

**Submission
No 190**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Domestic Violence NSW

Date Received: 14 June 2024

Legislative Assembly
Committee on Law and Safety
NSW Parliament
6 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

14 June 2024

Dear Chair

Re: Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities

Please accept this letter as Domestic Violence NSW's (DVNSW) submission in response to the inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities. We thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission and consent to our submission being made public.

DVNSW is the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence services in NSW. We have over 180 member organisations across the state. DVNSW members represent the diversity of specialist services working in NSW to support women, families and communities impacted by domestic and family violence. Our member organisations include crisis and refuge services, transitional accommodation and community housing providers, Aboriginal controlled organisations, specialist migrant and refugee organisations, men's behaviour change programs and networks, specialist women's legal support services, women and children's support services, women's health centres and Safe at Home programs.

DVNSW endorses:

- Raise the Age NSW's call for the NSW Government to raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14
- The NSW Council Of Social Service submission to the inquiry and recommendations, and
- The following recommendations of the Country Mayor's Association submission:
 - 19) That, the NSW Government invest new funding of \$10 million annually to establish Specialist Workers for Children and Young People in every frontline domestic and family violence service in NSW.
 - 20) That, the NSW Government increase evidence-based men's support and behaviour change programs in regional areas to ensure accessibility, this program should be annually reviewed to track the success in reducing domestic violence incidents.
 - 22) That, the NSW Government ensure safe and affordable transitional housing for women and children exiting crisis refuges by assessing current availability throughout regional NSW and fund additional capacity particularly in regions where new core and cluster refuges will be built.
 - 23) That, the NSW Government allocate ongoing funding to continue to build on existing research on DFV in regional areas, whilst also commissioning new research to ensure data and practice responses are timely, accurate and have a gendered lens.

DVNSW recognises the key work of local community services in supporting young people and keeping regional and rural communities safe. We strongly support increased NSW Government funding for prevention and diversionary services in rural and regional communities, including investment in specialist domestic and family violence services and culturally appropriate support services for First Nations children and young people.

DVNSW Recommendations:

Increased NSW Government investment in prevention and diversionary programs in regional and rural communities, including investment in:

- **trauma-informed services responding to young people impacted by domestic and family violence, including services available during periods of crisis, such as specialist workers for children and young people in domestic violence refuges, and homelessness services (refuges) for young people and services available in the longer term to support healing and recovery, and**
- **culturally-appropriate, trauma-informed services for First Nations youth, families and communities.**

Community safety in regional and rural areas requires the safety and protection of children and young people. Criminalising children and young people, particularly those that have experienced trauma or neglect, causes harm; every young person should have the chance to grow up safe and learn from their mistakes.

A trauma-informed response to domestic and family violence

Children and young people are frequent victims of domestic and family violence. The impact of domestic and family violence on children and young people is detrimental. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study showed 1 in 4 children were affected by domestic and family violence, with most of these children also experiencing multi-type maltreatment e.g. neglect (ACMS 2023). The 2016 Personal Safety Survey estimates 1 in 6 women and 1 in 9 men experienced abuse before the age of 15. The perpetrator is generally the child's parent/guardian or in a relationship with the child's parent/guardian (Campo 2015). More than 600 children aged 0-14 were hospitalised due to abuse, including 156 Indigenous children. For cases where the perpetrator was specified (79%), nearly 1 in 2 children were assaulted by a parent and 1 in 8 by another family member. For Indigenous children, about 2 in 3 assaults were perpetrated by a parent or family member (AIHW 2022). The prevalence of family violence is undeniable.

Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for children in Australia (Bland & Shallcross, 2015). Homelessness or an unsafe home due to domestic and family violence, forces children and young people to engage in criminal behaviour. The 2010 "Family Violence – A National Legal Response" report by the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) found a young person engaging in criminal behaviour is likely to have a serious history of abuse and/or neglect and a high chance of being in out of home care (ALRC 2010). Justice Reform's submission to the Human Rights Commission on children and the criminal justice system in Australia states 80% of children released from sentenced detention return within 12 months (Justice Reform 2023). Without proper investment in prevention and diversionary services, young people who have experienced domestic and family violence are likely to continue to be in a cycle of engaging in criminal behaviour.

Domestic and family violence services working in our communities see the impact of violence and trauma on children and young people every day. We strongly support keeping children and young people out of the legal system and focusing on strengthening communities with diversionary and prevention programs. Accessible, youth-specific, trauma-informed programs reduce engagement in criminal behaviour and

require adequate resourcing to meet the needs of children and young people in regional and rural communities.

Community safety requires collaboration between trauma-informed services to adequately protect young people and children and promote healing and recovery. Children and young people who are victims of domestic and family violence are resilient. There is significant research to indicate prevention and diversionary programs are effective in reducing criminal behaviour in young people (Justice Reform 2023).

DVNSW consulted with a Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (WDVCAS) practitioner from Dubbo. They provided insights into the challenges and barriers in supporting children and young people in Dubbo experiencing domestic and family violence:

"Young people escaping domestic and family violence have nowhere to go. There are no youth specific refuges, and all the other refuges are full. There's one youth service here that'll open after hours, but no one is paid for after-hours work and there's not enough volunteers to run it so young people are left on the streets with nowhere to go, getting up to mischief. They really lack the support system and role models they need to get out."

"When they do volunteer [at the youth service], many [workers] drive [the young person] home so they know they got home safely and off the streets. These workers just get it and go above and beyond. It would change everything if [the workers] could be funded for after-hours work and [the young person] funded to get a bus."

"Everyone knows each other here; [young victims of domestic and family violence are] worried about seeking help because maybe their [domestic and family violence] perpetrator will find out. Having workers meeting them at a cafe helps, but we don't have funding for that – like a company car to take [young victims] somewhere [safe]."

"Unless [the young person is] over 18, they don't qualify for Centrelink. They can get a Medicare card at 16, but no financial support. Even then some don't even have documentation or the right visa to access financial support. What are they supposed to do? We need to change the eligibility criteria to include all."

"We need more services and infrastructure. Outside Dubbo, there's one 1hr bus a day that gets people here. Because this is where the services are. But [domestic and family violence] perpetrators know this, and they will wait at the bus stop for [their victim] or track them down if they know they got on the bus to Dubbo. You can hide in the city; you can't hide out here."

Specific supports and services for First Nations

First Nations children and young people are over-represented in interactions with the legal system (AHRC 2023). In the 2024 *Youth Justice Report* by Youth Action, First Nations young people spoke about the impact of systemic issues including: poverty, substance misuse, mental health difficulties, domestic and family violence and intergenerational trauma on their communities (Youth Action 2024).

The report provides quotes from consultation with professionals:

"They would like to see a greater focus on building strong communities with support networks and programs that provide alternatives to involvement in crime. They want connection to meaningful activities such as education and employment and to have their personal and emotional development supported" (Youth Action 2024).

These complex and compounding issues and lack of support force First Nations young people to engage in criminal behaviour, continuing the cycle of recidivism.

Investment in culture and trauma-informed community-based initiatives specific to First Nations children and young people can drive better outcomes for First Nations youth and the community. A Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Scheme practitioner from Dubbo spoke about the benefits of culturally appropriate services in assisting young First Nations people and reducing crime:

"Project Walwaay works really well. They work Friday/Saturday night and feed them and their siblings, sit with them and have a yarn and drive them home. They got youth crime down 60%. This works, this is what [First Nations youth and communities] want and what they deserve."

All children and young people deserve to live and grow safely. Experiencing and escaping domestic and family violence should not lead to a criminal record. Increased investment in prevention and diversionary programs is vital. Without increased investment, children and young people will be deprived of their basic needs and human rights, remain in unsafe environments and continue engaging in criminal behaviour.

DVNSW strongly recommends urgent investment in trauma-informed specialist domestic and family violence services, youth refuges, youth-specific services, and culturally-appropriate services for First Nations youth and families that are tailored to community need, reduce criminal behaviour and keep communities, children and young people safe.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission and recommendations. If you have any questions regarding our submission, please contact me at [REDACTED]

Elise Phillips
Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Domestic Violence NSW

References:

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