

**Submission  
No 195**

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

**Organisation:** NSW Government

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# NSW Government Submission

Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and  
Safety inquiry into community safety in  
regional and rural communities

June 2024

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# Introduction

## Purpose of submission

The NSW Government welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities.

This submission draws together input from NSW Government agencies who work with communities across NSW to support community safety and address crime. The submission provides factual information about the drivers and patterns of crime in NSW, recent Government investments in community safety, and an overview of some selected services and programs.

The NSW Government looks forward to participating in the Inquiry, considering its findings, and responding in due course.

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## Executive summary

Crime rates in regional NSW are higher than in metropolitan areas.<sup>1</sup> The NSW Government acknowledges that regional crime extends beyond young people and includes offending by adults. However, noting the Committee's focus on young people, the submission aims to align with the Terms of Reference and focuses on drivers, services, and programs which relate to young people. The submission provides:

- an overview of the drivers of crime and recidivism, including particular considerations for regional NSW, as well as broader trends and patterns on crime in regional and rural NSW
- a summary of recent NSW Government announcements on community safety in regional and rural communities, including investments in a place-based response in Moree, state-wide regional crime prevention initiatives, and bail law changes
- a selection of existing NSW Government diversionary services and programs available for youth and families in regional NSW
- information on NSW Police regional and youth crime resourcing and functions performed by police officers
- an outline of considerations to support Aboriginal youth in various communities in regional NSW, aligning with the NSW Government's commitment to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities and organisations under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

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<sup>1</sup> Cook, A. & Fitzgerald, J. (2024). Crime in Regional and Rural NSW in 2023: trends and rates (Bureau Brief No. 169). Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, <https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Publications/BB/BB169-Report-Crime-in-Regional-and-Rural-NSW-2023.pdf>.

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## Overview

### Drivers of crime and recidivism

The drivers of crime are complex and multifaceted. In relation to young people specifically, research indicates that there are numerous risk factors which contribute to a young person's likelihood of criminal justice system contact. These risk factors include disability; neurodiversity; socioeconomic disadvantage; homelessness or accommodation insecurity; prior abuse, neglect, or victimisation; trauma; drug or alcohol use and disengagement from education.<sup>2</sup> Young people involved in the child protection system and living in out of home care are also at increased risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system.<sup>3</sup>

Poor access to health and welfare supports for young people and their families compound these risks. Referral into regional community-based health services can be limited by service availability and exclusion criteria, such as mental health complexity, risk of violence and homelessness. This can impede diversion from custody and leave unresolved health issues impacting a young person's offending behaviour and likelihood of future contact with the criminal justice system.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in both the adult and youth justice systems. Reasons for this overrepresentation are complex and can include additional factors to those listed above including intergenerational trauma and grief, the ongoing effects of colonisation and government policy, experiences of institutionalised racism, discrimination and the trauma of forced family separation and removals.

The drivers of recidivism are equally complex. BOCSAR has found that prison sentences can have a negative impact on reoffending.<sup>4</sup> In relation to young people specifically, evidence shows that early contact with the criminal justice system is correlated with ongoing justice system contact as an adult and with more serious offending.<sup>5</sup> Diverting children from the justice system towards needs-based supports can both foster child wellbeing and enhance community safety by avoiding the negative consequences associated with contact with the criminal justice system and addressing the underlying causes of negative behaviour.

Recidivism rates in regional and rural areas can have a negative impact on community sentiment and perceptions of public safety. This is particularly damaging when serious offending has occurred.

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### Further considerations for Regional NSW

The economic and social gaps evident between many parts of regional NSW and larger metropolitan centres continue to persist, with parts of regional NSW experiencing high rates of youth unemployment, lower incomes, and higher rates of poverty.<sup>6</sup> These gaps have been exacerbated by major events in recent years including COVID-19, bushfires, floods, and drought.

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<sup>2</sup> Standing Council of Attorneys General, *Age of Criminal Responsibility Working Group Report* (September 2023) 21-2.

<sup>3</sup> NSW Ombudsman, *Joint Protocol to Reduce the Contact of Young People in Residential Out of Home Care with the Criminal Justice System* (Version 2, July 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Don Weatherburn, 'The Effect of Prison on Adult Re-offending' (2010) 143 *Crime and Justice Bulletin*.

<sup>5</sup> Don Weatherburn and Stephanie Ramsey, *Offending Over the Life Course: Contact with the NSW Criminal Justice System Between Age 10 and Age 33* (Crime and Justice Statistics Issue Paper No 132, April 2018).

<sup>6</sup> NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS), *Mapping Economic Disadvantage in New South Wales*, [https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/NCOSS\\_MappingEconomicDisadvantage\\_Report\\_April23\\_v7.pdf](https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/NCOSS_MappingEconomicDisadvantage_Report_April23_v7.pdf).

A whole-of-government place-based approach to service delivery can better address underlying issues and respond to specific local need.

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## Trends and patterns on crime in regional and rural NSW

In March 2024, the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) published a report on Crime in Regional and Rural NSW in 2023: Trends and Patterns.<sup>7</sup>

The report considers recorded crime in Regional NSW to December 2023 and focuses on how long-term and short-term crime trends in Regional NSW compare with Sydney, the extent to which crime is higher in Regional NSW compared with Sydney, and who appears to be responsible.

The report notes that a longstanding feature of crime in NSW is that regional, rural, and remote locations tend to experience higher rates of crime than the capital city of Sydney. The discrepancy between crime rates in the city and the country persist to the present day despite crime variously increasing and falling over the past two decades.

Key findings of the report include:

- In the two decades to 2023, property crime fell significantly in Regional NSW (down 48% from 2004 to 2023). However, the reduction in Regional NSW was less than the reduction in Greater Sydney (down 67% over the same period). Due to the different rates of decline, **in 2023 the rate of recorded property crime was 59% higher in regional NSW compared to Greater Sydney.**
- In 2023 the aggregate rate of recorded violent crime in regional NSW was equivalent to the recorded rate in 2004. In Greater Sydney, however, violent crime declined significantly in the two decades to 2023 (down 20% from 2004 to 2023). The long-term decline in violence in Sydney and relative stability in Regional NSW has increased the disparity between the rate of violent crime in the regions versus the capital city. **In 2023 the rate of recorded violent crime was 57% higher in regional NSW compared with Greater Sydney.**
- During the COVID pandemic (2020 and 2021) crime fell across most offence categories in regional NSW (and in Sydney). In Regional NSW in 2023 most major offences remained lower than in 2019 (prior to the pandemic). This is true of: break and enter dwelling, break and enter non-dwelling, steal from motor vehicle, steal from dwelling, steal from person, other theft, sexual touching, and robbery. **Four major offences, however, significantly increased in regional NSW over the five years from 2019 to 2023:**
  - Motor vehicle theft (up 20% or 1,239 additional incidents)
  - Non-domestic assault (up 14% or 1,825 additional incidents)
  - Sexual assault (up 47% or 1,505 additional incidents)
  - Domestic violence related assault (up 24% or 3,284 additional incidents).

**BOCSAR has separately provided detailed statistics to the Committee which should be relied upon alongside this submission.**

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<sup>7</sup> Cook, A. & Fitzgerald, J. (2024). Crime in Regional and Rural NSW in 2023: trends and rates (Bureau Brief No. 169). Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, <https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Publications/BB/BB169-Report-Crime-in-Regional-and-Rural-NSW-2023.pdf>.

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## Recent NSW Government announcements on community safety in regional and rural communities

On 12 March 2024, the NSW Government announced a \$26.2 million package of reforms and initiatives to support community safety and wellbeing, particularly in regional NSW, with a focus on strengthening early intervention and prevention programs for young people.

The package of reforms aims to address the increased rate of offending and community safety concerns through three key elements, which are summarised below.

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### Moree place-based response

As part of the package of reforms, the NSW Government invested \$13.4 million in Moree to deliver a range of initiatives and supports in partnership with the local community, including:

- Funding for an additional magistrate temporarily in Moree for six months, with additional funding for Aboriginal Legal Services to ensure cases in Moree are resolved quickly and efficiently.
- A new bail accommodation and support service for young people.
- An Action Plan to optimise local service delivery and ensure funded services are more transparent, accountable and effective.
- Investment to improve the accessibility and availability of local after-hours activities.
- Continued NSW Police Force operations in the Moree area to protect the community, including Operation Youth Safe which combines education and early intervention to at-risk children.

New approaches tried in Moree will be used to inform how best to tackle similar issues in other regional towns, in addition to broader investments made by the NSW Government.

The Premier's Department and Moree Local Aboriginal Land Council has established a shared-decision making model in Moree to coordinate the delivery of these initiatives which is supported by the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (CAPO) and is consistent with the priority reforms in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and NSW's commitments under this Agreement.

Community participation is critical to ensure a sense of shared ownership and trust in the initiatives, transparency and accountability, and to deliver meaningful, appropriate, and sustainable solutions to youth crime in the region. Since the package of reforms was announced, Premier's Department, supported by Aboriginal Affairs, Regional NSW and Youth Justice, has held community listening sessions to hear about outcomes community wishes to see from this work, how community might work together to support the initiatives, where and how resources might best be invested, and how accountability might be strengthened.

The process for gathering information, listening, and collecting and analysing data together with community in the listening sessions aligns with Priority Reform 4 in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The process is shown below:

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Listen to understand the community's strengths, interests, values and priorities



Community listening has highlighted drivers of youth crime in Moree, supports needed to try and minimise the risk of offending, and community strengths which can be activated and amplified for this work. Listening has also highlighted the need for greater accountability on the part of not only community-based but also mainstream service providers, particularly in terms of staffing for diversion and prevention measures. These listening sessions will inform development of a program logic to evaluate the package of initiatives, an agreed local governance structure and appropriate eligibility criteria and process for the allocation of funding to boost after-hours activities.

As of 1 May 2024, NSW Police Force (NSWPF) have been deployed under Operation Youth Safe in the Moree area on 5 occasions since 28 February 2024, resulting in:

- 1672 interactions with young people,
- 10 school engagements,
- 300 student engagements, and
- 50 welfare checks or engagements conducted for young people.

NSWPF is currently developing Project Sunset, the overarching platform that will capture both prevention and disruptive policing concepts in regional areas of NSW. Project Sunset will allow for the holistic coordination of resources and capability to ensure Regional NSW is policed accordingly. This model is able to be rolled out to other regional areas in the future.

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## State-wide regional crime prevention initiatives

As part of the package of reforms, the NSW Government has also invested \$12.9 million in a broader range of initiatives to be implemented across regional NSW, including:



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- Investing in an expansion of Youth Action Meetings (YAMs), which bring NSW government agencies together to provide wrap around services and support to young people at risk of committing crime. The expansion of YAMs is continuing, with recruitment underway to fill additional roles.
- Investing to expand the Safe Aboriginal Youth Patrol Program (SAY), which will include collaborating with communities, Government and non-Government agencies, and utilising Close the Gap data to identify the 5 expansion sites.
- Rolling out Justice reinvestment grants in local communities, with grant funding available to recipients as early as June this year.

In the NSW Budget 2024-25, the NSW Government has invested \$66.9 million over the forward years for Youth Justice Diversionary Responses, including:

- Youth on Track, which helps young people reduce their risk of re-offending or committing more serious offences
- the Bail and Accommodation Support Service, which coordinates safe places for young people to stay until their court date
- the Broadmeadow Children’s Court Project, which provides wraparound supports to young people presenting to the court
- A Place To Go and a Place to Go House, which use contact with police/courts as an opportunity to intervene early by linking them with appropriate community supports and services
- the Rural Residential Rehabilitation Adolescent Alcohol and Other Drugs Service for young people whose use of alcohol and other drugs places them at significant risk of harm
- provision of legal services to Aboriginal young people in detention
- the Short Term Remand Pilot, which provides accommodation through non-government providers for young people on remand
- Domestic and Family Violence Therapy, which delivers culturally appropriate services to prevent reoffending.

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## Bail and Crimes Amendment Act 2024

On 22 March 2024, the NSW Parliament passed the *Bail and Crimes Amendment Act 2024* (the Amendment Act) to address significant community concern about persistently high crime rates in regional NSW and recent spikes in motor theft and break and enter offending.<sup>8</sup> The Amendment Act commenced on 3 April 2024. The legislation introduces a temporary bail test for certain repeat young offenders, as well as a new performance crime offence targeting those who advertise certain crimes on social media.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/pdf/asmade/act-2024-18>

## Amendments to the *Bail Act 2013* (NSW)

The Amendment Act amended the *Bail Act 2013* (NSW) to introduce a temporary new additional bail test for young people aged between 14 and 18 charged with a ‘serious break and enter offence’ or ‘motor theft offence’ while on bail for a similar offence. Under the test, a bail authority (a police officer, court or authorised justice) must not grant bail to the young person unless they have a ‘high degree of confidence’ that the young person will not commit a ‘serious indictable offence’ while on bail subject to any proposed bail conditions.

The bail amendments are a temporary measure that will sunset after 12 months (i.e. 4 April 2025). The amendments will be monitored and evaluated by the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).

### Performance crime

The Amendment Act also introduced a new offence in the *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) targeting offenders of motor theft or break and enter offences who also disseminate material to advertise their involvement in the offending conduct or the act or omission constituting the offence. The provision adds a further 2 years’ imprisonment to the maximum penalty available for the underlying motor theft or break and enter offence.

This new offence will be the subject of a statutory review 2 years after it commenced, and a report on the outcome of the review is to be tabled in NSW Parliament 6 months later.

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## Existing NSW Government diversionary services and programs

The NSW Government is committed to working across government to deliver coordinated services and solutions to reduce the drivers and root causes of youth crime in regional and rural NSW.

There are a range of NSW Government agencies involved in this work, including:

- Department of Regional NSW
- Department of Education
- NSW Health
- Premier’s Department
- Aboriginal Affairs NSW
- Department of Communities and Justice
- NSW Police Force.

These agencies include teams that collaborate on service delivery as well as specific programs, including the delivery of wrap-around services.

For example, NSW Health works closely with health, justice, education and social service agencies and community providers, including Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to provide healthcare to adults and young people in, or at risk of, contact with the criminal justice system. In this

way, NSW Health contributes to efforts to reduce crime by addressing health issues that impact offending behaviour, such as mental illness and drug and alcohol use, and diverting people from custody through a range of early intervention, diversion, and transitional support programs. Key aspects of the Department of Education's approach are also outlined below.

The NSW Government lead a range of innovative, whole-of-government diversionary programs and services available to young people and families in regional and rural NSW. A selection of relevant programs is included for the Committee's consideration below, noting this is not an exhaustive list.

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## Stronger Places, Stronger People (SPSP)

The Maranguka SPSP initiative in Bourke is the first Aboriginal led place-based model of justice reinvestment in Australia. Maranguka is a collaboration between the Bourke Tribal Council, Just Reinvest NSW and the community of Bourke. NSW Government participates in cross-sector leadership forums in both sites and supports the backbone teams on-the-ground with their work programs. Through this collaboration, Maranguka has taken a 'life-course' approach, targeting issues likely to push Aboriginal people into the justice system that arise from early childhood and into adulthood. This approach has demonstrated many positive impacts on the community including a significant reduction on youth offending and improved educational retention.

Following on from the success of the Maranguka SPSP initiative in Bourke, the Learning the Macleay SPSP initiative is adapting concepts and utilising key learnings from Maranguka in the Kempsey environment. Learning the Macleay is developing its own partnerships, leadership structures and implementation plan designed to maximise benefits to the community.

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## Youth on Track

Youth on Track is an early intervention service that provides a range of flexible and culturally appropriate supports to young people aged 10-17 involved with or at risk of involvement with the justice system. The program aims to empower young people and their families to achieve change in the young person's behaviour and safety, through the provision of case management, cultural and practical supports that build on the young person's strengths, addresses areas of concern and increase prosocial behaviours.

Youth Justice NSW partners with community organisations to co-design the Youth on Track program to better meet the needs of Aboriginal young people and ensure the services being provided are culturally appropriate, strength based and holistic.

A key focus for the program is embedding a focus on culture and adhering to the Closing the Gap strategic priorities by investing in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and ensuring self-determination for Aboriginal young people, families and communities. The program is delivered in 9 locations – Dubbo, Orange, Blacktown, Hunter, Coffs Harbour, Mid North Coast, Taree, New England and Riverina. In the recent Youth on Track recommissioning process, 6 of the 9 service providers that were successful are ACCOs.

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## Youth Action Meetings (YAMs)

Led by the NSWPF, Youth Action Meetings (YAMs) provide a coordinated service approach for young people at risk of becoming a victim or offender of crime, to lessen their contact with the criminal justice system, and improve their safety, welfare and wellbeing.

YAMs involve local key government and non-government agencies coming together in a structured forum to share information, develop multi-agency action plans and implement tangible strategies to achieve improved outcomes for the young person, their families and communities.

From July 2024, there will be 20 Youth Action Meeting Coordinators facilitating YAMs across 22 NSWPF Police Area Commands/Police Districts.

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## PCYC Youth Engagement

PCYC is a youth organisation which focusses on early intervention for young people to achieve positive outcomes and divert them from the criminal justice system. PCYC works in partnership with NSWPF, Youth Justice NSW, the Department of Education and other agencies to deliver programs to engage with and positively influence at-risk youth to break the cycle of disadvantage through crime prevention, vocational education, youth capacity building and social responsibility programs.

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## NSW Police Force Programs

RISEUP Programs connect disengaged young people to workplace opportunities. RISEUP incorporates job ready programs, mentoring and vocational training for at-risk youth to mitigate criminogenic risk factors by building their engagement with education, employment opportunities and the community. Engaging young people in education is a priority in the *NSWPF Youth Strategy 2023-2025*. Although there is a focus on returning young people to the education system, it is well understood some youth may be less likely to return and would benefit more from assistance to facilitate them into employment. The establishment of a direct pathway to employment strongly supports the NSW Government's policy to ensure young people are learning, in training or working.

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## Guumali Youth Project

The Guumali Youth Project is an ongoing diversionary program which builds a foundation for improved youth access to mental health and wellbeing support services, provides evening activities as a diversion from engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviours and promotes positive engagement between Police and Aboriginal communities, initially targeting Moree and Boggabilla. The project is run in partnership with NSW Police, Aboriginal Affairs, Moree Shire Council, NSW Health, DRNSW, Centacare and PCYC and included funding for the purchase of a Community Engagement Trailer, including an outdoor cinema screen to allow for special events.

The project promotes positive engagement between youth and NSW Police through sporting activities, with NSW Police in the region indicating that the local events have resulted in a reduction of local crime, reducing from approximately 10-15 incidences per night, to zero incidents on nights

when events are run. In 2023 over 20 Guumali events were held across the Moree LGA including Mungindi, Boggabilla and Toomelah, with over 1,700 attendees.

The project has now expanded with other organisations supporting its continuation. After witnessing the success of the project, the Barrier Police District is now replicating the project in the Far West region.

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## Adolescent Court and Community Team (ACCT)

Operating in 21 Children's Courts, ACCT clinicians assess young people with mental health concerns and comorbidities appearing in the Children's Court at any stage of court process and advise the Magistrate on alternative non-custodial care pathways to support their diversion. The team recommended 1,212 young people for diversion to community-based treatment in 2022-23 under the *Mental Health and Cognitive Impairment Forensic Provisions Act 2020* (NSW). The clinician arranges referrals to proposed care and treatment providers in the community.

Health-led mental health diversion in the NSW Children's Court significantly reduces reoffending for young people but is not available in all courts. Virtual care technology is being used to enable service access in courts without an onsite presence (particularly those in regional and rural NSW).

The team also provides a Forensic Risk Assessment and Management Advice Service (FRAMAS) to build capability of community-providers to support complex mental health presentations of young people who present with a high risk of violence.

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## Team Around a School

NSW public schools have adopted a holistic approach to positive behaviour support and management that works across the care continuum of prevention, early intervention and individual interventions by establishing support and maintaining high expectations for student behaviour.

NSW public schools also play a key role in promoting the positive benefits of school attendance.

NSW public schools monitor and record student attendance and where attendance issues arise, all schools have access to support staff – known as the 'Team Around a School' – to assist with linking schools, families and community services together to ensure positive outcomes for students.

Where schools require support with behaviour management, the 'Team Around a School' model works alongside support teams within the school to support individual student planning, provide professional learning and share specialist knowledge, skills and understanding in the areas of learning and wellbeing, disability and inclusion, behaviour, attendance, and Aboriginal student support. This model also enables schools to develop partnerships with allied health workers, specialists and other government agencies. Specialised and alternative education settings are also available to provide targeted support and intensive interventions for students with complex social and emotional needs.

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## Connected Communities Strategy

Co-designed and established with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), the Strategy provides differentiated, holistic learning underpinned by local Aboriginal culture. It is currently being implemented in 33 schools across 23 of the state's most complex communities. Connected Communities schools collaborate with external government and non-government agencies to facilitate the delivery of services at the school and support the learning, development and wellbeing needs of students and their families.

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## Wollundry Dreaming First Nation Youth Hub

Youth Justice NSW has partnered with community, who have co-led and designed the Wollundry Dreaming First Nation Youth Hub, offering young people a youth friendly, culturally safe space where they can spend time with Local Elders (in traditional leadership roles), First Nations mentors, and First Nations youth workers.

The supportive environment and structured and unstructured activities encourage young people to engage in prosocial activities, build awareness of and competence in traditional values, knowledge, skills and customs.

The hub aims to meet the needs of First Nations people from the ages of 7 to 18, with culturally and developmentally appropriate activities for each age group.

As recommended by local Elders and community members, the hub is not deficit focused. Rather the hub focuses on young people's strengths and identifying opportunities to further develop their skills and capabilities in a positive and culturally safe environment.

In meeting the needs of young people, the hub sits within a larger network. It engages with schools, community groups, sporting groups, government agencies and other service providers, within the context of creating a supportive network for First Nation youth.

In particular, the hub engages closely with the health sector to ensure that all of its participants have the necessary medical and mental health support to maximise the benefits of the hub. Noting, the hub will complement and not compete with other entities and their Indigenous charters.

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## NSW Police regional and youth crime resourcing

### Regional and youth crime resourcing

As of April 2024, there are 4762 Police Officers in Regional NSW Field Operations made up of various Police Districts and Regions, excluding specialist resources. There are three categories of youth-targeted resources aimed at pre-emptively mitigating youth crime in regional NSW, by reducing the contact of young people with the criminal justice system, as victims and offenders, through coordinated operational and stakeholder engagements. These resources include 36 Youth Officers in the Police Area Commands and Districts, 101 Youth Engagement Officers and 9 temporary Youth Action Meeting Coordinators at Crime Prevention and Youth Command (CPYC). There are varying

levels of vacancies across Regional NSW Field Operations and youth-targeted resources, as with other areas of police, which impacts the level of policing services that can be delivered to the community.

The NSW Government has introduced a range of measures aimed at increasing police recruitment including the payment of recruits to study at the Goulburn Police Academy and a new Professional Mobility Program to incentivise officers from other Australian states and territories and New Zealand to join the NSWPF while keeping their equivalent rank (up to senior constable level six). The 'You Should Be A Cop in your Hometown' program will support regional police recruitment and ensure people from regional NSW serve in, or near their hometown after they graduate from the Goulburn Police Academy.

Career opportunities for essential workers like police in regional areas are limited by factors outside of work, including finding work for partners and cementing connections into community. To support regional workforce attraction and retention, the NSW Government is delivering initiatives such as the Essential Worker Attraction Program which includes The Welcome Experience and the Regional NSW, make the move marketing campaign.

Police and youth services in regional areas are operating at capacity with extremely high workloads. The number of vacancies results in operational police more frequently being redeployed away from their specialist proactive and youth duties to maintain first response and core policing functions. Targeting of visiting practitioners and professionals including doctors, nurses and police in some regional areas has made recruitment for roles more difficult.

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## Functions performed by NSW police officers

NSWPF proactively participate in engagement activities through partnerships with other government agencies, not-for-profit organisations and the community. As part of these partnerships, Police participate in proactive youth programs such as PCYC programs with weekly and daily programs, multi-agency meetings, deliver specialised education during school visits, facilitate Project Community by supporting and mentoring young people while in Youth Justice Centres and post-release into the community, and assist with connecting young people with employment opportunities.

As one of the only 24-hour agencies in regional and rural areas alongside NSW Ambulance and hospitals, the NSWPF carries the majority of the responsibility for all functions outside of business hours. NSWPF are the first responders for domestic violence incidents, criminal offending, missing persons, youth at risk of harm, child at risk matters and almost all mental health incidents.

In addition to regular policing responsibilities, community engagement and first responder priorities, the NSWPF carries out responsibilities on behalf of other agencies if actions need to be taken outside of normal business hours. These actions include, but are not limited to, conveying young people to detention centres when they are refused bail, carrying out child protection work for other agencies until their resources become available, conducting home visits and welfare checks, supervising children and young people due to a lack of parental supervision, including waiting for adults to return to an address where young children are alone and transporting children to school, a safe space or pro-social activities.

## Aboriginal youth in regional, rural and remote areas of NSW

In regional NSW, the Aboriginal population is younger than the broader population, lives in less secure housing, and earns less than other residents.

Disparity in social and economic opportunities intergenerational trauma and dislocation from Country adversely impacts the mental health and social support structures of Aboriginal young people. Historical and contemporary legislation and policies on Aboriginal people have a continuous, compounding effect.

Despite the overwhelming impact of these factors, Aboriginal people continue to maintain their dignity, pride, strength and resilience, while being generous with their time and knowledge so as to build better partnerships and deeper understandings. This government is committed to building on those strengths, including through Local Decision Making and the Closing the Gap partnership.

**Activities for young people:** Community discussions indicate that for many young people in regional NSW, including young Aboriginal people, a lack of after-school activities led to boredom which was cited as a factor in petty offending. Activities and services, where available after hours, tend to finish relatively early in the evening, or may be mismatched with the activities that young people are seeking, or have associated costs beyond the means of many Aboriginal young people. Activities in small towns are often dependent on an individual, meaning that activities do not occur when they are on leave.

Many Aboriginal young people, particularly in regional areas, are affected by insecure access to food, employment, health services and housing without overcrowding.

**Disproportionate rates of victimisation:** Crime victimisation in regional NSW is being experienced by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. However, according to the Department of Communities and Justice Annual Report 2022-23, Victim Support Scheme services are being accessed by Aboriginal people at a disproportionate rate to non-Aboriginal people<sup>9</sup> reflecting over-representation as victims of violent crime. Despite this, communities report the lack of dedicated and targeted culturally safe services to respond to crime victimisation in Aboriginal communities.

**Supporting families:** Families, especially young parents, need sustained support. This includes addressing the gap in the service system on providing support for families to manage problematic behaviour children.

Members of Aboriginal communities can have distrust of government agencies. Aboriginal community-controlled services sometimes suffer funding uncertainty which has impacted the services to community. Furthermore, workforce challenges are leading to shortages and long waiting lists across services.

In Moree, Aboriginal people and organisations have told Aboriginal Affairs that service delivery is a significant challenge with staff shortages, lack of funding, absence of after hour services, and lack of accountability of providers. Despite the challenges for the Moree community, there is a great deal of strength and leadership. Aboriginal Affairs is exploring opportunities to build on that strength,

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Communities and Justice *Annual Report 2022-23* at page 111 <[https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/resource-centre/annual-reports/2022-23\\_DCJ\\_Annual\\_Report\\_Vol\\_1\\_.pdf](https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/resource-centre/annual-reports/2022-23_DCJ_Annual_Report_Vol_1_.pdf)>



including through building relationships between Aboriginal community and services, and mainstream service providers.

Communities have also reported that they need to be supported to rebuild and heal which includes provision of family-based care and tailored local programs, facilities, and early intervention services.

**Community engagement and partnerships:** Effective Aboriginal family and community support and development programs are community-led, that build partnerships with Aboriginal communities and organisations. They are centred on Aboriginal cultural values, seek to strengthen connections, and meet the needs of community. Communities seek greater shared decision making and accountability from government and non-government organisations responsible for the delivery of services.

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## National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The NSW Government signed the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020–2031 (the National Agreement) in July 2020 alongside all Australian governments, the Australian Local Government Association, and the national Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, the peak body representing Aboriginal people in Closing the Gap.

The National Agreement commits the NSW Government to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities and organisations to improve the life outcomes of Aboriginal people. It sets out 4 Priority Reform areas, designed to fundamentally change the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to give effect to (including jointly through partnership actions):

1. formal partnerships and shared decision-making
2. building the Aboriginal community-controlled sector
3. transforming government organisations
4. shared access to data and information at a regional level.

NSW has also committed to a fifth, NSW-specific Priority Reform on driving employment, business growth and economic prosperity.

In addition to the Priority Reforms, the National Agreement sets out 17 socio-economic outcome areas across health, education, justice, families, housing, land and waters, languages and culture, and digital inclusion. Together with the Priority Reforms the 17 socio-economic targets focus on a preventative approach to not only having safe communities, but thriving communities. For example, there are socioeconomic targets focused on students reaching their full potential through further education pathways, and youth being engaged in employment or education. Particularly relevant socio-economic outcomes NSW has committed to are:

- SEO 10 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.
- SEO 11 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

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- SEO 12 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.
- SEO 13 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe.
- SEO 14 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

Each of these targets is crucial for promoting equity and justice, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have greater control over their social, cultural, and economic futures.

Working towards the socio-economic outcomes will close the gap, but the realisation of the Priority Reforms will ensure the gap stays closed and Aboriginal communities can thrive, which will in turn strengthen and benefit the state of NSW. The commitment to shared decision-making is a commitment to make policy impacting on the lives of Aboriginal people in full and genuine partnership – and to empower Aboriginal people to share decision-making authority with governments.