

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY SAFETY BILL 2023

Submission No: 84
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Publication:
Attachments:
Submitter Comments:



Economics and Governance Committee
Queensland Parliament
c/o EGC@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee,

Thankyou for the opportunity to write to the Economics and Governance Committee, in relation to the Queensland Government's *Strengthening Community Safety Bill (2023)*.

My interest in this includes firstly my role as the representative of the Cooper community, a community which has an interest in this Bill and its proposed measures, and secondly drawing from my personal and professional experience which includes:

- Extensive experience working with victims of violent crime, over close-to twenty years both within the non-government and public service sectors;
- Post-graduate qualifications in Criminology and Criminal Justice;
- State-wide coordination of services for victims of crime;
- Personal provision of support to thousands of Queenslanders who have experienced violent crime, including victims of homicide, assault, sexual assault and domestic violence.
- Advocating for stronger community safety outcomes at a national level

Additionally, I have a lived experience of crime, as someone who has lost my sister and father to homicide, at the hands of two young men. I have personally navigated not only the grief and loss associated with these homicides but experienced two distinct criminal justice investigations and prosecutions.

I want to state at the outset that I recognise the drivers behind this Bill. The right for members of our community to feel safe and to be safe is a fundamental social and psychological need and right.

I do believe we have an opportunity to improve community safety responses in Queensland, while also recognising strong and substantiated research into 'what works' in the criminal justice system and strengthen our response for victims of crime.

I have reviewed the *Strengthening Community Safety Bill (2023)* and have the following remarks:

- a) It's crucial that the Queensland Government remain committed to prioritising criminal justice policies and programs which have or draw from an evidence base of what works. There are many varied views and opinions about how to treat young offenders, but what most people objectively agree on is that we want responses that will actually drive down criminal offending over a life-course. To this end I would like to acknowledge the following initiatives announced:
 - a. Additional investment in case-work
 - b. Trialling a remand fast-track program
 - c. Additional investment in high visibility patrols
 - d. Expansion of youth co-responder teams
 - e. Expansion of place-based initiatives, like the Stronger Communities initiative in Townsville

- b) It's crucial to continue investing in early intervention and prevention work. I recognise that the Queensland Government has invested over \$1.1 billion in youth justice since 2015, with numerous programs continuing throughout the State. This focus on prevention was highlighted in the Atkinson Report on Youth Justice (2018) and remains one of the five pillars in Queensland's Youth Justice Strategy. I also recognise the Premier's most recent announcement associated with this Bill includes a focus on early intervention.
- c) There is an opportunity to improve Queensland's response towards victims of violent / personal crime. The risk of conflating victims' needs with broader youth justice discussions often results in victims' needs being overlooked in the debate. It's therefore important to separate the issues out, and intentionally consider the needs of victims.

While victims do want accountability and consequences for the offender, it's my experience that this is not the sole need of victims. And while I recognise that what victims expect from the justice system are not homogenous, decades of research in the field provides certain justice themes, including:

- a. The need to be treated with dignity and respect, to be heard and included;
- b. The need to be informed throughout the investigation and prosecution;
- c. The need to have our sense of safety restored, which might include practical measures like additional measures to improve home security, or psychological responses including therapeutic responses;
- d. The need for agency and voice throughout the investigation, trial, sentencing and parole periods; and

I commend the Queensland Government's announcement for additional funding of \$9 million to respond better to victims of property crime where violence or a threat of violence has occurred, including \$3 million to boost counselling capacity and support NGOs.

Further to this announcement, I would like to suggest the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

1. Review the Victims of Crime Assistance Act, with consideration given to:

- a) Expanding the eligible victim's category to include home invasions. These are not currently eligible crimes, however we know that these types of crimes cause great distress to victims. Enabling these victims access to financial support to recover from the act of violence would support their recovery.
- b) Mapping the victim's experience through the (VOCAA Financial Assistance) application process, identifying ways to reduce the burden on applicants while still maintaining program integrity
- c) Reviewing the Charter of Victims' Rights – identifying common complaint themes from victims to inform future sector training needs.

2. That the Queensland Government work with relevant stakeholders to increase the uptake of youth justice conferencing. This would include exploring the barriers for uptake, and may include considering an amendment to the Youth Justice Act to remove the voluntary nature of Youth Justice Conferencing for the offender in the case where a victim would like to proceed with a youth justice conference.

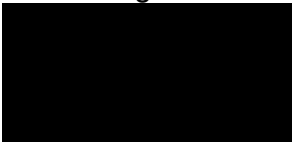
Restorative justice processes such as youth justice conferencing have a proven positive affect for both the offender and the victim, helping to improve greater empathy for both parties, increase accountability for the offender as they are required to hear firsthand the impact of their crime on the victim, and in many cases reduce the victim's psychological distress.

I have spoken to numerous victims who have sought to meet with their offender, only to be told that the offender has refused the conference. This can act as a further insult to victims who already feel that they lack agency in the criminal justice process. And while I ordinarily question the merit in compelling people into programs, I also have witnessed firsthand the value of restorative justice approaches, and believe it's worth investing heavily in.

3. That the Queensland Government strengthen support for victims in system navigation, in particular supporting victims with real-time information relating to the progress of the investigation and prosecution, and support with handing matters over from the QPS to the ODPP as they progress to trial. The evidence highlighting the risk of systemic traumatisation for victims is voluminous, and can be managed by greater cross-agency coordination of victims throughout their criminal justice journey.

Committee, thank you for the opportunity to contribute thoughts on behalf of myself and my community. Reforming Queensland's criminal justice system will take steadfast dedication, focus and courage, and I wish you the best of luck in your considerations.

Kind regards



Jonty Bush MP
Member for Cooper

