

Making Queensland Safer (Adult Crime, Adult Time) Amendment Bill 2025

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The life of a child or young person society doesn't value.

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's youth justice and incarceration system.

By Sarah Nelson

From the outset, I want to declare that I am not a person with lived expertise or experience of Australia's youth justice and incarceration system. I am, however, a person with lived expertise and experience of so many of the things that lead to children and young people ending up in that system. I was sex trafficked to 14 men at age 4, experienced other forms of violence, including child sexual abuse by two further men at ages 8 and 13 and I was homeless from ages 14-22. It was during this period that I testified at the Burdekin Inquiry into Youth Homelessness.

Over the last few years, I have been sharing my story with our Australian governments and politicians to help them understand things in a way that they may not have had an understanding of previously, through a series of submissions to various Government inquiries, as well as two economic white papers - the first on housing, homelessness and Australia's child protection systems and the second on child sex trafficking.¹ In these, I have sometimes shared things that I had actually never spoken of prior to putting them in writing. It's been incredibly difficult and emotionally taxing to share my story but a by-product of doing so has been that I have been afforded an opportunity to confront the things that I have experienced so that I could make peace with them and move on with my life without carrying the weight of them.

As part of this whole process, in 2023 I confronted what was undoubtedly the most difficult period of my life, which was between 12 -20 years of age. In working to make peace with and move past what I have experienced, I have gained invaluable insight about myself and what I thought and did back then, as well as why I did it. It's this insight that I want to share with the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, as well as the other politicians and officials I will be sending this to. My hope is that by giving people an understanding of what was going on for me back then, they will then have a greater understanding of what could be going on for the children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system that is driving them to act the way that they are, and would fall under, f) any related matters, in the terms of reference².

I will address the following in this submission:

- 1. Unpacking the self-hatred that leads to destructive behaviour**
- 2. Age appropriate 'meltdowns' in unsafe environments**
- 3. The difference in responses to men who choose violence and children who choose violence**

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<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7214841013381521408/?originTrackingId=%2B05%2BE06qQzeR1pCXgoAtsA%3D%3D>

² https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Incarceration47

4. The untapped potential of children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system
5. Conclusion

Before I begin explaining what was going on for me, I want to make one statement that I know was 100% accurate for me and I believe is accurate for children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system. References to this statement will be repeated throughout this submission as a reminder. It is:

The children and young people who are in our youth justice and incarceration system are watching us. They are not just seeing how we treat them and how we speak about them. They are noticing exactly how we perceive and, more importantly, value them.

I will explain what I mean in further detail for the reader. If there was one thing that I learned growing up the way that I did, it was to read everything that people don't say with their words, but with their actions and demeanour. In my childhood, the slightest change in any of these things often signalled an onslaught of some form of abuse and I had to be on guard 24/7 to protect myself. Today, I am so attuned to even the slightest change in people's behaviour: their body language; a slight change in a tone of voice; small movements; unconscious actions; someone's eyes because as a child, all of them signalled a potential threat to me.

I do want to note with the reader that one thing I have become especially adept at reading is people's perceptions of me. I learned to read this through the way people looked at me; the tone of voice they used when they spoke to me or when they were referring to me; their body language, right down to the way they stood or crossed their arms or clasped their hands. I became an expert at reading these things because of the way one of my abusers treated me. The norm was that this person looked at me with such disgust and disdain. When I became homeless at 14, I went from a household where I was looked at with disgust and disdain and changes in demeanour usually precipitated an attack to being homeless and incredibly vulnerable in a broader world where I was also treated with disgust and disdain because of my circumstances and because I was an unaccompanied minor, I was even more vulnerable to being attacked by someone.

I will go into this in greater detail in my first point, but I saw how those who grew up around me - my siblings, cousins and friends - were treated and I knew I was being treated a lot worse than they were. I internalised this and it created such a warped and broken sense of who I am as a person. I truly believed that I was a disgusting and vile human being who had nothing to offer the world. This self-belief that I formed then drove even more bad behaviour because I became angry with myself and angry with those who treated me badly. It has taken such a long time and so much incredibly hard work to change. In fact, it's only been in the last few years, more than three and a half decades later, that the belief system I formed about myself when I was younger has completely left my thinking.

In a lot of ways, I consider myself incredibly fortunate that I was homeless in the pre-internet era so I had to actively seek out information if I wanted to know what was going on. From a young age, I have always loved the news. I love learning about what is going on in the world around me. When I was homeless, I had to actively seek that information out. I used to read the metal frames with newspaper headlines outside newsagents or I would read old newspapers that I found. Often, I would read about our governments spending millions on a bridge/warship/parking station or giving money to another country and every single time, it felt like my heart had been sliced with a searing hot knife blade. I always thought to myself, 'Governments can spend money on those things, but they can't spend money to make sure that I was okay.' That reinforced my internal narrative that I was a disgusting and vile human being.

Young people don't live the way that I did. Information is delivered right to where they are. They don't have the luxury of having to go and look for information. It is right at their fingertips and it means that those in our youth justice and incarceration system have access to everything that is being said about them by our politicians, in the media and within society in general. And they will be internalising it the way that I did, to the point that it becomes their core belief about themselves and their value as people.

These young people are watching us. They, like I did, would be internalising how we are treating them, what we are saying about them, but more importantly, the value we are placing on them, as small humans. There wasn't internet access, mobile phones, let alone Facebook, Instagram and YouTube when I was younger. I had to seek out the things that I wanted to know, like news headlines. For these young people, this information is so much easier to access. And they are watching us.

My aim with this submission is to interpret, similar to a language interpreter, based on my understanding of the types of things they notice and why, what they are hearing and seeing us say and do and how they are perceiving we value them, as human beings, interweaving that interpretation throughout this submission.

1. Unpacking the self-hatred that leads to destructive behaviour:

In November, 2023, news broke of a 12 year old girl in Melbourne who had murdered a 37 year old woman who was sex trafficking her³. This young girl had run away from out-of-home care 275 times. This sent me down the path that led to me writing the white paper on child sex trafficking, but it also brought up so many of the emotions that this young girl must've felt, because I felt them when I was her age, too. Below is the text of a LinkedIn post⁴ I wrote about it at that time.

"As the magistrate handed down his orders, the girl asked "Where am I going?"

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/nov/17/girl-12-charged-with-over-fatal-stabbing-of-woman-in-melbourne>

⁴ https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sarah-nelson-41b775200_girl-12-charged-with-melbourne-stabbing-activity-7131799413332574208-oJ6?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

These 4 spoken words took me back to a time in my life that I've only recently faced and processed so that I can try to heal myself from it. It was the worst period of my life and it created the most damage to me as a person. I genuinely don't know how I survived it.

I know some of what this young girl would be feeling because I felt similar. The agony of not being wanted. The agony of not being cared for. The agony that comes from people repeatedly doing things to you that should never be done to a child.

The terror. The isolation. The aloneness. The despair. The dread. The constant state of hypervigilance.

The questions you ask yourself about what is wrong with you that makes people keep hurting and abusing you. That no one seems to care where you are or what's being done to you.


The knowledge that you are alone in this world and no one is coming to protect, help or save you physically and mentally tears through every fibre of your being. It creates destruction within you that I would visually describe as being like a city that has been completely razed and everything within it is dead.

All of this then creates a rage within you that, having just unpacked it, I could only describe as murderous. It is a rage towards others but even more so, it's a rage towards yourself because, in your eyes, there is something fundamentally wrong with you. When I speak of the pain, trauma and experiences that, by their very nature, I wasn't supposed to survive, the above is what I mean. I made different decisions but I, too, could've easily made the choice to do what this girl did at some point in time when I was a teenager.

Consider the below options this girl had to choose from, because of the situation she was in:

1. To stay somewhere/with someone where she would continue to be trafficked. To be a victim of child sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as, most likely, other types of abuse. Where she was constantly feeling the things that I felt.

2. To murder someone and be put in jail or similar because of it, but at least this way, she would be 'safe' and wouldn't be subject to constant abuse.

"Where am I going?" 

What kind of life have we allowed this precious CHILD to live if murdering someone was the best option she could choose from to ensure that she was safe?

She's just a little girl."

Not long after I wrote this post, I contacted multiple Federal Government MPs and Senators sharing these thoughts with them. Of special note, I sent this information to the Federal

Attorney-General, Mark Dreyfus KC, MP, to help give the Council of Attorneys-General, which was meeting a few days later, some insight when they discussed raising the age of criminal responsibility nationally. I said then that I couldn't tell anyone why I didn't choose to go down the road of violence and crime but I know I teetered along the line between choosing and not choosing it for 8 years.

In the 11 months since then, I have come to understand things differently. I now realise that I actually did choose to use violence back then, however, I chose violence against myself, as opposed to other people and things. I did this through self harm, namely trying to end my life 30-40 times, with the first attempt taking place when I was 7 years of age. Putting it in other words for the reader, the anger and rage I felt towards myself drove me to implode. The report, *'Missing Figures - the role of Domestic and Family Violence in Youth Suicide'*⁵, released in March, 2023, showed that children who experience maltreatment are 4.6 times more likely to attempt suicide. This means that like me, these children and young people are imploding, like I did. The anger and rage that drives their, and my, self-destruction has to go somewhere.

If children and young people can implode, then there would naturally be those who explode, choosing violence against people and things because, again, that anger and rage has to go somewhere. I believe unequivocally that child and youth suicide as well as child and youth criminal activity, which includes drug use, are intrinsically linked. They are both ways that children and young people self destruct because of how much they hate themselves and feel they have no value.

I will now attempt to give the reader an understanding of the scale of the anger and rage that I felt back then so that they might understand these young people more. I have only explained this with this level of detail to a few people until now. When I started unpacking the 12-20 year old period of my life last year, I was actually absolutely terrified of exposing the pain and anger that drove my self destruction. It was uncontrollable and very, very violent. It took me a very, very, very long time to get my anger to get under control and I was terrified that if I let it out, I wouldn't be able to keep control of it. It turns out that I can, and fairly easily, but it has been incredibly difficult realising just how bad the rage and anger was, when I compare it to what is an acceptable level of rage and anger. I now know it was that intense that it could have created a superhuman type of strength within me (like the type that people get when they lift cars off people) and I could've easily used to physically rip the arms and legs off a 6ft 4 man with my bare hands.

The thing that I found scariest, however, is that back then, I wouldn't have cared in the slightest about doing that because I hated myself and didn't care what happened to me. In doing something that could create destruction for someone else, my goal was actually to destroy myself because I detested myself that much.

⁵ <https://www.berrystreet.org.au/uploads/main/Files/Missing-Figures-Report-Final-May-2023.pdf>

What shocked me more than anything, though, was the scale of the pain and agony I was in then. To make peace with it, I have had to face every last bit of that pain and it was one of the most harrowing experiences of my entire life realising just how mangled I was (which says everything when you consider I was sex trafficked at age 4, among many other things). I have a very broad vocabulary these days yet I still can't find the words to describe that pain. I used to absolutely detest myself, so much so that even looking at myself in the mirror created such anger and heartache. I genuinely believed that I was that vile of a human being that I deserved the abuse I received. I saw my siblings and those growing up around me not receiving the same treatment, or rather abuse, so this made me hate myself even more. I mean, it had to be because there was something wrong with me, right?! Why else would I be treated differently?

Today, I honestly do not know or understand how I am still alive. For a very long time, I wanted to die every minute of every single day. I hated every breath that I took because I didn't want to be in that much pain. I didn't want to feel that much rage and hatred towards myself. I felt like I didn't even deserve to be alive, but by the same token, I also knew that if I was dead, then I wouldn't have to feel the things that I was feeling. As I have sat here typing this, there have been tears streaming down my cheeks because I wish I hadn't had to experience that pain. I wish I hadn't had to experience that much anger and rage against myself. I wish I hadn't wanted to destroy myself so desperately. I wish I hadn't imploded the way that I did. It is what it is, though. We can't change what happened to me.

I genuinely believe that this is the type of pain that the young people in our youth detention and justice system are in. This is the type of anger and rage that they feel towards themselves that has to go somewhere, so it is exploding. I, and others, end up imploding whereas these children and young people end up exploding. They are trying to destroy themselves right in front of our eyes! There is also a crossover between imploding and exploding. A lot of young people would do both - I did, but I predominantly imploded. Again, child and youth suicide and child and youth criminal activity are intrinsically linked. You could even say that they are two sides of the same coin.

In sharing my experiences in this way, my hope is that the reader gains a greater understanding of what is most likely driving the behaviour of children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system. More than that, though, I hope that we can collectively find ways to prevent them from imploding and exploding and that we help them understand that they aren't who they believe they are.

Had I been shown that I wasn't who I believed I was, it would have eased some of the pain, which would have, in turn, made the rage I felt towards myself dissipate and would have reduced the scale to which I imploded.

2. Age appropriate ‘meltdowns’ in unsafe environments

I think most adults understand that children and young people have meltdowns. It’s actually developmentally appropriate for them to have them but for most children and young people, they are able to have them in an environment that is relatively safe. Yet, even those who are able to have them in a safe environment have violent outbursts. I know of people who grew up in safe and loving homes who punched holes in walls during this period in their life. I have two daughters aged 12 and 10 and, well, their meltdowns can be epic, yet they feel safe with me. Then there are the fights between them. I’ve had to peel one of them off the other multiple times because they’ve had a disagreement which resulted in one melting down and beating the crap out of the other. Whilst it is not ideal, it’s generally considered to be age appropriate behaviour.

So what happens when these age appropriate ‘meltdowns’ take place in an environment where a child doesn’t feel safe? In thinking back over my behaviour when I was younger, these age appropriate meltdowns became really complicated. I used to hold inside me the urge to lose it out of fear of reprisal, because I didn’t feel safe. But I couldn’t do that for very long because the rage just built and built until I couldn’t control it anymore. Then, it would all come out, often over the slightest little thing, and it was horrific. I feel such sadness and disappointment at my behaviour during that time, even today, because it was bad. Really bad. There were times where I exploded, but mostly, I imploded and tried to destroy myself.

What exacerbated my age appropriate ‘meltdowns’ was the indescribable pain I was in, which led to the rage and anger I felt towards myself, which I spoke of above. It created a hell-ish combination that became wild anger and rage because I was imploding. Most children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration systems would be feeling this same indescribable pain and would feel such wild rage and anger towards themselves because they are in such pain. They would be self-destructing.

In late 2022, Crikey published an article titled, *‘Shocking WA youth detention footage a stark reminder of what incarceration can do to children’s brains’*⁶. In it, it says:

“Imagine how much energy it takes for a 10-year-old to behave to a level that results in incarceration,” neuropsychologist and youth counsellor Warrick Brewer said. “A child attracting the attention of police or welfare is a child in distress.”

*The cohort of children in youth detention is the country’s most traumatised and cognitively impaired. Research from the Telethon Kids Institute found 89% of sentenced 10- to 17-year-olds at Banksia Hill had at least one form of severe neurodevelopmental impairment, while 36% had foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.*⁷

⁶ <https://www.crikey.com.au/2022/11/15/youth-detention-incarceration-childrens-brains/>

⁷ <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/news--events/news-and-events-nav/2018/february/young-people-in-detention-neuro-disability/>

Further down in the article, it talks about the impact a lack of close interpersonal relationships, or in my terms, an unsafe environment, has on a child's life.

'Children and adolescents rely on relationships for their cognitive and emotional development. Hauling children through foster care robs them of any chance to develop a "stable, organised, single attachment", Brewer said. The alternative is a string of "superficial attachments" that prompts an equivalent response from the brain.

The absence of any meaningful attachment is only entrenched inside the justice system, with many managers and high staff turnover. One case worker for anger management, another for drug and alcohol abuse, another to manage criminal proceedings, another to deal with their family... and the list goes on. Brewer said it was not uncommon for kids in the system to be unable to name a single person they felt "watched over them" or taught them something because staff chopped and changed so much'.

I didn't have a safe environment that I could have meltdowns in. I bottled the emotions up but they had to come out somehow or somewhere. And they did, mostly through me imploding and choosing violence against myself as a means of trying to destroy myself.

The anger and rage these young people feel, like me when I was younger, has to go somewhere. When it is combined with age appropriate meltdowns that take place in unsafe environments, I believe it creates the scale of self-destruction through explosions, which is what we are seeing through the actions of the children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration systems. It might look like something else on the surface, but having experienced such relentless self-destruction myself, I know without a shadow of a doubt that this is what it is. This is something I don't believe I could have connected had I not recently unpacked what was going on within me when I was younger so that I could make peace with it. It has been an incredibly confronting, but enlightening process.

These children and young people's means of self-destruction is an explosion, whereas mine, and the children and young people referred to in the *'Missing Figures - the role of Domestic and Family Violence in Youth Suicide'* report, is an implosion. Age appropriate meltdowns in unsafe environments combined with this self-destruction becomes considerably more volatile and the violence they display towards themselves and others becomes increasingly difficult for them to manage, let alone control.

3. The difference in responses to men who choose violence and children who choose violence

Following a National Cabinet meeting on May 1, 2024, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced an independent Rapid Review of Intervention Approaches to End Gender-Based Violence. This report was released to the public on August 23, 2024. Below are two of the recommendations made by the panel conducting the review.⁸

⁸ <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/15756>

- Engaging with men and boys in violence prevention, including meeting them where they are at
- Better understanding pathways into perpetration to improve targeting of early intervention initiatives, with the aim of preventing violence from occurring

On September 6, 2024, National Cabinet met again and agreed to multiple recommendations that were made, including the below statement, quoted in an article from the Guardian⁹:

*'Another \$351m from the federal government will go towards a five-year partnership for supporting specialist women's and children's services, **as well as men's behaviour change programs**. This investment will be matched by the states, amounting to \$702m.*

Here is a similar quote from The Daily Aus¹⁰:

'Men's behaviour change programs and prevention strategies will also be funded under the new plan. Programs will be focused on changing the behaviour of 'perpetrators of gender violence.'

I now want to draw the reader's attention to the statements that have been made about youth crime and violence. These have been made by the very people who agreed in the Sept 6, 2024 National Cabinet Meeting that men who choose violence need to be met where they are at:

NSW

*'The New South Wales premier has ruled out raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 as he announced sweeping new laws that would make it harder for teenagers to get bail and would criminalise "posting and boasting" about offences on social media.'*¹¹

Victoria

*'Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes on Wednesday said nothing was off the table as the government met with police, legal advocates and community groups to respond to public concerns about crimes committed by a group of young repeat offenders.'*¹²

Queensland

*'The community rightly expects that if a young person is a risk to community safety that they will be detained and we will deliver to them the kinds of rehabilitation programs that can only be intensively delivered in detention.'*¹³

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/sep/06/national-cabinet-family-domestic-violence-funding-albanese>

¹⁰ <https://thedailyaus.com.au/stories/the-govt-has-announced-4-7-billion-in-domestic-violence-support/>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/mar/12/nsw-premier-chris-minns-youth-crime-law-changes-bail-act>

¹²

<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/victoria-s-top-lawmaker-flags-revoking-bail-more-often-for-repeat-youth-offenders-20240710-p5jsik.html>

¹³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-01/qld-government-remove-detention-as-a-last-resort-youth-justice/103788566>

Northern Territory

'Northern Territory Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro has doubled down on her government's plans to lower the NT's age of criminal responsibility to 10, despite criticism from Indigenous, medical, human rights and legal groups.

Ms Finocchiaro said on Tuesday her government was elected to lead the NT on a mandate of alleviating crime, arguing that "experts can be political commentators all they like".

NT News reported the Chief Minister argued "intervening early to help to turn children's lives around so they do not fall into a life of crime".¹⁴

Again, these same people were in the room when it was agreed that men who choose violence need to be met where they are at as part of the primary prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence. I do acknowledge that there was also an announcement that there are to be reviews of bail laws, as well as other things, that each jurisdiction is currently undertaking, however, you can see that, when they are placed side-by-side, there is a completely different tone being used when discussing each of these groups of people who choose violence.

Primary prevention principles should be applied to both children and young people who choose violence and men who choose violence. The goal for both should be to prevent people from ending up in a position where they choose violence. There would be other submissions to this Inquiry that speak to the impact of incarceration on children and young people, and how it increases the chance of them continuing to explode and choose violence. They would also have recommendations within them as to how this could be achieved. Further to this, I fully acknowledge that there really is so much complexity to this issue, and it isn't an area I have much expertise in. As such, I will stay in my lane and let others speak to those things. I will just speak to what I know and that is self-destruction that drives imploding or exploding violence.

I want to draw the reader again to my point about people like me learning to read the things that people don't say but then to tie that in with what people do say. They also have a core belief that they do not have anything of value to offer the world, like I did. The reader will note that the language used to describe each group is quite obviously very different. But there is a further message that I can pick up because I'm well-trained to do so. That is that men who choose violence deserve to be met where they are at and supported to resolve the issues that are driving their violence, such as their underlying trauma and pain because they are important, but children and young people who choose violence need to be locked up because they aren't important.

These young people already feel like they aren't important. They believe that they have nothing of real value to offer the world and through the things we are saying and doing, I believe we are actually reinforcing those beliefs they already have in themselves. Knowing how I used to think and react, I can tell you that this messaging will create more pain, which will create more self-hatred, which will lead to

¹⁴ <https://nit.com.au/17-09-2024/13763/nt-chief-minister-doubles-down-on-plans-to-lower-age-of-criminal-responsibility>

even more self-destruction, whether by them imploding and harming themselves or by exploding and harming other people and things.

The children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system are watching us more than we realise. Even today, I'm alert to the things people say with their actions, not just words. Most people don't know that I do this, but I know no other way. These children and young people don't either. This is how they are trained. I also know, based on how I internalise things, how they would be internalising these current discussions, and it is most likely going to exacerbate the issues we are already seeing and experiencing.

On a separate, but related point, because I love all things economics, I will present a supposition to the reader:

If we were to look at the return-on-investment (ROI) of behaviour change programs, it would be safe to say that investing in providing them for a 16 year old, who possibly has another 60-70 years of life ahead of them, would achieve a far greater ROI than investing in them for a 60 year old, who possibly has another 20-30 years of life left in them. This difference in the possible ROI is even more noticeable when you consider Australia's retirement age, which a 60 year old would only be a few years off reaching. This then leads me to my next point:

4. The untapped potential of children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system

The last almost 3 years have truly been the wildest of my entire life, and my life has already quite a few incredibly wild experiences. The memories of being sex trafficked when I was 4 only came back to me 2 ¼ years ago. Alongside recalling those memories as well as trying to make peace with what I have been through so that I can move on with my life, I have had this ongoing and evolving realisation of just how intelligent I am and what I am capable of. It has been terrifying yet exciting. Soul crushing yet empowering. Someone recently told me that so many people clearly see my intelligence but that the part of this that they love is watching me realise it.

It turns out that not only am I good at, but I actually LOVE economics and data. I still get the giggles when I think about this because I had absolutely no idea I had this in me, but I do. I'm incredibly fortunate that I'm being mentored by some of Australia's top economists, and that makes me giggle even more. During the period I was homeless, I still tried to go to school. This wasn't really to learn - it was more because school was a constant in my life. It was somewhere I could go and just be a student for 6 hours. Someone I was in high school with sent one of our maths teachers the white paper I wrote on housing, homelessness and child protection. From what I heard, he was shocked when he read because I definitely didn't display those skills when I was in his class because I was self-destructing.

The thing is, I simply cannot be the outlier here. I cannot be not the only person whose skills and capabilities have been buried under the rubble of what they have been through. Whose potential was not able to be noticed by teachers, nor others, because of their relentless self-destruction.

I'm going to get very real here:

We actually came dangerously close to missing out altogether on the capabilities that we are now seeing coming from me. In my economic white paper on child sex trafficking,¹⁵ I shared anecdotal evidence that only between 1-4% of children who are sex trafficked reach adulthood alive. This was incredibly confronting to realise and means that I came so close to losing my life in ways beyond what I had previously realised.

What if I hadn't survived what happened to me when I was 4?

What if my life had been taken by the men in the paedophile ring? They threatened to take it.

What if I hadn't overcome the impacts of child sex trafficking, which are catastrophic?

What if I hadn't had the resolve from the moment I became homeless at 14 years old to never take drugs?

What if I had been murdered when I was out there on the streets all alone?

What if I had exploded and ended up in the youth justice and incarceration system, instead of imploding?

What if one of my attempts to end my life had been successful?

What if I hadn't been able to become a fully functional human being?

These are not small things that I have had to overcome. But for me, more than anything else, the fact that this love of all things economics and data is what we are now seeing are coming out of me now, says to me that there is an immense amount of untapped potential amongst children and young people in the youth justice and incarceration system? My high school maths teacher had no idea that there was someone with the potential to become an economist buried within the girl in his classroom who was self-destructing. In fact, I'm sure if he was asked back then to pick the student least likely to have the skills and intelligence to be able to become an economist, I would have been his first choice!

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<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7214841013381521408/?originTrackingId=%2B05%2BF06qQzeR1pCXgoAtsA%3D%3D>

Again, I ***simply cannot*** be the outlier here. There is an incredible amount of potential that we can unleash within the children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration systems. At best, the potential these young people have is being buried under the impact of what has happened to them and the way they are self-destructing because of the anger and rage they feel towards themselves. At worst, we are completely losing their potential because they are getting stuck in cycles of crime and violence. Or they are dying prematurely.

These young people, like me when I was their age, aren't being shown other ways to channel their anger. They aren't being shown that they have this untapped potential. They aren't being shown that they are not who they believe they are. They aren't being shown that they have something of value to offer this world. They aren't being shown that they are valued. I acknowledge that doing the above things isn't easy. We aren't starting with a clean slate. To teach them the narrative that they have untapped potential and are incredibly valuable first means that we have to help them unlearn the narrative that they don't have any value.

I want to put their untapped potential to the reader in a different way now. Australia, as a nation, has some major issues ahead of us because of our ageing population and ever decreasing birth rate. The question has to be asked:

Is it sustainable for us, in the long term, to keep locking these children and young people in detention centres, etc, effectively sending them down a road that statistically leads to them getting stuck in a cycle of violence and crime, and not being able to realise their potential, when we already know we will have less people than we need to work in our workforce in 20-30 years time?

Some of those reading will have already heard me use this argument in relation to other issues related to violence against children. I'm using it again with this because, in my view, it is just as valid a point regarding these children and young people as it is for every other child or young person in Australia.

Until I was 7 and my family moved from Adelaide to Sydney, I actually lived 2 streets away from a person who now lives 2 suburbs away from me. This means that when I returned to my family home after I had been sex trafficked when I was 4, this person was approximately 200 metres away. What has been especially jarring for me is that I wanted to be a lawyer when I was younger and this person is a lawyer by profession. This person has actually lived the exact life I wanted to live when we were younger.

Talk about a tale of two children!

When this person and I were growing up, most people died in their 60's and 70's. There was also a birth rate of 2.5 children per family. This meant that there were enough young people growing up around me, like the lawyer who lives 2 suburbs away from me, my siblings and peers at school, to keep Australia moving in the years that were to come. This meant I was expendable. It didn't matter what happened to me.

But things are very, very different now. With our ageing population; a current birth rate of approximately 1.6 births per female, and this is on the decrease, and our already record low productivity levels, clearly it really matters what happens to **every single one** of today's young people. None of them are expendable. We desperately need each one of them functioning at their maximum capability to keep Australia moving in years to come, and we simply will not be able to achieve that if we do not do all that we can to ensure the children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system have everything that they need to be able to realise the potential they have within them, like the potential I didn't know I had within me..

Their future and their untapped potential is actually invaluable to all of us, and will help us ensure that we can keep Australia moving in 20-30 years time. It really is as simple, yet complicated, as that. We cannot keep making them pay the price that they are paying for their self-destruction, because ultimately, we will all end up paying a higher price for it in the long term.

Disclaimer:

I know most people back then, and today, would never think let alone say that I was expendable. I would never think or say it about anybody myself. I can say it, however, because I'm talking about myself and also because it was just the way circumstances evolved over the course of my life. I've made peace with and am doing all that I can to move on from it, which is why I can speak so bluntly in this regard.

5. Conclusion:

Having experienced the level of pain that comes from knowing you aren't valued gives me full confidence in stating that the way we, within society, within governments, and in the media, are portraying these young people is being noticed. These young people are watching and hearing what we are saying about them and they are internalising it. Most, if not all, of these young people have a core belief about themselves that they have nothing of value to offer this world. It is the most horrible belief and causes pain that I still cannot describe to the reader. I wish that I could explain it to help others understand, but I can't.

We are reinforcing this belief through the language we use when it comes to them and through the way that we treat them. We are reinforcing it through our bias against them.

And I know that it is making things worse for them because I have experienced these same feelings.

The devaluation of them as human beings - as children and young people who actually have so much to offer all of us - is adding to their self hatred, which then creates more self destruction. We speak about them and how they are self-destructing more as problems that need to be solved rather than patterns of self destruction that need to be changed.

I want to ask the reader a few questions, but I would like you to take a moment to really sit with them and think about how you would view things:

How would you feel if you were in these young people's position? What would you do if you knew that everyone around you viewed you as a problem that needed to be fixed? How would you react if people didn't take the time to see past what you are doing to try and work out why you are doing it?

Moving on from that, I consider the most problematic issue we have to resolve as being the potential impact these children and young people not realising their untapped potential will have on our country in the long term.

As I have stated, and we all know, Australia has a rough ride ahead of it when it comes to our future workforce. Where a few decades ago, the untapped potential of children and young people, like me, who were imploding and exploding left, right and centre was offset by the more than sufficient number of children growing up around us who weren't imploding and exploding, things are VERY different now.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that in 2008, we had a birth rate of 1.96 babies per female.¹⁶ The below quote from University of Western Australia Social Scientist Amanda Davies was in an ABC News article about how cost of living issues are lowering our already low birth rates.

"(The) replacement fertility rate for a country like Australia with our healthcare system is 2.1," she said.

"We're heading towards 1.6 nationally ... data that came out in The Lancet earlier this year puts Australia at 1.45 — that's incredibly low.

"If we wanted to grow or wanted to shift our society in any way, we would have to turn to international migration at the moment, we don't have a replacing population."¹⁷

Put simply, this means there weren't enough children who are currently 16 years of age (born in 2008) to maintain a replacing population. The consequence of this is that things like our healthcare system, as it currently operates, are at risk of becoming unsustainable. This risk is then increased every time a 16 year old ends up being incarcerated, which limits their ability to rehabilitate, or rather move past the things that are driving their self-destruction. This is before we even consider the increased resources that will be required over the next few decades to maintain things like our healthcare system at its current standard due to our ageing population.

As a nation, we could continue to try using immigration as a means of offsetting the fact we don't have a replacing population as well as the loss that would be created because children and young people are

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<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/products/451BFD1C377B7908CA2577CF000DEF53?opendocument#:~:text=The%20FR%20reached%20a%20low,to%201.90%20babies%20per%20woman>

¹⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-07-24/cost-of-living-pressures-melbourne-birth-rates/104135890>

being incarcerated. However, with us being in the middle of a housing crisis that will take us decades to get out of, a further influx of people would create further pressure on housing. This means that there is a far better chance of us trying to keep Australia moving in years to come, as well as getting a better return on investment (ROI), through ensuring that we realise the untapped potential we have available to us within our children and young people in our youth justice and incarceration system. It would be far simpler to stop them self-destructing by showing them that they aren't who they believe they are. This applies for those who are currently exploding in our youth justice and incarceration system, as well as those who are imploding and are harming themselves, or even ending their lives prematurely, because they are intrinsically linked.

We need these young people to realise their full potential more than they know, and I would actually go as far as saying, more than we know, too.

We need them - desperately!

I know that had I known I had something of value within me; that I wasn't who I believed I was, I would have stopped self-destructing sooner.

These young people have so much to offer us and we all need to start showing them that.

We need to show them that they aren't who they believe they are.

We need to show them, in any and every way possible, that they are important and that we value them.

This means that we have to address our bias towards them and stop seeing them, and what they do, as a problem that needs to be fixed.

They aren't a problem. They are precious humans with an untold amount of untapped potential within them we desperately need. And they need to know this!

We can't keep letting them self-destruct the way that they are. It is going to take time and it will take a lot of work. It will cost money, too. But, ultimately, it is an investment in human capital with incredible potential returns on the investment (ROI) made. I know I simply cannot be the outlier here. I have only just started realising what I'm capable of. I mean, if this submission, as well as the other things I have written and done, are what is coming out of me (and to be honest, I know I'm still only using about 25% of what I have in me), then this again points to the incredible amount of potential these young people have within them that can be realised is immense and will benefit all of us.

These children and young people deserve to be invested in and we, as a nation, **desperately** need their untapped potential.

Put simply, if they keep imploding and exploding the way that they are, in years to come their self-destruction will hurt us in many, many more ways than it is currently.