

Expanding Adult Time, Adult Crime and Taking a Strong Stance on Drugs and Anti-Social Behaviour Amendment Bill 2026

Submission No: 079

Submission By: Outback Instincts Ltd

Publication: Making the submission and your name public

Submission to the Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee

Expanding Adult Crime, Adult Time and Taking a Strong Stance on Drugs and Anti-Social Behaviour Amendment Bill 2026

Submitted by:

██████████ % Outback Instincts Ltd
Toowoomba Region, Queensland

Introduction

I am making this submission as a practitioner working directly with young people in regional Queensland, including those disengaged from education, exposed to substance use, and at risk of involvement with the youth justice system.

From a community perspective, I understand why stronger responses to serious youth offending are being considered. Community safety matters, and where serious harm occurs there must be clear accountability and consequences. Victims and communities deserve confidence that the justice system can respond appropriately to serious offences.

However, based on my experience working with vulnerable young people and families, stronger laws alone will not resolve the underlying causes of youth offending. Many young people entering the justice system are already facing complex environmental and social factors that significantly increase their likelihood of offending.

Effective policy must therefore balance accountability with prevention, intervention, and diversion.

Environmental drivers of youth offending

Many young people who become involved in crime are growing up in environments where:

- substance use is normalised
- criminal behaviour exists within peer groups or family networks
- school disengagement has already occurred
- trauma or family instability is present
- supervision and positive role models are limited

These drivers are well documented in youth justice research.

The Queensland Government Statistician's Office identifies several key risk factors associated with youth offending, including family dysfunction, substance abuse, antisocial peers, poor school engagement and community disadvantage.

Reference:

Queensland Government Statistician's Office – *Youth Offending in Queensland*
<https://www.qgso.qld.gov.au/issues/10321/youth-offending-april-2021-edn.pdf>

National research also shows a strong overlap between the child protection system and youth justice involvement. Young people involved with child protection are significantly more likely to later experience youth justice supervision.

Reference:

Australian Institute of Family Studies – *Intersection between the child protection and youth justice systems*
<https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/intersection-between-child-protection-and-youth-justice>

Reference:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – *Young people in child protection and under youth justice supervision*
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/06341e00-a08f-4a0b-9d33-d6c4cf1e3379/aihw-csi-025.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

These findings highlight that youth offending is often linked to broader social and environmental conditions rather than simply isolated individual decisions.

Concerns about current early intervention responses

While there is increasing discussion around early intervention and diversion programs, my experience working directly with young people suggests that many currently funded programs do not provide the level of meaningful engagement required to influence long-term behavioural change.

In practice, some programs rely heavily on short engagement activities or incentives designed to encourage attendance. These may include casual outings, food incentives, or short-term activities that create temporary engagement.

While these approaches may attract participation for a short period, they often do not address the deeper issues driving youth offending.

Young people who are already disengaged from school and struggling with identity, purpose, or belonging often require consistent structure, mentorship, responsibility and practical skill development in order to change behaviour.

Short-term engagement activities without these elements rarely produce sustained behavioural change.

Evidence of successful diversion models: BackTrack Youth Works

One of the most widely recognised examples of effective youth diversion in Australia is the BackTrack Youth Works program in Armidale, New South Wales.

BackTrack works with young people aged 12–24 who are disengaged from school and at risk of entering the criminal justice system. The program focuses on long-term mentoring, practical skills, animal care programs, vocational training and employment pathways.

BackTrack's approach combines:

- alternative education
- practical work and training
- social enterprise employment
- animal programs and working dog training
- long-term mentoring relationships

BackTrack's annual reports show significant engagement outcomes, including hundreds of young people participating in programs and many progressing into employment, accredited training or further education pathways.

BackTrack's broader model demonstrates how intensive, relationship-based programs that combine responsibility, mentoring and practical skill development can successfully re-engage young people who have disengaged from traditional education.

The program has been widely recognised as a national model for community-led youth diversion.

Reference:

BackTrack Youth Works Annual Report

<https://backtrack.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Backtrack-Annual-Report-2024.pdf>

Reference:

BackTrack Youth Works overview

https://futuregeninvest.com.au/case_studies/backtrack-youth-works/

Evidence supporting animal-assisted and nature-based programs

Research increasingly supports the role of animal-assisted and nature-based programs in improving outcomes for vulnerable youth.

Studies have shown that animal-assisted interventions can improve emotional regulation, empathy, engagement and behavioural outcomes for young people experiencing trauma or social disadvantage.

Reference:

Animal-Assisted Therapies for Youth with or at Risk for Mental Health Problems: A Systematic Review

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28798541/>

Similarly, research into nature-based interventions shows positive impacts on wellbeing, resilience and social development.

Reference:

Nature-based interventions for improving health and wellbeing

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6628071/>

These findings align with practitioner observations that many disengaged young people respond strongly to hands-on environments involving animals, agriculture, outdoor work and practical skill development.

What we are seeing in the Darling Downs region

In the Darling Downs region there is significant demand for meaningful early intervention programs.

Our organisation currently has a **waitlist of more than 50 young people** whose families, schools and support services are actively seeking alternative engagement pathways because existing programs have not been effective.

Many of these young people are:

- disengaged from school or frequently suspended
- beginning to have contact with police
- experiencing behavioural or emotional regulation challenges
- influenced by peer groups already involved in crime

Parents, teachers and support workers frequently report that existing services have not been able to meaningfully engage these young people.

Instead, families are asking for structured programs operating during school hours, where young people can attend regularly, learn practical skills, build responsibility and develop relationships with positive adult mentors.

Programs operating multiple days per week — particularly those involving animals, agriculture, trades exposure and hands-on learning — appear to engage young people who have already disengaged from mainstream education.

Without access to these types of programs, many young people remain disconnected from education and community supports, increasing the likelihood of further contact with the justice system.

Importance of outcome-focused diversion funding

Smaller community-based organisations that deliver practical engagement programs often struggle to access sustainable funding.

Meanwhile, larger service providers may receive substantial funding for programs that measure success primarily through attendance numbers rather than long-term outcomes.

If government investment is intended to reduce youth offending, funding models should prioritise programs that demonstrate measurable outcomes such as:

- improved school engagement
- reduced police contact or offending behaviour
- increased participation in employment or training
- improved emotional regulation and social development
- stronger community connection

Early intervention funding should therefore prioritise long-term behavioural outcomes rather than short-term engagement metrics alone.

Balancing accountability with prevention

Serious offending must have consequences, and communities deserve to feel safe.

However, enforcement alone cannot resolve youth crime if the underlying causes remain unaddressed.

Research examining custodial penalties for young offenders suggests that detention alone does not necessarily reduce re-offending when compared to other responses.

Reference:

Australian Institute of Criminology – *The specific deterrent effect of custodial penalties on juvenile reoffending*

https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/02_0405.pdf

Effective youth justice policy therefore requires both:

- clear accountability for serious offending, and
- strong investment in early intervention and diversion programs.

Without prevention strategies, the system risks repeatedly processing the same young people once they become entrenched in offending behaviour.

Recommendations

I respectfully recommend that the Committee consider the following alongside the proposed legislative changes:

1. Increase investment in genuine early intervention programs that provide structured engagement, mentoring and employment pathways.
2. Review how diversion funding is allocated to ensure programs demonstrating measurable behavioural outcomes are prioritised.
3. Expand access to hands-on programs involving agriculture, animals, trades and outdoor learning environments for disengaged youth.

4. Strengthen collaboration with smaller community-based providers who often have strong relationships with vulnerable young people.
 5. Improve access to diversion programs in regional communities where service availability is often limited.
-

Conclusion

Community safety is important and serious offences must be addressed through appropriate legal consequences.

However, legislation alone cannot resolve youth crime if the environmental and social drivers remain unaddressed.

Many young people involved in offending behaviour are responding to environments where they lack structure, purpose, mentorship and pathways into meaningful work.

If Queensland is serious about reducing youth crime long-term, investment must focus not only on enforcement but also on programs that help young people develop responsibility, identity and a positive role within their community.