

Making Queensland Safer Bill 2024

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The Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee,
Parliament of Queensland,
Brisbane, Australia

Submission to Inquiry into Making Queensland Safer Bill 2024.

Introduction

This submission is made on behalf of the African Youth Support Council (AYSC), a youth-focused program under the Queensland African Communities Council (QACC) and aligns with AYSC's vision (Every African Australian child in Queensland grows up feeling adequately supported, belonged, ambitious and optimistic about their future). AYSC's services are shaped by QACC's **African Village Model**, underpinned by "*It takes a village to raise a child*" approach, which recognises and empowers key stakeholders in the upbringing, progress and success of the child. The African Village Model recognises the role of key stakeholders in the upbringing, progress and success of the child as illustrated below. It mirrors the definition of the family in the African context, where relationships extend beyond the nuclear to the extended family. This submission focuses on the outcomes and impacts of youth incarceration in jurisdictions across Australia and the purpose is to address the intention to amend the *Youth Justice Act 1992*.



The African Village Model

QACC is the umbrella organisation that represents more than 80,000 people and organisations of African heritage and AYSC as the youth agency run independently within QACC. AYSC currently runs various school-based and after-school early intervention programs in more than 15 schools across the State and transitional rehabilitation programs inside juvenile detention centres and adult correctional centres. AYSC operates three new community and youth centres that open seven days a week in a flexible and responsive way that meets complex social needs of young people and their families. Since the opening of these centres and other complimentary programs mentioned, we have seen significant reduction in the number young people engaging in serious offending and reoffending and the number of young people entering the juvenile detention centres has dropped dramatically in the last year or so from an average of 15 per detention centre to an average of 5 now – more than 50 percent drop.

Key issues identified in schools and communities

In our experience working with African Australian youth, and other young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, especially those from refugee backgrounds, the following key factors contribute to their disengagement from the system, involvement in crime, and general feelings of disempowerment:

- *Trauma from pre-and post-migration experiences*: Many young people from African refugee backgrounds experience trauma due to their migration journeys, compounded by family breakdowns, domestic violence, and cultural isolation.

- *Racism and discrimination:* Reports from our studies indicate that African-Australian students face high levels of racism (100%) and discrimination (76%) in schools, leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation from educational institutions. Similar findings are reported among bicultural workers.
- *Systemic disempowerment:* Our community's trust in institutions is severely undermined by experiences of institutional racism, bias media reporting, neglect, and absence of meaningful engagement with immigrant families.
- *Criminal exploitation by sophisticated networks:* Vulnerable youth, especially those affected by trauma and alienation, are at risk of being recruited into criminal networks that exploit their circumstances.
- *Identity Crisis.* This is a crucial issue affecting young Africans and other children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- *Service provision:* Lack of adequate culturally appropriate and community-controlled services embedded in the local communities

These issues underscore the need for comprehensive, community-led strategies that can break the cycle of crime and disengagement while addressing the root causes of youth incarceration.

Recommendation N° 1: Early Intervention Strategy and Evidence of Success

- An early intervention strategy is designed to foster resilience, optimism, and opportunity for young people, ensuring they remain connected with school and their families.
- School-based programs, such as soccer, cultural activities, and academic mentorship, have led to significant improvements in engagement and behaviour. These programs also create safe spaces where young people can receive guidance, support, and learn essential life skills.

Recommendation N° 2: Supporting youth in detention centres

Through our Cultural Support Program (CSP), regular visits to juvenile detention centres [Brisbane Youth Detention Centre (BYDC) and West Moreton Youth Detention Centre (WMYDC)], providing culturally relevant interventions that prioritize a young person's sense of belonging, personal growth, and rehabilitation have provided notable improvements in safety, well-being, and engagement for participants. A more systemic and consistent support across the community is necessary for lasting change.

Recommendations N° 3: Legislative and programmatic change: accountability and justice

- Mandate participation in community-led restorative programs for young offenders, providing them with opportunities for rehabilitation rather than punitive measures.
- Ensure that criminal justice processes consider cultural relevance and implement a Māori-like court system involving elders or community leaders alongside judicial authorities, to promote rehabilitation.
- Make it unlawful for individuals to join or participate in criminal gangs, as this perpetuates the exploitation of vulnerable youth.

Recommendations N° 4: Community-led programs inside and outside detention centres

- Facilitate effective coordination of transitional programs to ensure that young people leaving detention are properly supported with housing, employment, and mental health services.
- Expand and invest in local community-led rehabilitation programs both inside detention centres and for youth re-entering the community. Programs should focus on education, therapy, skill-building, and mentorship.

Recommendations N° 5: Early intervention through recreational and educational programs

- Introduce flexible, culturally relevant early intervention programs that engage young people in schools and community centres. These programs should focus on recreational activities (sports, arts, music and cultural events), life skills development, and academic support. QACC already offers some of these activities at the centres and would require long term funding to sustain them.
- Empower schools to better address the needs of at-risk youth by providing school-based mentors, cultural liaison officers, and support networks that include parents, community leaders, and social services. QACC already offers has youth mentors in some schools and require long term funding to add increase the number of staff to meet the increasing demand.
- Provide recreational and educational programs after school hours and during weekends that are accessible to all youth, especially those from disadvantaged or refugee backgrounds.

Recommendations N° 6: Disrupting criminal networks exploiting vulnerable youth



- Strengthen efforts to disrupt sophisticated criminal networks by providing alternative pathways for young people to thrive through youth engagement programs, sports, cultural education, and mentorship.
- Develop prevention strategies focused on identifying at-risk youth early and diverting them away from criminal activity through mentorship and support programs.

Recommendations N° 7: balanced community safety and accountability

- Ensure a balance between community safety and accountability, understanding that harsh punishment is not the sole solution. Instead, focus on consequences that foster personal growth, responsibility, and a sense of community.
- Foster a village model solution where the community collectively supports young people, holding them accountable while also providing the guidance and structure needed to prevent future offenses.

The African Village Model stresses the communal responsibility for raising children. It involves a network of families, schools, community organizations, and extended networks, where every individual is accountable for the well-being of young people. This collective approach strengthens both individual families and the broader community, offering a positive alternative to punitive measures that focus only on individual responsibility.

Recommendations N° 8: community-based justice models

- Establish community-led restorative justice programs where young people and their families participate in conferences that involve elders, mentors, and local leaders. These programs focus on accountability and reintegration, rather than punishment.

Recommendations N° 9: support for newly arrived humanitarian families

- Invest in culturally appropriate support services for newly arrived families from refugee backgrounds to address trauma, build resilience, and foster social integration.

Conclusion

To achieve meaningful change, we must move towards a state and federally based adapted and consistently implemented strategy that integrates early intervention, community-led programs, and restorative justice. By focusing on the root causes of crime, promoting accountability and justice, and empowering families and communities, we can build a more inclusive, safer, and resilient society. Effective early intervention and rehabilitation programs, driven by the collective responsibility of communities, will not only reduce the number of young people in detention but will also foster a more supportive, connected, and prosperous future for all young people, regardless of background. Recommendations for action and implementation must prioritize a holistic, compassionate, and inclusive approach that addresses the needs of our young people, their families, and the broader community.

AYSC/QACC acknowledge the efforts of the government and its intention of this bill to address youth crime, and we support strategies that may address the issue and equally ensure the right balance is struck between accountability, justice, responsibility and rights of children and other driving factors. We also urge the government to ensure that the legal and policy mechanisms introduced to address the issue will not unintentionally breach our international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989.

I am more than happy to appear before the committee if given the opportunity to discuss the submission further and answer any questions that the committee may have.

Submitted on behalf of the African Youth Support Council (AYSC)

For further enquiry

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