

Youth Justice Reform Select Committee  
Queensland Parliamentary Service  
Parliament House  
Cnr George and Alice Streets Brisbane Qld 4000

**In this submission, we provide a response to the following Question on Notice (asked by Member for Ninderry):**

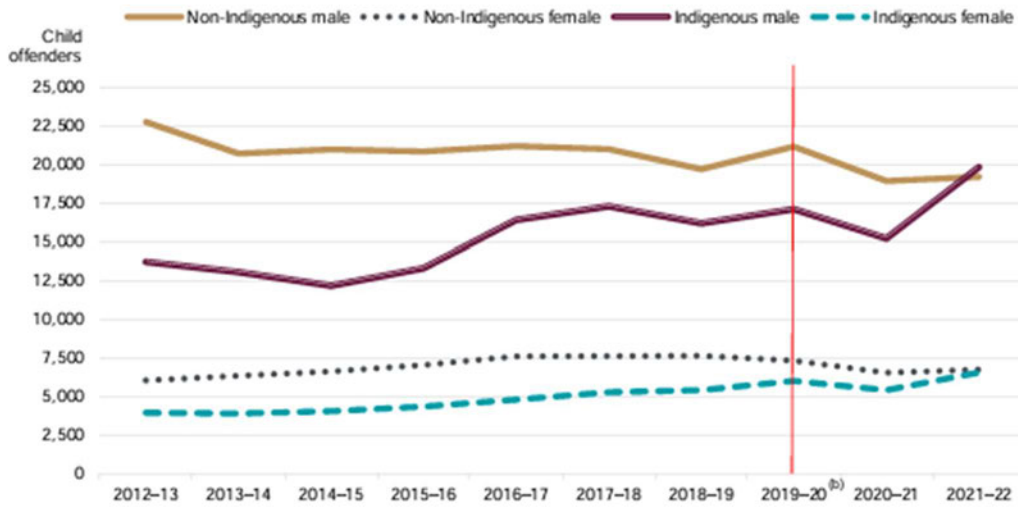
**The committee seeks a response clarifying your view on the trends in youth crime in Queensland, with consideration to the statistics referred to in the attached article published on the Bond University website – specifically the below:**

... the 2021-22 Queensland Crime Report showed a 13.7 percent increase in the number of children aged 10 to 17 being proceeded against by police, compared to the previous year. The total number of youth offenders reached 52,742, the highest number in 10 years.

### **Response**

We believe that the data quoted in this article (Goldsworthy, Brotto, Cawthray, 2023) published by Bond University and by the Conversation, i.e. the 13.7% increase in the number of children being proceeded against by police from 2020-21 to 2021-22, and a total number of 52,742 children in 2021-22 (noted as the highest in a 10 year period), reflects the number of *offences* charged against children rather than the *unique number of children* being proceeded against by police in each year. We understand that the Bond University authors sourced this data from the Queensland Government Statistician's Office Annual Crime Report 2021-22, specifically section 6.4.1, and reflected in Figure 13, which is reproduced below.

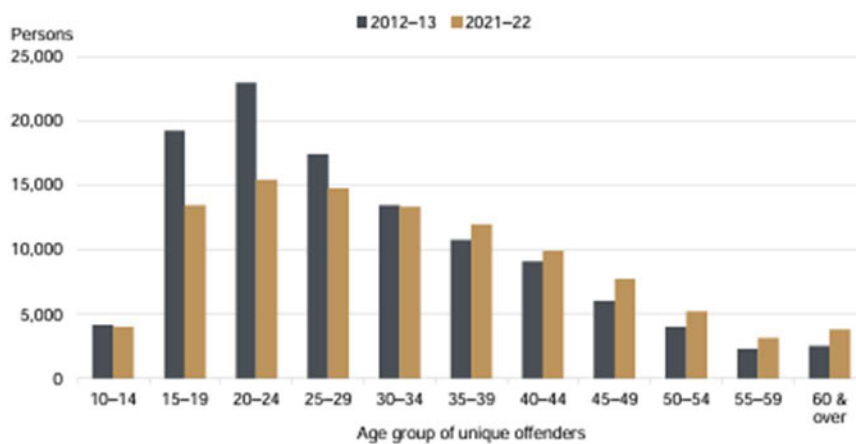
**Figure 13 Child offenders by Indigenous status and sex<sup>(a)</sup>**



Source: QGSO Crime Report Queensland, 2021-2022

In the same report (QGSO, 2023), the *unique number of children* being proceeded against by police in each year is reported to have *declined between 2012-13 to 2021-23 by 20.5%*, with a reported decrease from 13,352 to 10,620 unique child offenders over this 10-year period. This can be seen in Figure 20 in the QGSO report, which is reproduced below. So while the number of youth offences has increased over the 10-year period from 2012-13 to 2021-22, the number of young people engaging in offending behaviour in each year has declined in this same period. We would encourage the Committee to seek further clarification on the interpretation of this data from the QGSO or the Bond University authors.

**Figure 20 Unique offenders by age group**



Source: QGSO Crime Report Queensland, 2021-2022

This data supports previous analysis conducted on the Queensland Police Service data, such as in McCarthy (2021), which shows an overall decline in the unique number of children being proceeded against or diverted by police, but some growth in the total number of offences. This trend has been explored in McCarthy (2021) and McCarthy et al., (2023) and appears to be due to a notable decline in low-level youth offending (e.g. young people who are charged for a total of 1 to 3 offences in adolescence), and a growth in frequency of offending among young people engaged in chronic offending.

We have included below analysis undertaken using police data from Queensland Police Service (extracted from the Griffith University Social Analytics Laboratory), NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, and Victoria Police which indicates that similar trends are evident across each of the states - QLD, NSW and VIC – to differing degrees. All three states have shown a **decrease in the total number of young people being proceeded against by police since about 2008 (adjusted to youth population across states and years)**. This can be seen Figure 1 below.

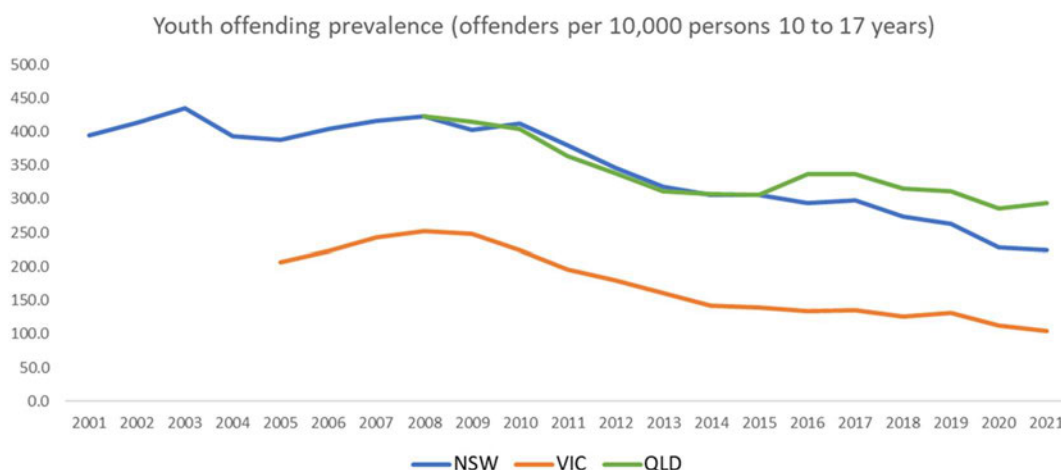


Figure 1: Youth offending prevalence (number of unique young people proceeded against) in each state and year, adjusted to population

And all states (QLD, NSW, VIC) show a flatter trend for the rate of offences proceeded against young people (adjusted to youth population across states and years). This indicates that while there are fewer young people engaged in offending, those that are offending are being charged on average for a larger number of offences per young person. Note that for VIC and NSW there are more notable declines in offences 2020 and 2021 related to the more extensive lockdowns that occurred in these states in those years. Recent data from VIC and NSW indicates a rebound effect for youth offending in 2022 and 2023 (Crime Statistics Agency Victoria, 2023,

<https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data/alleged-offender->

[incidents-2](#) ; NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2023, [https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar\\_pages/Young-people.aspx](https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_pages/Young-people.aspx) ).

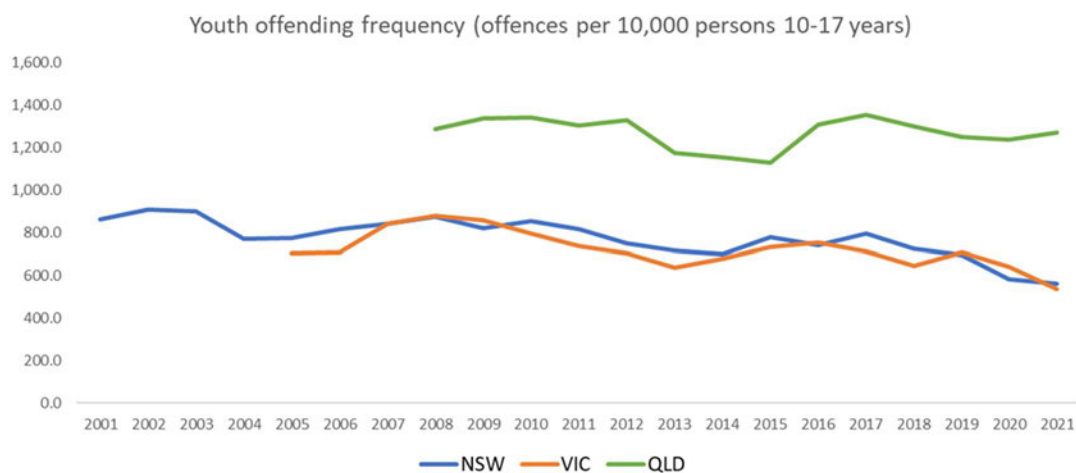


Figure 2: Youth offending frequency (number of offences proceeded against for young people) in each state and year, adjusted to population

**Note:** Some of the differences in frequency across the states may be driven by slightly divergent counting rules for offences within different police data systems.

## Possible drivers of polarised youth offending trends

### *Criminal justice system drivers*

An important question when considering how to respond to increases in chronic youth offending is to consider what might be driving these polarising youth offending trends. In Queensland and other states of Australia, fewer young people are having contact with the criminal justice system, and concurrently there has been an increase in the frequency of offences charged and processing through the criminal justice system for the young people who are engaged in offending behaviour.

The study we recently published as a pre-print (McCarthy et al., 2023) examined the role of **police-led diversion** on the decline in the number of young people having contact with the criminal justice system across QLD, NSW and VIC. **We found, contrary to expectations, that the number of young people being diverted by police within their first three offences had significantly decreased** in recent cohorts. And we found that in the most recent cohort of young people (born in 2001/2002), a low probability of early police-led diversion was associated with a significantly higher volume of offending compared to previous cohorts. This study suggests that **one possible contributor to increased offending rates among young people in recent years may include**

*reduced access to police-led diversion within their first three offences.* These findings underpin our recommendation for diversion remaining a centrepiece of police responses to youth offending, particularly for early offences and for non-serious or non-violent offences, to put downward pressure on the overall volume of youth offending.

Another possible cause of increased volume of offences charged that has been proposed is that **police resources may have become increasingly concentrated on a smaller pool of youth offenders**, leading to increased surveillance, detection, charging and criminal justice processing of these young people (Nilsson et al., 2016; McCarthy, 2021). This could mean more offending behaviour by young people engaged in chronic or high frequency offending is now being detected and prosecuted, due to more intense focus of policing resources on this group, rather than this reflecting an increase in actual youth offending behaviour. We are not aware of any studies that have explored this hypothesis to date.

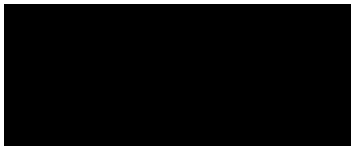
### ***Social factors***

Outside of the criminal justice system, there are several other possible drivers of the polarising youth offending trends. One of the key factors that has been found to be leading to the reduction in youth offending behaviour across a few international jurisdictions is **changes to the routine activities and social contexts for young people**, driven by widespread internet access and smart phone adoption, and changes to parenting norms. International research suggests young people are spending more time under parental supervision, less time in unstructured social engagement with peers, more time in digitised contact with peers, are showing a reduced frequency of binge drinking, engage in fewer ‘nights out’, display greater engagement with education, and have more negative views of risk-taking behaviour (Baumer et al., 2021; Keyes et al., 2018; Svensson & Oberwittler, 2021; Twenge & Park, 2019; Van der Laan et al., 2021). These changes are argued to have dramatically reduced young peoples’ exposure to settings associated with higher risks of offending and victimisation.

However, there will be **groups of children and young people who haven’t experienced these reductions in exposure to high-risk settings**, or to the same extent. For example, young people who live in contexts where it is not safe or desirable to spend more time at home, whose parents are not engaged in high levels of supervision, and children who may be living in state care or other contexts who have not experienced the same reduction in exposure to criminogenic risk. These young people are likely to still be spending substantial time in unstructured social engagement with peers, and thus in these settings they may be exposed to a smaller group of peers who have a higher risk of engagement in delinquent or antisocial behaviour. This may be concentrating the intensity of offending behaviour

among certain groups of young people. No identified studies have explored this hypothesis, so we don't currently have evidence for this supposition. However, Dr McCarthy will be examining possible social drivers of polarised youth offending trends in Australia through her Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA) Fellowship over the next few years.

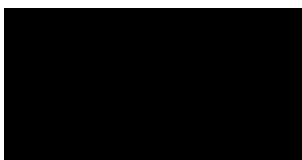
A further social factor which could be driving more recent increases in youth offending behaviour (e.g. post 2020) is the **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational engagement**, particularly for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic may be particularly problematic for young people who had less access to parental support to continue their education in the frequent periods of lockdown and home schooling in 2020 and 2021, and that this may have implications for the number of young people engaged in offending behaviour in future years (McCarthy et al., 2021). Supporting this contention, it has recently been reported that the children and young people from lower socio-economic communities displayed significantly lower attendance rates during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Tomaszewski et al., 2022), which would have been likely to affect their education engagement in the years following. This could be a factor contributing to the increases in the youth offending behaviour seen across a number of Australian jurisdictions in 2021 and 2022, following the COVID-19 lockdowns (as seen in the QGSO 2023 report).



**Dr Molly McCarthy**

**Lecturer in Criminology, Monash University**

**Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, Griffith Criminology Institute**



**Dr Troy Allard**

**Senior Lecturer, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice**

**Griffith University**

## References

- Baumer, E. P., Cundiff, K., & Luo, L. (2021). The contemporary transformation of American youth: An analysis of change in the prevalence of delinquency, 1991–2015. *Criminology*, 59(1), 109-136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12264>
- Keyes, K. M., Gary, D. S., Beardslee, J., Prins, S. J., O'Malley, P. M., Rutherford, C., & Schulenberg, J. (2018). Joint effects of age, period, and cohort on conduct problems among American adolescents from 1991 through 2015. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 187(3), 548-557. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwx268>
- McCarthy, M. (2021). How universal is the youth crime drop? Disentangling recent trends in youth offending through a socio-economic lens. *Victims & Offenders*, 16(6), 796–818. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2020.1855281>
- McCarthy, M., Homel, J., Ogilvie, J., & Allard, T. (2021). Initial impacts of COVID-19 on youth offending: An exploration of differences across communities. *Journal of Criminology*, 54(3), 323-343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00048658211005816>
- McCarthy, M., McLaws, S., Matthews, B., & Allard, T. (2023). Cohort changes or criminal justice diversion: what is driving changes in youth offending behaviour in Australia? Pre-print available from: <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/hqvrt/>
- Nilsson, A., Estrada, F., & Bäckman, O. (2017). The unequal crime drop: Changes over time in the distribution of crime among individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds. *European Journal of Criminology*, 14(5), 586–605. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370816682979>
- Svensson R, & Oberwittler D. (2021). Changing routine activities and the decline of youth crime: A repeated cross-sectional analysis of self-reported delinquency in Sweden, 1999-2017. *Criminology*, 59(2):351-386.
- Tomaszewki, W., Zajac, T., Rudling, E., te Riele, K., McDaid, L., & Western, M. Uneven impacts of COVID-19 on the attendance rates of secondary school students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Australia: A quasi- experimental analysis of administrative data. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 58, 111-130.

Twenge, J.M. & Park, H. (2019). The decline in adult activities among U.S. adolescents, 1976–2016. *Child Development*, 90(2), 638-654.

van der Laan, A. M., Rokven, J., Weijters, G., & Beerthuisen, M. G. (2021). The drop in juvenile delinquency in the Netherlands: Changes in exposure to risk and protection. *Justice Quarterly*, 38(3), 433-453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2019.1656762>