Submission No 68

INQUIRY INTO YOUTH JUSTICE

Organisation: Name.Narrate.Navigate Program, Centre for Violence, Prevention and Healing, Institute of Regional Futures, University of Newcastle

Date Received: 20 March 2026

SUBMISSION TO THE

NSW SELECT COMMITTEE ON YOUTH JUSTICE

Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) Program

Centre for Violence, Prevention and Healing

Institute of Regional Futures

University of Newcastle, Australia

March 2026

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1. Preamble

Acknowledgement of Country

The Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) program is delivered across the lands of the Awabakal, Worimi, Darkinjung, Bundjalung and Yaegl peoples. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal people on whose Country we live, work and learn. We extend that respect to First Nations peoples across all lands this submission may reach. We acknowledge the violent dispossession of land and culture on which this nation was built, and the enduring aftershocks of that violence in the lives of Aboriginal people whose stories feature in this submission.

Who We Are

This submission is prepared by practitioner-academics; social workers, social scientists, youth workers, lawyers, psychologists, researchers and educators. Collectively we hold identities as mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, carers, advocates and allies. We are not Aboriginal. We are, however, accountable to Aboriginal community members who have been central to NNN since its inception – including Acknowledged Elder Aunty Elsie Randall of Justiz Community, whose guidance as Aboriginal Practice Lead and chair of the NNN cultural reference group has shaped the foundations of this work. The Aboriginal voices in this submission belong to the young people and practitioners who shared their stories with us.

On Our Writing

Readers will note we write in a conversational and reflective voice because we believe that knowledge sharing – like healing – happens best through genuine connection and shared understanding. We have spent years working alongside young people whose experiences have been rendered invisible by the institutional language used to describe them. We do not wish to reproduce that invisibility here. Where we use the words of young people and practitioners, we do so with their consent and with all identifying information removed or changed. We use the term 'Aboriginal' throughout this submission, as is common practice in our geographic location. We also use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' in accordance with the original sources we cite.

Scope of This Submission

NNN generates data from and about a specific cohort: young people who have used and experienced violence, and the workers who support them. This submission speaks from that evidence base. We address those Terms of Reference where our evidence is direct and our contribution genuine – leaving to those better placed to respond to questions of governance, system architecture and comparative international models.

2. Introduction

The terms of reference for this inquiry are concerned with evidence-based approaches to reducing the number of children and young people in contact with the criminal justice system in New South Wales. Addressing this requires understanding what brings young people into contact with the system in the first place – the events, experiences, relationships and structural conditions that might shape risk – and what kinds of responses are most effective in addressing need. This submission speaks to both, from the specific evidence base of the Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) program, developed for young people whose contact with the criminal justice system is contextualised by their use of violence.

Violence-related offences account for a significant and growing proportion of youth justice contact in New South Wales (NSW). In the year October 2024 to September 2025, 6,036 young people aged 10-17 were proceeded against by police for violence-related offences. This represents almost 30% of all young people proceeded against for criminal behaviour, a number that has increased by 59.1% in the ten years to September 2025.[1] The gendered dimensions of this trend are significant: while the majority proceeded against remain male, the number of young women aged 10-17 proceeded against for violence-related offences grew by 20% between 2014 and 2023, compared to relatively stable trends for young men.[2] These figures are likely to underrepresent the true scale of the problem – young people's use of violence encompasses a broader range of physical and non-physical behaviours, including coercive control and psychological abuse, that are significantly under-reported and not always captured within current legislative frameworks.[3]

What the data does not capture is that young people's relationship with violence is rarely one-dimensional. Research consistently shows that many who use violence have also experienced it – forming a crossover cohort whose histories of victimisation are often deeply entangled in their use of violence toward others.[4] These young people are not well served by systems organised primarily around the harm they have caused. Their actions are often highly visible in public discourse, yet their own experiences of trauma, disadvantage and systemic failure remain largely unheard in the settings that determine their fate. In an effort to better understand the experiences of these young people, we began our work in 2016 with a pilot study involving semi-structured interviews with 37 practitioners across policing, juvenile justice, health, child protection, out-of-home care, education and Aboriginal-specific services in across the greater Hunter region of NSW.[5] Practitioners we spoke to at that time,

[1] BOCSAR, 2026, *Youth Crime*.
[2] Donnelly, 2024, *Trends in female offending in New South Wales: 2014 to 2023*.
[3] BOCSAR, 2026, *Youth Crime*.
[4] Baidawi & Sheehan, 2019, 'Crossover kids'; Malvaso et al., 2021, 'Associations between adverse childhood experiences and trauma'.
[5] Blakemore et al., 2018, 'Crime and Context'; Blakemore et al., 2019, 'The service system challenges'.

described young people's involvement in crime in deeply contextual terms – shaped by location, socioeconomic and sociocultural experience, and the relational transactions they felt gave both violence and justice involvement their meaning. They were frank about what they saw as the inadequacy of the existing service landscape to respond in trauma-informed and culturally responsive ways and noted that appropriate training was neither accessible nor affordable. A parallel process seemed to be at play: practitioners described young people disengaged from and by systems, and workers themselves presented as disenfranchised within those same systems without the right tools or scaffolding to work differently. This structural and relational parallel became the conceptual seed of the development of the NNN program.

Intentionally merging evidence from the neuroscience of trauma, with Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing, NNN was developed and has been continuously improved through community-based participatory research with Aboriginal community members, young people and frontline practitioners.[6] The program includes a preventive-intervention for young people 12-18yr who use and experience violence, and a program of professional development for the workers who support them. The program aims to strengthen skills for self-awareness, self-regulation and healthy connection through relational, creative and participatory approaches. To date, NNN has been delivered to over 500 young people across community, education and custodial settings in Australia, and has engaged over 2000 practitioners, with more than 200 provided with specialist training to deliver NNN in their own service settings. This submission draws on evidence from delivery and evaluation of NNN as a targeted intervention for 150 young people known to have used and experienced violence in the Hunter region between 2018 and 2026. These young people were referred to the program by youth justice, community and out-of-home care providers. Data is also drawn from delivery of and evaluation of specialist training for 200 cross-sector practitioners between 2022 and 2026.

This submission addresses Terms of Reference (TOR) where our evidence is direct and our contribution genuine. Addressing TOR (a), section 3 details what young people in NNN tell us about the drivers of criminal justice involvement. Addressing TOR (b), section 4 presents NNN as a case study of evidence-based, community-led tertiary intervention, and addressing TOR (i), section 5 draws on what workers tell us about workforce knowledge, capacity and support needs. The experiences of young women, young men and Aboriginal young people are addressed within each section rather than as separate topics, reflecting the intersecting rather than discrete nature of these experiences.

[6] Blakemore et al., 2024, *Name.Narrate.Navigate: Working with Youth Violence*.

3. Drivers of Criminal Justice Involvement: What Young People Tell Us

Reducing young people's likelihood of engaging with the criminal justice system – and the risk of reoffending among those already involved – is often framed as a question of what to do with young people. What program, what consequence, what intervention. This submission argues that this kind of framing misses something important. Responding effectively to youth justice involvement requires understanding what drives it in the first place – the experiences, relationships and structural conditions that shape a young person's outcomes – but it also requires reflecting on the capacity of services and supports to address these drivers in ways that facilitate positive change. This section attends to the first of those tasks, reflecting on what young people in NNN tell us about drivers of criminal justice involvement. The capacity of the sector to respond to these drivers is addressed in section 5.

NNN was developed for young people 12-18 who use and experience violence, with this use of violence often – though not always, nor in isolation – contextualising their involvement with the criminal justice system. This means our learnings about drivers of justice-involvement often draw on evidence related to drivers of youth violence. This evidence was generated as artefacts of young people's participation in NNN, spanning delivery with young women and men (NNN, 2018–2024) and with young men and boys specifically (NNN.360, 2025–2026). It includes deidentified data from psychosocial assessments completed as young people join the program – describing what has happened and *is* happening for them, how they spend their time, with whom, and how they see the world around them. It also includes data from practitioner reflections on how young people engage with program content and activities related to emotional literacy, communication, empathy, power, control, shame and choice – as well as their anonymous feedback provided through 'Postcards to Practice'.

This evidence consistently shows that young people's use of violence, and with it their involvement in the criminal justice system, is contextualised and multi-determined.[7] It is shaped by both their inner world – who they understand themselves to be, how they feel, and how they've learned to read and respond to the world around them – and by their outer world – what their daily lives look like, what's happened to them, and what their engagement with broader social systems and structures has facilitated or constrained. The following sections are organised around these two landscapes, recognising that in practice they are inseparable, each being informed by, and informing the other.

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[7] Blakemore et al., 2018, 'Crime and context'; Bushman et al., 2016, 'Youth violence'; Andrews & Bonta, 2010, *The psychology of criminal conduct*.

3.1 Inner worlds

3.1a Who I am

Identity is not simply something a young person has – it is something they are constantly negotiating, often under conditions they rarely choose. For many young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system, that negotiation has been shaped by a particular and persistent experience: being seen – and seeing themselves – primarily through the lens of their behaviour.[8] Consistent with what we see in the program, one young man who was asked in his orientation interview how he would describe himself, gave an answer that referred only to his offending history. When asked who he was when he was not in trouble, he said he "didn't know". NNN participants have described knowing, from an early age, what label others attach to them – and for some, how these labels can become, over time, something they actively inhabit.[9]

Participants describe using violence to find and form connection, for acceptance and status, to communicate needs, and to redress injustice[10] – their identity, and reputation for violence, serves specific functions that vary along gender lines. For young men, being known and recognised as someone not to be challenged, and as someone who has proven themselves, is often closely tied to significant social standing.[11] For some young women, this same readiness for violence is identified as a way of securing safety, as belonging and respect is not otherwise readily available to them. For other young women, violence is a means of fulfilling community obligations, upholding shared norms, and maintaining standing within the social worlds they inhabit.[12] For both young men and women, using violence was viewed as a necessity to avoid becoming a target of violence themselves. For young Aboriginal women, these dynamics take shape within a specific and additional context – one in which the historical and ongoing disruption of cultural identity through colonisation, removal from Country, and the fracturing of kinship and Women's Business has narrowed the space available for forming a sense of self. Those with fractured kinship ties most often experienced diminished access to cultural knowledge and connection. Where cultural connection can be accessed and supported, strong cultural identity is protective and associated with reduced justice system involvement and greater resilience.[13]

This speaks to what is possible when young people are seen and supported for the whole of who they are. A consistent reality in this work is that many justice-involved young people hold dual identities as simultaneously harmed and harmful.[14] Violence used against these young people almost always

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[8] Maruna, 2001, *Making Good*; Braithwaite, 1989, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*; Blakemore et al., 2024, *Name.Narrate.Navigate*.
[9] Rak et al., 2025, 'Who I Am, and Why That Matters'.
[10] Blakemore et al., 2026, 'The Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) Program'.
[11] Warton., 2020, 'The development of a criminal identity amongst adolescent males'.
[12] Rak et al., 2025, 'Don't Worry About Her'.
[13] Rak et al., 2025, 'Who I Am, and Why That Matters'.
[14] Blakemore, & Krogh, 2024, 'NNN a new way of working'; Baidawi, 2020, 'Crossover children'.

preceded the violence they used against others.[15] Yet the yet the victim/offender binary that organises most system responses carries a reductive risk, treating these as mutually exclusive categories when the evidence consistently shows they are not.[16] As a result, when the harm a young person has caused is the primary organising frame for every interaction they have with services and systems – it becomes difficult for them, and the people working with them to hold other understandings of who they are. Research on desistance – the process by which people move away from offending – consistently finds that sustained change requires not just a change in behaviour, but also a change in identity and how a person understands themselves and what's possible in their life.[17] For young people whose identity has been organised around violence – whether through the labelling of systems or through the social functions violence can serve – that shift is neither simple nor guaranteed. What shapes whether it is possible at all is, in large part, a matter of how a person feels and relatedly how they read and respond to the world around them.

3.1b How I feel

In our work we have found that identities organised around violence are not held without cost. Some young people in NNN have reflected with sadness and shame on identities that afforded them standing and safety – but often at considerable personal cost. Working with a young man in a custodial setting, detention centre staff described him to NNN practitioners as someone whose criminal identity was worn as a badge of honour – a young man whose reputation for violence gave him significant standing among his peers.[18] His engagement in the program demonstrated something quite different. When asked to identify the word that had shamed him most, he named *criminal* – a label he could not bear to have physically attached to him in an experiential learning activity. Labels tied to criminal activity have frequently been reported alongside racial slurs, and for young women in particular, racial and sexual slurs – all experienced from a young age, for some from the age of five.[19]

Shame, for many of the young people we work with, is compounded by experiences of invalidation – the process by which a person's lived experience, point of view, or communication of need is ignored or disavowed by another. Young people in NNN too often find their interests, hopes, views and concerns go unheard, not only in their relationships with peers, parents, carers and kin, but also within the services and systems designed to support them.[20] NNN practitioners have witnessed well-intentioned practitioners dismiss young women's experiences of grief and loss – and have observed

[15] Malvaso et al., 2021, 'Associations between adverse childhood experiences and trauma'.
[16] Baidawi, S. 2020, 'Crossover children'; Rak et al., 2025, 'Don't Worry About Her'.
[17] Maruna, 2021, *Making Good*.
[18] Krogh & Blakemore, 2024, 'Shame named, known, and (re)negotiated'; Blakemore & Rak, 2023, 'Implementation of NNN at Frank Baxter Youth Justice Centre'.
[19] Krogh & Blakemore, 2024, 'Shame named, known, and (re)negotiated'.
[20] Blakemore et al., 2018, 'Crime and context'; Blakemore & Rak, 2024, 'Emotional recognition, regulation, and relationality'.

and heard from young people that they have been told outright they would inevitably reoffend.[21] In this way, systems can actively invalidate young people in ways that tie criminality directly to their identity. This is consistent with NSW based research on criminal identity formation in adolescent young males that suggests the ways in which police, caseworkers and teachers interact with young males may have great impact on identity formation and criminal trajectory.[22] The racial profiling young people describe as associated with this process is also consistent with other NSW based research with young Pasifika men that finds over half of those interviewed had weekly contact and/or interaction with police.[23] Young people in NNN commonly recalled these experiences as fuelling anger, and sometimes reactive or explosive violence. Some have described this as a form of communication, to be heard and seen when every other form of communication had failed, while others describe it as responding to a tangle of feelings and urges they are unable to accurately name.[24]

The role of emotions in youth violence, and young people's engagement with the criminal justice system, centres around capacities for emotional recognition and regulation. Both are part of a system of influence that involves awareness, understanding, and acceptance of emotions; skills to inhibit or control emotional or behavioural responses and capacities to flexibly use strategies to manage distress.[25] While anger is often assumed to be the primary emotion driving youth violence, our observations reflect the emotional world of justice-involved young people is often more complex than it might appear from the outside. For example, one young male participant in the program reflected:

> *When you're angry at the world, you're angry at yourself. When you're angry at the world, like everything you think is about you and what you're thinking, I guess, about the world. But when you're screaming it out – you're letting everyone know who you are and what you are, yeh … like when you're angry, I don't think you're telling the full truth … you sort of lie to yourself and everyone else.*[26]

While this reflection demonstrates a developed arc linking thoughts, feelings and behaviour – this same young person, in reflecting on his past and on his peers, also articulated that recognising and communicating feelings is not easy:

> *Oh yeh, yeh, they don't know, like, they can tell when they're happy or sad, but they can't tell what feeling love looks like, (well, they can, but they don't know it). They can't tell*

[21] Rak et al., 2024, 'Invalidation, voice, and connection'.
[22] Warton, 2020, 'The development of a criminal identity amongst adolescent males'.
[23] Ravulo, 2016, 'Pacific youth offending within an Australian context'.
[24] Blakemore & Rak, 2024, 'Emotional recognition, regulation, and relationality'.
[25] Gratz & Roemer, 2004, 'Multidimensional assessment of emotional regulation and dysregulation'.
[26] Blakemore & Rak, 2024, 'Emotional recognition, regulation, and relationality'.

when someone's exhausted or scared, or disappointment or any of that … more just happy, sad, … yeh black or white … yeh that used to be me.[27]

These observations are consistent with research that finds justice-involved young people often demonstrate a lack of confidence and ability to articulate experiences and feelings.[28] Young people who use violence show particular difficulty discerning emotional cues in others – especially signals of fear and sadness – while remaining acutely sensitive to cues of anger and perceived threat.[29] In contexts characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability, this can produce a hostility bias, a tendency to read ambiguous situations as threatening, and to respond accordingly.[30] Experiences of developmental trauma are directly implicated in this pattern, disrupting the neural pathways responsible for processing others' distress and reducing access to the regulatory strategies that might otherwise moderate a young person's response.[31] Rather than individual failings, these are in many cases, predictable outcomes of growing up in environments and circumstances where threat vigilance has been necessary – and where the emotional skills that make other responses possible have not been able to develop in safety.

3.2 Outer worlds

3.2a What life's like

How a young person feels about themselves, what they believe is possible, and how they read and respond to the world around them is shaped profoundly by the circumstances of their lives. Australian evidence highlights for the vast majority of justice-involved young people, those circumstances are marked by accumulated trauma from an early age. Indeed, research indicates that more than 90% have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, events including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, domestic violence, and serious household dysfunction – at rates up to eight times higher than those reported in the general community.[32] Consistent with this, life for young people who have participated in NNN since 2018 has routinely been characterised by intersecting and compounding experiences of violence, loss, instability and disadvantage – rarely one thing in isolation, almost never by choice.

Among the most persistent adversities described by young people we work with are family dysfunction, domestic violence and intergenerational trauma. For young women referred through

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[27] Blakemore & Rak, 2024, 'Emotional recognition, regulation, and relationality'.
[28] McNeill et al., 2011, 'Inspiring desistence? Arts projects and what 'works'?'
[29] Sato et al., 2009, 'Misrecognition of facial expressions in delinquents'; Schonenberg et al., 2013, 'Impaired identification of threat-related social information'.
[30] Santamaria-Garcia et al., 2019, 'Out of context, beyond the face'.
[31] Briere & Spinazzola, 2005, 'Phenomenology and psychological assessment of complex posttraumatic states'; Siegel, 2003, 'An interpersonal neurobiology of psychotherapy'.
[32] Malvaso et al., 2011, 'Associations between adverse childhood experiences and trauma'.

justice and those who participated in on-Country cultural camps, the evidence from our work is unambiguous: all recalled experiences spanning neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, poverty and exposure to domestic, family and community violence in their childhoods.[33] For all of the justice-involved young women we have worked with, this violence was commonly perpetrated by a male, and trauma in childhood frequently coincided with key developmental milestones – compounding across time rather than resolving with it.[34] For young men involved in the program through out-of-home care referral, the intergenerational patterning of this violence is a consistent and sobering feature of their stories. These young men describe a trajectory of witnessing domestic violence in their own childhoods to facing their own stalking and intimidation charges as teens, some replicating the controlling behaviours of their own fathers. Others report navigating the complexity of a parent returning from custody and trying to rebuild a relationship with them while carrying unresolved trauma from the same household violence they grew up in.

For Aboriginal young people, these experiences cannot be understood apart from their colonial origins. Dispossession of land and culture, the state-sanctioned removal of Aboriginal children across generations, and structural racism embedded in Australian institutions, continue to produce aftershocks of trauma, disconnection and marginalisation that are actively present in the lives of the young people we work with.[35] In our delivery of NNN in justice, out-of-home care and on-Country settings, 92% of young women and 76% of young men who participated identified as Aboriginal. In this group, young Aboriginal women have shared stories of nested disconnection within characteristically connected contexts – family violence, grief, loss and separation from Country and kin alongside stories of positive connection with an Aunty or grandmother who offered guidance and safety. These positive connections were often outnumbered by the damage done to family relationships across generations, damage not of the young women's making, but whose weight fell on them. Young men in out-of-home-care contexts reported a spectrum of cultural connection, from active engagement with culture as a protective factor through to complete disconnection despite Aboriginal identification. Where cultural connection can be accessed and supported, the evidence is consistent: strong cultural identity is protective, associated with reduced justice system involvement, safety and wellbeing.[36]

Housing instability and homelessness are another consistent feature of the lives of young women in this work. Justice-involved young women we have worked with in NNN have often resided in overcrowded public housing or living in various forms of homelessness – couch surfing, youth

[33] Rak et al., 2025, 'Don't Worry About Her'; Rak et al., 2025, 'Who I Am, and Why That Matters'.
[34] Blakemore et al., 2024, 'Trauma, culture, and youth violence'; Rak et al., 2025,'Don't Worry About Her'.
[35] Blakemore et al., 2024, 'Trauma, culture, and youth violence'; Menzies, 2019, 'Understanding the Australian Aboriginal experience of collective, historical and intergenerational trauma'.
[36] Rak et al., 2025, 'Who I Am, and Why That Matters'.

refuges, sleeping rough.[37] In these contexts, we find young women describe the stakes of their interactions with others as higher and their options narrower – with some reporting using violence transactionally – as a means of securing somewhere to stay, alongside unsafe and exploitative relationships, often with older men.[38] Evidence suggests justice-involved young men carry their own relationships with housing instability, though it presents differently – less often tied to immediate physical survival and more to place, belonging and identity, with local area functioning as both a source of connection and a constraint on it. In this regard, young men describe the prospect of moving to a new area not as a fresh start but as a loss: of name, standing, a sense of belonging, and of what would remain behind.[39] The experiences of young men engaged with NNN through out-of-home care settings complicate this picture further. For these young men, care and accommodation have themselves been sources of harm – with experiences including abuse in placement, significant placement instability, and relocation to areas where they had no existing connections. One young person disclosed 41 different placements since entering care. These experiences do not simply add to prior harm – they compound it, and in some cases replicate its conditions.

The instability of placement has a direct bearing on educational continuity. Justice-involved young people commonly have protracted histories with education systems that have failed to accommodate them – many are disengaged from, and have been actively disengaged by, schooling long before they come into contact with the justice system.[40] Among young women referred to NNN through justice, almost all had ceased schooling in early high school, with those still enrolled attending partially at best. Their experiences of educational exclusion were often actively imposed – described with grief and loss, with stories of being told by workers they could not 'hack' school, of being suspended within hours of starting somewhere new, of barriers appearing when they tried to return. Some expressed deep regret at missed opportunities to learn and a genuine desire to re-engage, only to encounter further barriers when they tried. This pattern could also be seen among young men referred to NNN through justice and out-of-home care settings – being expelled for behavioural concerns, attending school for as little as one hour per day, or having no educational involvement at all. Young men who value school also report facing structural barriers to continuing, including placement in alternative education settings that do not offer senior years. Across both cohorts, the pattern is consistent: when educational settings cannot accommodate the behavioural and emotional needs of these young people, exclusion too often follows – limiting future opportunity and reinforcing the deficit-based understandings of themselves that many have already encountered in other systems.

[37] Rak et al., 2025, 'Don't Worry About Her'.
[38] Rak et al., 2025, 'Don't Worry About Her'); Rak, 2022, 'Making the invisible, visible'.
[39] Rak & Warton, 2023, 'His, Hers and Theirs'.
[40] Blakemore et al., 2026, 'The Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) Program'; Blakemore et al., 2019, 'The service system challenges.'

Educational disconnection and limited economic opportunity are closely linked for this cohort. Some young men in NNN describe in the absence of employment or education, turning to drug dealing and fraud as available economic strategies, while many others discuss wanting to find employment but facing significant barriers to accessing it. Across our work with both young men and young women in NNN since 2018, there has been almost no evidence of young people being connected to meaningful vocational or employment support. However, post-NNN intervention, many young people go on to engage in employment and further education.

For many of these young people, exclusion from education and living with disability or mental health needs appear closely connected. Data collected through NNN practitioner notes and orientation assessments identifies neurodevelopmental conditions – diagnosed and suspected – among the young people participating, which have gone unassessed or unsupported. This raises questions about whether educational settings have had either the information or the resources to respond to these young people's needs appropriately, or if their presenting disruptive behaviours were prioritised without adequate attention to the antecedents driving them. The scale of mental health need in this cohort is particularly significant. Rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among justice-involved young people are reported to be comparable to those of soldiers returning from war and are highest among young women and young people from racial and ethnic minorities.[41] For young women in our work, mental health support was frequently either unavailable, inaccessible, or actively refused by the young people because of prior negative experiences with services. In the absence of accessible support, substance use is commonly reported to fill the space – described not just as recreation but as a way of managing distress that has no other outlet. Unmet mental health and disability need, compounded by substance use, can produce the very behaviours that bring young people into contact with the justice system or deepen contact that already exists. Even where need is identified and services are funded, the volume of support is not always matched by its coordination or effectiveness – young people can carry extensive service involvement and still experience significant distress, view their lives negatively, and be unable to access their communities independently.

What connects these experiences is not their individual severity, even though that severity is real and well-documented, but their intersection. The circumstances of these young people's lives – the relationships, resources and conditions that have shaped what has been available to them and what has not – have intersected in ways that constrain the development of wellbeing rather than facilitate it.[42]

3.2b How systems respond

[41] Malvaso et al., 2021, 'Associations between adverse childhood experiences and trauma'.
[42] Zubrick et al., 2014, 'Social determinants of social and emotional wellbeing'.

The circumstances described in the preceding section do not exist apart from the systems designed to address them. Those systems shape – and in some cases can actively reproduce – the very conditions they are meant to interrupt. This is not an argument against the practitioners working within them, most of whom are motivated by genuine care and carry the weight of this work with real personal cost.[43] Rather, it is an observation about structural patterns with direct and documented consequences.

It has long been observed that people convicted of crimes rouse little sympathy in systems organised around culpability and punishment – and the practical consequence for justice-involved young people is that the harm done to them is routinely overshadowed in system responses by the harm they have caused.[44] When service responses fail to account for the impacts of harm on young people, a double penalty can emerge: trauma-related behaviour can result in criminal charges, meaning young people are criminalised both for their actions and, implicitly, for their victimisation. For young women, whose violence is often relational and sometimes situated in a reciprocated process of harm, this double penalty can be particularly acute – their justice involvement can reflect the criminalisation of traumatic impact rather than independent criminal intent.[45] Aboriginal young people experience this dynamic with particular intensity.

Despite comprising approximately 6.6% of the Australian youth population, Aboriginal young people are a detained at a rate 21 times that of their non-Aboriginal peers and represent approximately 60% of incarcerated youth.[46] Aboriginal young people are also significantly overrepresented in what has been described as a crossover cohort – those with dual involvement in child protection and youth justice systems. Young people from this cohort encounter the criminal justice system earlier, are more often charged with violent offences, and experience poorer outcomes than peers involved with only one system.[47] These patterns reflect the failure of systems to adequately account for the role of colonisation and structural racism – a failure argued to be embedded in the foundational assumptions of criminology and criminal justice itself.[48] Research with practitioners undertaking training to deliver NNN found that while some expressed shock at Aboriginal overrepresentation statistics, the relative silence of the majority may be equally revealing, potentially indicating that training and practice too often fail to adequately centre Aboriginal voices and experience. It may also reflect a more troubling possibility: that practitioners have become desensitised to data that should demand urgent response.[49]

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[43] Blakemore et al., 2019, 'The service system challenges'.
[44] Levenson & Willis, 2019, 'Implementing trauma-informed care in correctional treatment and supervision'.
[45] Blakemore et al., 2024, 'Trauma, culture, and youth violence'.
[46] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025, *Youth detention population in Australia 2025*.
[47] Baidawi, 2020, 'Crossover children'.
[48] Cunneen & Tauri, 2019, 'Indigenous peoples, criminology, and criminal justice'.
[49] Blakemore et al., (in press), '"Till today I didn't know..."'.

In its most extreme form, desensitisation may blind practitioners to the harm occasioned by systems on the young people they serve, and the role that harm plays in young people's own use of violence. Australian research argues that the most vulnerable young people are also the most hyper-governed – experiencing violence and harm as pervasive across their interactions with social structures – and that violence enacted on young people by systems shapes the violence young people do. The accounts of young people who have participated in NNN offer some illustration of this dynamic. One young woman described being arrested in her underwear and held in a police cell, visible to several adult men nearby for hours with nothing to cover herself. One young man described being struck by a police officer and witnessing his mother assaulted by police, three days after she had given birth.[50] These accounts were not shared as exceptional circumstances. They were offered as descriptions of ordinary institutional experience – normalised and unremarkable, and directly shaping how these young people understood power, trust and the possibility of change. In the face of such experiences, young people are not passive. They resist and navigate the power exerted over them, expressing agency within the circumstances available to them – though the forms that resistance takes are not always those that serve their interests or keep them safe.

What strikes us in reflecting on these accounts is a troubling symmetry. Practitioners who work with justice-involved young people often come to normalise the conditions those young people navigate – the harm, the instability, the institutional failures – in ways that can blind them to how that normalisation itself creates conditions for further harm.[51] Young people, in turn, come to expect harm in these contexts. For many, the accounts described in the preceding pages are not exceptional – they are simply how things are, met with resignation rather than surprise. What this produces is a circumstance in which young people appear hard to reach, and practitioners express genuine frustration at their inability to form authentic connection. Our work has given us pause to consider what has been described as a parallel process: the ways in which the dynamics experienced by two separate groups come to be reflected in their interactions with each other.[52] The challenge between them is not simply a matter of individual willingness on either side. It is a product of accumulated experience – in systems that have not always earned the trust they expect, and in young people who have learned, with good reason, to be cautious about extending it. The following section describes how NNN has sought to work differently within and against these conditions.

[50] Blakemore et al., 2024, 'Power, control, and agency'; Lohmeyer, 2018, 'Youth as an artefact of governing violence'.
[51] Blakemore & Krogh, 2024, 'NNN, a (new) way of working'.
[52] Miller, 2024, 'What's going on?'.

4. The NNN Program: A Case Study

NNN was developed as a direct response to the conditions described in the previous section – designed to work with the intersecting and parallel needs of young people who use and experience violence, and the workers who support them. This section presents a case study of the NNN program for young people, describing the impetus and context for its development, how it was built, what it does and what it achieves. The professional development and training program that grew from NNN's work with young people and the learnings it affords regarding workforce need are detailed in section 5.

4.1 Why NNN: Impetus and context

The impetus and context of NNN intertwined. While not unique, the Greater Hunter Region location of our work is characterised by both considerable strengths and challenges, and in comparison to other parts of the state, it fares worse in terms of unemployment, youth unemployment, and high school completion rates. For Aboriginal young people in particular, these challenges occur within a broader context of ongoing colonisation, the enduring consequences of the Stolen Generations, and a service system not always experienced as culturally safe or responsive. High rates of child protection reports, out-of-home care (OOHC), and domestic and family violence (DFV) in the region, particularly around sites of declining heavy industry, further contextualise it as rich in potential but, in parts, disconnected from education, early intervention and opportunity. The region is also recognised as an epicentre of historic institutional child sexual abuse.[53] The intergenerational effects of abuse that occurred across church dioceses evident in the socioeconomic realities of some parts of the region. Despite these challenges, both people and place are characterised by steely resilience. The human and social service workforce is large and relatively stable, staffed by skilled and committed employees with real and often longstanding ties to the community.

A small pilot study[54] with 37 local practitioners across policing, juvenile justice, physical and mental health, child protection and out-of-home care, education, and Aboriginal-specific services described young people's involvement with crime as being shaped by contextual factors related to socioeconomic and sociocultural experience, relational transactions and interactions. Practitioners voiced concern for youth violence becoming more frequent and intense, particularly for young women, and were frank about what they saw as the inadequacy of the existing service landscape to respond in trauma-informed and culturally responsive ways. Further, practitioners noted appropriate training for them to work in these ways was neither accessible nor affordable.

[53] McPhillips, 2018, 'The royal commission investigates child sexual abuse'.
[54] Blakemore et al., 2018, 'Crime and Context'; Blakemore et al., 2019, 'The service system challenges'.

A significant outcome of the study was a collective recognition amongst those involved that this region – precisely because of its characteristic contexts – was well-placed to develop community-driven, ground-up solutions to working with youth violence and that the relevance of such work might extend well beyond its local origins. That conviction is borne out by the broader evidence that despite decades of research interest effective interventions for justice-involved young people who use and experience violence remain critically scarce.

Notable programs for youth violence in Australia have included anger management[55], aggression replacement training[56], multisystemic family therapy[57], and Step-Up[58], most drawing predominantly on cognitive-behavioural principles. While these have demonstrated effectiveness with some populations, the evidence base remains limited and conflicting.[59] In particular, an inherent tension exists between the long-reported value of cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) based interventions for this cohort[60], and their underpinning assumptions of a relatively straightforward relationship between thinking, feeling, behaviour and change – assumptions that are context-free and don't necessarily fit young people whose use of violence is embedded in structural disadvantage and trauma. As a consequence, few existing interventions explicitly address the intersecting dynamics of trauma, marginalisation, and cultural dislocation.[61] Most critically, effective tertiary interventions for young people most deeply involved in serious and persistent violent offending remain the least developed and least evidenced tier of the continuum.

At an individual level, research consistently identifies criminogenic needs – including deficits in emotional literacy, communication skills, empathy and the capacity to understand and navigate power, control, and shame – as drivers of violence for young people.[62] From a strengths-based perspective[63], these are not fixed 'deficits' but capacities – context-bound and multi-determined in their development and expression, but capable of growth and change through targeted intervention. It is this reframing – from deficit to capacity, from driver to target – that underpins NNN's approach to intervention for young people whose use of violence is inseparable from the structural and relational contexts in which it occurs. NNN was developed precisely to address this gap, bringing together

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[55] Howells et al., 2005, 'Brief anger management programs with offenders'.
[56] Glick et al., 2011, *Aggression replacement training*.
[57] Henggeler et al, 2009, *Multisystemic therapy for antisocial behavior in children and adolescents*.
[58] Routt & Anderson, 2016, 'Building respectful family relationships'.
[59] Boxall et al., 2020, 'Responding to adolescent family violence'; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022, *Adolescent family violence in Australia.*
[60] Lipsey, 2007, 'A standardised program evaluation protocol'; Lipsey, 2009, 'The primary factors that characterize effective interventions with juvenile offenders'.
[61] Campbell et al., 2020, *The PIPA project*; Moulds & Day, 2017, 'Characteristics of adolescent violence towards parents'.
[62] Andrews & Bonta, 2010, *The psychology of criminal conduct*.
[63] Saleebey, 2012, *The strengths perspective in social work practice*; Ward & Maruna, 2007, *Rehabilitation*.

trauma-informed, culturally responsive and strengths-based principles in a program designed specifically for a cohort that existing interventions have most consistently failed to reach.

4.2 How NNN was built

NNN was developed and has been continuously improved through community based participatory research (CBPR), a social-justice informed approach involving increasing degrees of active collaboration between researchers and the community.[64] Building on the pilot work described earlier, a stakeholder consortium – an advisory group of young people with lived experience, a cultural reference group of Aboriginal community members facilitated by an Acknowledged Elder, a practitioner working party and a sector steering committee – was formed to support the design of NNN. With appropriate ethics approvals in place[65], a series of increasingly focused consultation activities were undertaken with the consortium, beginning with their feedback on a synthesis of existing evidence and moving to the co-design and endorsement of program activities. Through this process, consortium members provided practice and lived experience perspectives, ensured local relevance, challenged assumptions and tested and trialled activities that became part of the program.[66]

4.3 What NNN involves

NNN recognises that foundational skills in self-awareness, self-regulation and connection are critical for young people to achieve positive and sustained change in life circumstances, wellbeing and safety – including cessation of violence. Its theory of change (TOC) acknowledges these foundational skills encompass a broader set of specific ones – including skills to recognise, regulate and communicate emotions and needs, empathy to respond to the self and other, and the capacity to navigate power, control and shame in making choices toward positive change. NNN theorises that these skills constitute 'targets' of change – best addressed through 'mechanisms' that build knowledge and skills, sustained by growing confidence, connection and coping. The program draws on Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)[67] , experiential learning[68], universal design learning (UDL)[69], and Photovoice[70] to support these goals in trauma-informed and culturally responsive ways .

The program is delivered in settings that are known and familiar to young people, comprising an individual orientation, six weekly group sessions, and an individual debrief. The six weekly sessions are sequentially structured around the component skills identified in the TOC as targets of change –

[64] Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003, *Community-based participatory research for health*.
[65] Ethics approvals were obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committees of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), the University of Newcastle (UON), and the NSW Departments of Education and Justice.
[66] Rak et al., 2024, 'The Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) program'.
[67] Linehan, 2015, *DBT Skills Training Manual*.
[68] Kolb, 2015, *Experiential learning*.
[69] Rose & Meyer, 2006, *A practical reader in universal design for learning*.
[70] Fitzgibbon & Healy, 2019, 'Lives and spaces: Photovoice and offender supervision'; Wang, 1999, 'Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy'.

emotional literacy, communication skills, empathy, power and control, shame, and choice. Each group session is consistently structured around six core components: check in/check out; mindfulness; experiential learning; Photovoice; 'Postcards to Practice', and; session rating scales. Activities within sessions deliberately alternate between higher and lower intensity, building capacity for self-regulation in ways consistent with neurodevelopmental principles for trauma-informed practice.[71] Program graduates are invited to contribute to NNN in peer mentoring or consultancy roles, recognising the expertise embedded in their lived experience.

NNN practitioners work from five core practice principles: validation of trauma; reciprocal communication; mindful engagement; shared power, and; skills for connection. Threading through these principles, under the guidance of Aboriginal Practice Lead and Acknowledged Elder Aunty Elsie Randall, is an approach of 'Deep Listening' – an Aboriginal practice of respectful and reciprocal listening and conversation[72] – adopted to honour young people's lives and stories, facilitate sensitive conversations about violence, and promote connectedness, learning and self-awareness.[73] Following each session, practitioners complete a structured reflection document that seeks immediate observations about the experience of delivering each core component. Practitioner reflection forms, alongside other anonymous and deidentified data collected in the program – including Photovoice images and narratives, Postcards to Practice and session rating scales – are analysed by the project team with the aforementioned ethics approvals and requisite participant consent protocols in place. Importantly, young people can participate in NNN without contributing their work to associated reviews and research. Outcomes of the analysis are shared with the stakeholder consortium, informing ongoing refinement of the program and the development of professional education, training and tools to support practitioners working with youth violence and young people's justice engagement more broadly.

4.4 What NNN achieves

An independent realist evaluation of NNN's pilot delivery was conducted in 2021 by researchers at the University of the Sunshine Coast, examining what worked, for whom, and under what circumstances.[74] Findings are best understood as indicative rather than definitive – the evaluation was undertaken at an early stage of program, with constraints on data volume that limited the conclusions available. With that caveat, the evaluation identified meaningful early evidence of effect across four domains.

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[71] Perry, 2009, 'Examining child maltreatment through a neurodevelopmental lens'; Warner et al., 2013, 'Can the body change the score?'.
[72] Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, 'Yarning about Yarning as a legitimate method in Indigenous research'; Brearley, 2014, 'Deep listening and leadership'.
[73] Blakemore et al., 2021, 'Deep listening and relationality'.
[74] Rayment-McHugh et al., 2021, *Name.Narrate.Navigate: An initiative for youth violence.*

Young people showed active effort to attend, which was described by caseworkers as distinctly different from their engagement with other programs. Session rating data showed consistently high engagement, and young people's Postcards to Practice reflected a deep need and appreciation for being listened to – an experience many described as genuinely novel in their interactions with services. Focus groups with practitioners and interviews with young people identified shifts in personal narrative – emerging capacities to tell new, more nuanced and reflective stories about their lives and their use of violence. Each of the young people who completed evaluation interviews described a changed relationship with violence since participating in the program.

Broader indicators of change reported by practitioners include shifts in relationships with family members and caseworkers, re-engagement with education and employment, and reductions in violent behaviour over time. For some graduates this movement has extended beyond the program itself – one young woman reflecting on her experience said: *"I want to help those kids as much as I can to change, I've been in those ways before and I want to see them change, it's how far I've come."* Some graduates have formalised this contribution as peer facilitators and consultants with NNN itself.

The evaluation also identified important moderators and implementation learnings that have directly shaped subsequent iterations of NNN. The complexity of young people's lives moderated program effects significantly – young people attended while managing complex trauma, housing instability and in some cases active family obstruction to their attendance. External service partners were identified as essential to program outcomes – providing not only referral and transport but the between-session relational continuity the program itself cannot supply within its timeframe. Post-program pathways for graduates have since been formalised, recognising that gains made within the program need to be held and supported beyond it.

The evaluation also found that NNN generated positive benefits for the practitioners who delivered and supported it – with referring and supporting workers reporting feeling valued as partners and noting NNN's influence on their own approach, particularly in embedding a more consistent trauma-informed lens in their work with young people. This finding – that the program's effects extended to the workforce around it – directly informed the development of NNN Practice Pathways, a specialist training and professional development program for cross-sector practitioners. The evidence base from that program, and what it tells us about the knowledge, skills and conditions the workforce needs to respond effectively to youth justice involvement, is the subject of the following section.

5. Workforce Considerations: What Workers Tell Us

Young people who use and experience violence encounter practitioners from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds – social work, psychology, youth work, education, health and community services – whose legislative frameworks, professional standards and practice contexts differ considerably.[75] What is common to their work is often the same young person. What is not common is a shared, sufficient foundation for responding to the young person's needs. The evidence in this section draws on what workers tell us in our research with practitioners who work with young people who use and experience violence, work that often, though not always, contextualises those young people's involvement with the criminal justice system.

Collectively, work with young people who use and experience violence has been described as occupying a triple paradox: a phenomenon that is well recognised yet poorly understood; work significant in scale yet largely unnamed and unrecognised as a specialised field; and knowledge that is needed yet absent from core professional training. The consequence of this situation is not limited to practitioners. When those tasked with responding to youth violence lack foundational knowledge, the gap between evidence and practice widens, and young people can remain in systems that may feel familiar with their circumstances yet lack the capacity to respond to their needs.[76]

The complexity of this work also carries a personal dimension. Practitioners often come to this field with their own experiences of adversity and trauma and/or, despite being well intentioned and experienced, practitioners' narratives show signs that this work takes a toll – sometimes this is articulated as cynicism, detachment and despondency, and disconnection from the worlds inhabited by the young people they serve. The impacts of secondary and vicarious trauma are well documented in the helping professions, and practitioners working with youth violence are not immune to them.[77] Addressing workforce capacity therefore requires attention to more than knowledge and skills – it also requires attending to the conditions that enable practitioners to sustain this work well.

5.1 Workforce knowledge and capacity gaps

Research with over 200 cross-sector practitioners undertaking training to deliver NNN examined their responses to the reflective prompt "Till today I didn't know..." to identify knowledge gaps for working with young people who use and experience violence. Content analysis of their responses identified three main areas. The first, and most frequently reported, concerned the dynamics and drivers of youth violence – including gender and age trends, the biological and psychological markers of

[75] Blakemore et al., in press, '"Till today I didn't know..."'.
[76] Blakemore et al., in press, '"Till today I didn't know..."'.
[77] Blakemore & Krogh, 2024, 'NNN, a (new) way of working'; Jacob & Lambert, 2021, 'Trauma exposure response'.

violence, and the prevalence of youth violence. Over half of participants (51.3%) identified gaps in this area. Many were unaware that violence peaks during ages 10–18 before declining, that the rate of violence among young women is increasing, or that humans have a biological mechanism that initially prevents violence but that, once overcome, makes subsequent violence easier. Some practitioners were also surprised to learn that trauma was, in one participant's words, "*such a large concern*" in understanding youth violence, despite working with this cohort daily. The second area concerned intervention effectiveness. Many practitioners entered training operating from a punitive orientation, believing that informing young people of the consequences of their actions would deter violence. In this respect, training produced documented shifts: from understanding violence as an individual condition to recognising it as shaped by cultural, structural and relational factors; from seeing young people as problems to be fixed to understanding them as individuals with agency whose lives deserve understanding, and; from advice-giving to relational, reciprocal practice. The third area concerned Aboriginal overrepresentation, as previously explained (see p. 15).

These findings are not explained by lack of effort or commitment. The fact that 95% of participants reported prior training in violence or trauma work, yet still demonstrated significant knowledge gaps, points to a more structural problem encompassing the fragmented nature of current professional development offerings, their varied quality, and their insufficient depth to build the competencies this work requires. For practitioners in regional, rural and remote settings, these barriers are compounded by limited access to appropriate training – meaning workplace culture, rather than evidence-based professional development, often becomes the primary source of learning about what works.[78]

Research with practitioners undertaking NNN training also identified a dimension of the workforce challenge that is less visible but equally important. Examining practitioners' responses to an empathy-focused activity in NNN training found that empathic responses were shaped by ingroup and outgroup dynamics, socioeconomic distance and emotional labour – that practitioners' capacity to empathise with young people whose lives and circumstances differ markedly from their own is not straightforward, and is influenced by their own experiences and social positioning.[79] This is not a criticism of practitioners – it is an observation about the human conditions of this work, which has direct implications for the training, development and support needs of cross-sector workers.

5.2 Workforce training and support needs

The knowledge and capacity gaps identified in section 5.1 reflect shortfalls in existing workforce education and training. Part of the challenge is that justice-involved young people, including those

[78] Blakemore et al., in press, "'Till today I didn't know...'".
[79] Blakemore et al., in press, ''Empathy Disrupted? Reflections on the Fancy-Lady Shoebox'.

who use and experience violence, are supported by workers across multiple sectors, differing in legislative, policy and professional scope of practice. These workers occupy roles requiring varying levels of qualification, with no common minimum standard of education and training. For those with formal qualifications, pre-qualification education across social work, psychology, youth work and allied health lacks specific or compulsory content on working with violence, meaning practitioners enter this work without foundational preparation for its significant practice demands. What post-qualification professional development is available to address this is fragmented, inconsistent in quality, and – particularly outside major metropolitan areas – often inaccessible in terms of cost and geography. For practitioners in regional and remote settings, workplace culture rather than evidence-based professional development can become the primary guide for practice.[80]

Where training does exist, it has not consistently addressed the foundational knowledge this work requires. Training in trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice – both of which are essential for work with this cohort – has typically been offered as separate, siloed workforce development opportunities, rather than as integrated competencies embedded across the disciplines represented in this workforce. Training has also rarely been designed with the diversity of this workforce in mind. The wide variation in role, qualification level, sector and prior experience means that a single training model pitched at one level or one discipline will not reliably meet the needs of all workers, nor the young people they support. Evidence from NNN practice pathways, the dedicated workforce development program informed by NNN's work with young people, points to what effective training for this work needs to look like.

Independent evaluation of NNN practice pathways has found that upskilling practitioners for work with justice-involved young people requires attention not only to the content of training but to how it is delivered. Delivering quality information was not sufficient on its own – practitioners learned best, and implemented their learning more readily, when training was delivered in engaging ways that established rapport and felt safety. The program achieved this by recreating the same conditions for learning that are required for effective practice with young people – safety, reciprocity and shared power – and by having practitioners participate in the same activities they would go on to deliver. Practitioners consistently described the training as unlike other professional development they had encountered, citing both the facilitators' depth of knowledge and the experiential approach as central to its impact. Practitioners reporting being able to readily implement what they had learned directly into their practice – even noting its generative application with young people outside the formal NNN program.

[80] Blakemore et al., in press, "'Till today I didn't know...'".

Evaluation findings from NNN training also highlight a parallel between effective practice and effective training: just as working well with young people requires understanding the contexts they live in, the experiences they carry and the systems they navigate, training for the practitioners who support them must reflect the same orientation. Practitioners bring to their work – and their training for that work – their own lived experiences. Their approach to work – and training – can be shaped by the organisational cultures and systemic constraints of the settings they work within, and they can be affected by the cumulative weight of the work itself. Training that does not account for these realities risks limited impact on practice outcomes. Where it fails to recognise practitioners' own experiences, identities and structural contexts, it can also replicate or compound experiences of harm for the workers themselves.

Beyond the personal dimensions of this work, practitioners who have engaged in NNN training consistently report that the primary barrier to delivery is implementation support. These practitioners – often in the context of limited access to supervision or support outside of administrative line management – identify mentoring, coaching, co-delivery with experienced practitioners and peer support as practical strategies for sustaining change to their practice. Beyond enhancing individual confidence, the need for implementation support speaks to structural realities that without an organisational context that endorses, legitimises and actively supports new ways of working, even well-prepared practitioners are likely to default to familiar approaches – not because they are unconvinced by the evidence, but because the conditions for doing otherwise do not exist around them. Investment in training without corresponding investment in the conditions that sustain it produces limited and short-lived change in practice.

Addressing the workforce conditions described in this section ultimately requires action beyond individual training programs and the organisations that deliver them. Pre-qualification curricula across all youth-facing disciplines need to include foundational content on youth violence, trauma, and the intersecting experiences of young people who both use and experience violence. Post-qualification professional development needs to be accessible, affordable, of sufficient depth and quality to build genuine competence, and available in the regional and remote settings where need is greatest and provision is most limited.[81] Effective workforce development for this field must centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, knowledge systems and leadership – recognising that Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing offer not only a response to the ongoing impacts of colonisation on this cohort, but practices and understandings that are inherently valuable for trauma-informed work and consistent with the evidence base for healing and repair.[82] Organisations need policy frameworks, supervision structures and resource allocations that make evidence-based practice viable in the daily reality of

[81] Blakemore et al., in press, ''Till today I didn't know...''.
[82] Blakemore & Krogh, 2024, 'NNN, a (new) way of working'.

service delivery – not as an aspiration, but as a baseline condition of practice with this cohort.[83] These investments are not without return. Justice involvement is costly – to young people, to families, to communities, and to the systems that respond to it across health, education, welfare and corrections. The evidence presented in this submission shows that relational, trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice produces meaningful change – including re-engagement with education and employment, reductions in offending, and shifts in how young people understand themselves and what is possible in their lives.[84] Investment in a workforce genuinely equipped to deliver this kind of practice generates returns across systems and across generations.

[83] Blakemore et al., 2019, 'The service system challenges'.
[84] Blakemore et al., 2026, ‘'The Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) Program'; Rayment-McHugh et al., 2021, *Name.Narrate.Navigate.*

6. Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

This submission draws on evidence from the Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) program for young people aged 12–18 who use and experience violence, and the workers who support them. The evidence is offered to give voice and visibility to the experiences of these young people who, in public discourse and system responses alike, are constructed as both harmed and harmful – at once known and unknown, agentic and vulnerable. Their actions are often highly visible – in media reporting, police and court data, the concerns of communities, and more – yet their experiences, their voices and the circumstances that have shaped their behaviour remain largely unheard in the systems that determine their fate. They are capable of agency and resistance, and exercise both, yet they do so within circumstances that significantly constrain what is available to them and what is possible. Their use of violence, and with it their involvement in the criminal justice system, is contextualised and multi-determined – shaped by accumulated adversity, structural disadvantage, and system responses that have too often compounded rather than addressed the conditions driving their behaviour.

The evidence in this submission is consistent: the vast majority of justice-involved young people carry significant histories of adversity before they ever encounter the justice system. Family dysfunction, intergenerational trauma, housing instability, educational exclusion, poverty, disability and unmet mental health needs are common features of this cohort's lives – not as determinants of their outcomes, but as the intersecting circumstances that have shaped what has been available to them, and what has not. For Aboriginal young people, these circumstances carry the additional and ongoing weight of colonisation and structural racism. The systems designed to respond have not consistently recognised this, and in some cases have actively reproduced the conditions they are meant to interrupt.

The impetus for NNN was an unmet need for responses that attend to these young people's experiences in trauma-informed and culturally responsive ways, and for training that enables workers to embed this way of working in their own practice. To our knowledge, NNN is the first program of its kind to deliberately integrate the neuroscience of trauma with Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing – recognising these as complementary frameworks, and centring story, connection and Deep Listening as mechanisms of change that are both evidence-consistent and culturally grounded. Developed through community-based participatory research, NNN is also uniquely both evidence-based and evidence-producing, contributing to an evolving evidence base for work with this cohort and for the development of a workforce equipped to meet contemporary and emerging practice realities. Evaluation of the program finds that young people who use and experience violence can, given the right conditions, develop new capacities for self-awareness, regulation and connection, and that these shifts can produce meaningful change in how they understand themselves and engage with the world around them. The workforce development program that grew from NNN's work with young

people demonstrates that equivalent shifts are possible for practitioners, and that the conditions enabling them are similar: safety, reciprocity and genuine engagement.

The evidence presented in this submission supports the following recommendations to the Committee:

On the underlying drivers of children's contact with the criminal justice system, including the disproportionate impact on Aboriginal children (TOR a, c): The drivers of justice involvement for young people who use and experience violence are multi-determined and complex. Young people who use violence have commonly also experienced it, and for Aboriginal young people this is compounded by the ongoing legacies of colonial violence that remain actively present in their lives and in the systems they encounter. All responses to justice-involved young people must attend to intersecting and compounding experience, be trauma-informed and culturally responsive. This applies across the full arc of a young person's contact with the justice system. Responses must also be cognisant of the gendered, cultural and trauma-related dimensions of justice involvement, which differ across cohorts and require differentiated understanding and practice. Metrics, measures and practices that do not account for this complexity risk replicating rather than addressing harm. We recommend that all responses to justice-involved young people be grounded in an integrated, trauma-informed and culturally responsive framework that attends to the intersecting nature of risk and need, and that assessment, diversion, intervention and throughcare practices be evaluated against this standard.

On the availability and effectiveness of evidence-based and community-led responses (TOR b): NNN represents a model of best practice for tertiary intervention with young people who use and experience violence. Developed through community-based participatory research in direct response to documented unmet need, it is both evidence-based and evidence-producing, designed not only to deliver effective practice but to continuously generate and refine the evidence base for it. It is uniquely Australian and responsive to the geographic and cultural contexts of the communities it serves. Its deliberate integration of Aboriginal knowledges and practices – grounded in the recognition that these are synergistic with trauma-informed approaches – represents a model of culturally responsive practice with application across contexts and cohorts. The program's tools, training resources and way of working have demonstrated value and potential that has not yet been fully realised at scale. We recommend that investment be directed toward the validation, expansion and embedding of NNN, recognising it as a community-developed, evidence-generating Australian model with capacity to address the unmet need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive intervention, particularly in regional, rural and remote settings.

On workforce considerations (TOR i): The evidence in this submission identifies knowledge and capacity gaps in the cross-sector workforce supporting justice-involved young people. Addressing

these requires sector-wide reform. Minimum standards of qualification and competency for work with justice-involved young people are needed and present as the most effective policy lever for driving the systemic change required in both pre-qualification preparation and post-qualification development. Without minimum standards, the current reliance on fragmented, inconsistent and inaccessible professional development will persist, and the gap between what the evidence requires and what practitioners are equipped to deliver will remain. Post-qualification professional development must address existing workforce capability gaps in ways that attend to the diversity of sector roles, qualification levels and practitioner confidence. It must be trauma-informed and culturally responsive, and it must be available, accessible and achievable for practitioners in regional, rural and remote settings. The organisational conditions that sustain evidence-based practice warrant serious consideration and investment. Return on that investment, in terms of better outcomes for young people, the sector and the community are likely to be significant.

We hope this submission contributes to a conversation – between research, practice and policy – about what responses to young people who use and experience violence can and should look like.

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