous communities, and government agencies is essential to ensure effective coordination and integration of programs into the broader support network for youth.



Feedback provided by a representative from a Shoalhaven Community Services Organisation

Fund Youth & Community services to deliver onsite and in schools. Fund more YLO police officers (not to be taken back to general duties to cover shortages, prioritise youth). I have worked at this organisation for 3 years at the Youth and Community Centre and have not seen the YLO for the region once.

Feedback provided by a representative from a Community Hub

One key improvement would be the reinstatement of the SAY (Safe Aboriginal Youth) Program in the Shoalhaven LGA.

This program, previously funded under the Attorney General's Department, once operated successfully in Nowra. Established in 2009 and auspiced by a local Aboriginal organisation, the Nowra Youth Centre facilitated the program. However, when the auspice organisation went into liquidation, efforts to regain funding for the program were unsuccessful

Despite the program's proven effectiveness in our community, there was no interest from the Attorney

General's Department in reinstating it. The absence of the SAY Program has had a significant impact on our community, contributing to the rise in youth crime that we are currently witnessing.

Reintroducing this program would provide essential support and diversionary opportunities for Aboriginal youth in the region, & help to address the root causes of their involvement in criminal activities.

It would also foster stronger connections between young people and positive community resources, promoting safer and more resilient communities.

Feedback provided by a representative from a local Community Housing Provider

[Wongee Mia - Ruah Community Services](#) a comprehensive family case management approach called 'Wongee Mia,' currently undergoing trials in Western Australia.

I believe this approach could be highly effective in our region.

There is a prevailing sense among children and young people that service providers, governments, and other authoritative bodies often dictate their needs without genuine consultation.

To enhance the effectiveness of our services and programs, it is essential to engage in meaningful dialogue and consultation with the children and young people who have directly participated in these initiatives. This could involve hosting forums and seeking their input on how these services and programs can be improved to better meet their needs.

It is crucial to consult with young people transitioning from custody, those leaving out-of-home care or kinship care arrangements, and individuals completing rehabilitation programs. Understanding their perspectives on existing gaps in services is vital for tailoring future interventions to address their specific needs and challenges. We are dedicated to supporting young people in securing and maintaining stable housing.

We offer several initiatives tailored specifically to their needs:

- Rent Choice Youth: This subsidy is designed to assist employed young individuals in retaining their tenancy by offering reduced rent rates.
- Start Work Bonus: Similar to Rent Choice Youth but available to individuals of all ages, this program provides financial support to those who are employed.
- Keys2Renting Short Course: This course equips young participants with essential skills and knowledge to navigate the rental market successfully, empowering them to secure suitable accommodation.
- June Stevens Scholarships: We offer annual scholarships of up to \$1200 per student to support their educational pursuits, helping to create opportunities for personal and professional development.

We have established special agreements with various youth community service providers. These agreements grant us special allocation rights for a portion of our properties, ensuring that young people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness have access to safe and stable housing options.

Through these initiatives and partnerships, we strive to address the unique challenges faced by young people in securing and maintaining housing stability.

Feedback provided by a Youth & Family Support Worker

It is crucial to recognise that young people are unlikely to engage with services when participation feels forced. Instead, creating relaxed environments where rapport can be built is key to fostering meaningful engagement.

Lengthy referral periods and challenges in completing processes due to lack of access to required documentation are common barriers faced by young people. To address these issues, there is a need to establish more walk-in processes and Youth Hubs that provide access to medical support, sexual health services, mental health resources, mentoring, and referral support on a walk-in basis.

Ensuring housing pathway support is accessible to individuals of all races and abilities is essential, particularly considering the concerning rates of youth homelessness. Homelessness not only increases the risk of engaging in risky behaviours and substance abuse but also exacerbates mental and physical health issues.

Currently, youth refuges are limited in number, often located in high-risk, low

socioeconomic areas, and only accessible to individuals aged 16 and over. There is a need for more transitional housing units specifically designed for young people.

Access to psychological and psychiatric support is often hindered by cost barriers.

Many young people engaging in criminal activities have histories of trauma and require free access to mental health services and medication support. Financial constraints make it difficult for them to schedule appointments in advance or afford private healthcare costs. Mental health care plans often do not cover the full cost of psychology appointments, leaving young people with significant out-of-pocket expenses.

Many vulnerable individuals, including young people, are overlooked due to criteria-based requirements for service eligibility. This can lead to individuals being turned away from services and deter them from seeking help elsewhere due to fear of rejection. It is imperative to provide simple support and assistance to refer individuals to appropriate services, regardless of their documentation status or eligibility criteria.

Feedback provided by a representative from an Illawarra Community Hub

Efforts are needed to strengthen partnerships between services and schools, allowing for a broader duty of care that extends beyond the confines of the school grounds.

This approach aims to better support students and their families by integrating services seamlessly into their daily lives. Implementing a strength-based approach to service delivery is essential, as it allows for personalized interventions that meet the specific needs of each location.

This strategy involves identifying and replicating successful practices already in place within organizations, ensuring effective and efficient use of resources.

Involving community members in decision-making processes and program design means initiatives can better address local challenges and foster community ownership.

Furthermore, securing funding for programs over extended periods, such as three years or more, is vital for ensuring their long-term sustainability and impact.

This sustained investment supports continuity and allows programs to grow and adapt to meet evolving community needs effectively.

Currently we run a program one afternoon a week in school terms for children in Primary & High School.

Attendance can be between 10 – 40 kids each week, with those attending coming straight after school.

The program provides a safe space for young people to meet with their peers, participate in an activity/get homework help or utilise the full-sized basketball court. The program also provides a soft entry point to support our young people and their families holistically by providing information and referral.

We feel this program is a great asset to our community but is not without its challenges. Over the last year we have seen an increase in negative behaviour, with three incidents involving young people which has escalated to violence.

We have young people attend who have not been attending school, have not eaten or look unkempt. It has been difficult to manage these situations without police presence close by, or even to gain additional insight from a teacher/support officer when school is closed for the day.

We also have difficulty engaging with the parents whose children are attending the program which further compounds the issue. By offering guidance, support, and advocacy, case management services empower young people to make positive choices

d) Staffing Levels and Workforce Issues in Regional and Rural Areas:

Community services across our footprint are facing challenges in attracting and retaining a workforce. The NSW Auditor-General's study (2022)⁸ emphasises the need to resource and support recruitment and retention, especially in remote areas with limited access to training and professional development opportunities.

Strategies to enhance services and reduce youth crime should include targeted recruitment efforts, incentives for police officers to work in regional and rural locations, and investments in technology and infrastructure to improve operational capabilities.

Additional resources should be allocated to NSW Police for recruitment and retention of police officers in rural and regional communities. This may involve offering incentives such as housing assistance or relocation allowances, and professional development opportunities including specialised training in community policing and rural crime prevention.

Invest in technology and infrastructure, like mobile police units and communication systems, to improve operational efficiency and response times.

Feedback provided by a representative of Youth Health:



Develop partnerships between law enforcement agencies and community members to build trust, improve communication, and address concerns collaboratively.

Implement community policing strategies that focus on problem-solving and crime prevention rather than just law enforcement. Police presence...walking the beat, police on horses... a presence that builds trust. Educate the community about the factors contributing to youth crime, such as poverty, lack of education, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Raise awareness about the importance of early intervention and prevention.

All police and front-line workers should be trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid as a starting point.

⁸ NSW Auditor-General's Report. (2022). Law Enforcement: Police Staffing in Regional and Rural Areas.

e) Reoffending Rates and Community Impacts in Regional and Rural Areas:

High recidivism rates among young people in regional and rural areas have significant social and economic consequences for communities. BOCSAR's report (2021)⁹ underscores the need for evidence-based interventions which address the underlying factors which drive reoffending, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and lack of educational and employment opportunities.

Community-based programs which offer support and rehabilitation services to young people involved in the justice system can help break the cycle of reoffending and alleviate pressure on the justice system. Invest in early intervention and prevention strategies to promote positive outcomes for young people and reduce the social and economic costs of youth crime.

Invest in community-based programs which offer comprehensive support and rehabilitation services to young people involved in the justice system. These programs should prioritise early intervention and prevention efforts which target underlying factors such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and lack of educational and employment opportunities.

Wraparound support services, including counselling, education and vocational training, life skills development, and employment assistance can help break the cycle of reoffending and support positive reintegration into the community. Additionally, partnerships with local schools, employers, and community organisations can facilitate the successful transition of young people from the justice system to productive and fulfilling lives.

f) Functions of NSW Police Officers in Regional and Rural Areas:

NSW police officers in regional and rural areas are often required to take on activities beyond the traditional law enforcement duties, including mental health assistance and youth welfare support. The research brief by the NSW Parliamentary Research Service (2021)¹⁰ highlights the need for additional training and support to enable police officers to conduct these functions effectively.

Enhanced training should include instruction on crisis intervention, de-escalation techniques, trauma-informed care, and cultural competency to better equip officers to respond to mental health crises and support vulnerable young people. In addition, police officers should be given opportunity to develop partnerships with local community service providers.

⁹ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR). (2021). Youth Justice in NSW: Factors Influencing Re-offending.

¹⁰ NSW Parliamentary Research Service. (2021). Policing in Regional and Rural NSW: Issues and Challenges

Partnerships with mental health professionals, youth service providers, and other community organisations can facilitate collaborative responses to complex issues such as youth homelessness, substance abuse and family violence.

Feedback provided by a representative from a Youth Centre:

The local police have approached us to join forces in tackling the issue of high engagement rates among Aboriginal young people in our community. Together, we have devised a comprehensive project plan aimed at implementing a program that offers youth transport and engaging activities. However, to put this plan into action and effectively address the needs of our community, securing funding for the program is imperative. Without financial support, we cannot proceed with the necessary resources and infrastructure to make a meaningful impact on the lives of Aboriginal youth in our area.





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