



# ***YOUTH JUSTICE REFORM SELECT COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Ms SL Bolton MP—Chair  
Mrs LJ Gerber MP  
Mr AD Harper MP  
Mr JJ McDonald MP  
Ms MF McMahon MP  
Ms JC Pugh MP  
Mr DG Purdie MP

**Staff present:**

Dr A Beem—Committee Secretary  
Dr S Dodsworth—Assistant Committee Secretary

## **PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY TO EXAMINE ONGOING REFORMS TO THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM AND SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Wednesday, 21 February 2024**

**Brisbane**

## WEDNESDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 2024

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### **The committee met at 2.15 pm.**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry to examine ongoing reforms to the youth justice system and support for victims of crime. The focus of this hearing will be on seven priority areas that the committee has identified based on the evidence it has received so far. These priority areas are: improving support for victims of crime; strengthening confidence in the youth justice system; the need for a long-term youth justice strategy; better early assessment, intervention and prevention; improving young people's engagement with therapeutic programs and supporting their transition from detention back into the community; reimagining youth justice infrastructure; and the operation of the Youth Justice Act 1992.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times.

Witnesses before the committee have called on all sides of politics to deliver bipartisan youth justice reform. This is really important. I would like to restate the bipartisan approach that each member of this committee has committed to in the undertaking of this very important inquiry. As chair, I remind all committee members that questions put to the witnesses must be relevant—and that is questions, not statements—to the inquiry. It is my expectation that this is adhered to and that questions are asked in good faith.

You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I would like everyone to please turn their mobiles off or to silent mode. Before I welcome our first witness, I remind everyone that the committee has reopened submissions. Please head to the committee's webpage to find out how to make a submission online or contact our secretariat for assistance.

### **KERR, Ms Aysha, Queensland Advocacy and Campaign Coordinator, Justice Reform Initiative (via videoconference)**

### **SOTIRI, Dr Mindy, Executive Director, Justice Reform Initiative (via videoconference)**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon to you both. Would you like to make an opening statement before members ask some questions of you?

**Dr Sotiri:** Thank you so much. I will go first and then Aysha will follow. We both have very brief opening statements. Firstly, I acknowledge that I am on Gadigal land and pay my respects to elders past and present. I am very grateful to the committee for your time and for your thoughtful approach to date on this incredibly important policy issue. The Justice Reform Initiative is committed, as I hope is evident from our submission, to really elevating evidence-based justice policy. We are focused on promoting policy that is informed by two bodies of evidence. The first body of evidence is about what works to reduce crime, what works to reduce recidivism and what works to build safer communities. I hope that our submission covers a lot of our thinking in that area.

In my opening statement I want to look at the second body of evidence that we mention in our report. It is really important as a frame for what we want to talk about. This is the body of evidence about what does not work. In fact, it is this body of evidence that really led to the formation of the Justice Reform Initiative. Clearly, our 'Jailing is failing' tagline gives you a good indicator of where we are positioned in terms of this evidence.

We do not talk about it too much in the submission, but what I do want to make clear from the outset is that we have more than three decades worth of evidence in Australia that prison does not work to deter people from committing crime. We know that it does not work to rehabilitate. We know that it does not work to prevent people from committing future crime after they have experienced

imprisonment. We know in fact that, more than that, the use of imprisonment in Australia for both children and adults increases the likelihood of entrenching ongoing criminal justice system involvement. People become much more likely to return to prison once they have experienced it previously. What we know without a doubt is that the experience of incarceration is one of the most significant social drivers of future incarceration.

In our submission we summarise very briefly the points that were made in Bob Atkinson's 2022 review about the failures of detention in the ways that I have described but also, importantly, the failures of curfews, the failures of boot camps and other what you might call control oriented interventions. We also note from overseas the resounding failures of things like minimum mandatory sentencing and zero tolerance policies. The reason I really wanted to emphasise this at the start of our conversation is because obviously sometimes policy development in this space does get politicised and it does get hot and often we turn to policies that sound tough but are, in fact, ultimately ineffective.

The final point I want to make is that it is very clear that prison and the experience of incarceration—this includes prisons, detention centres, watch houses—do not reduce crime. Although it is true that when somebody is incarcerated they are not committing crime in the community and if they had been offending prolifically that can lead to a short-term reduction in crime in a particular community, I guess what the evidence shows us very clearly is that this does not stick. As a result, overall, in the medium or long term it does not work as a form of crime reduction.

The second thing I want to say in relation to what we know about what does not work is that the threat of harsher penalties—that is, longer prison sentences, mandatory sentencing, harsher bail laws, removing prison as a last resort in sentencing guidelines—does not reduce crime. Even if we look to the United States, which is the only western democracy to retain the use of capital punishment, there is absolutely no evidence that the threat of the death penalty has ever had any impact on homicide rates. We know that talking tough does not reduce crime.

The final thing that I wanted to say—and I know the committee has heard this, but I think it probably needs to be emphasised—is that Queensland is an outlier when it comes to the overincarceration of children. It has the highest number of children incarcerated in Australia. It is increasing at a time when comparable jurisdictions in terms of population numbers, New South Wales and Victoria, are seeing significant reductions. This last year, in the most recent RoGS data, it recorded the highest rate of First Nations incarceration in the country for the first time, jumping ahead of both the Northern Territory and Western Australia. There is a lot that needs to change in Queensland.

I think there is incredible goodwill on the part of, obviously, members of this committee and many members of parliament and, of course, members of the police and members of the community. What we are really hopeful for is that this committee acknowledges the expertise of the community sector as well, especially First Nations communities, which a lot of the research we have uncovered and a lot of our reports and our submission show are really making huge difference, albeit on a very small scale, in terms of reducing the rate of incarceration. I will hand over to Aysa.

**Ms Kerr:** Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present evidence today. For those who do not know me, I am a proud Quandamooka woman and the Queensland coordinator for the Justice Reform Initiative. I acknowledge that I am dialling in from Gubbi Gubbi country and pay respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge the elders across Queensland who continue to work tirelessly and often on a voluntary basis to improve justice outcomes for First Nations children, really to break down cycles of structural disadvantage and intergenerational trauma that have stemmed from colonisation.

As the committee has no doubt heard across this inquiry, youth justice is a complex and intersecting policy area and meaningful change does take time. It requires a commitment from all sides of politics to work together across multiple election cycles to implement pragmatic and sensible policy solutions that are based on the evidence of what works. For me, that is why it has been really positive to see the formation of this bipartisan committee.

As you will have seen within our submission, as well as highlighting what does not work we have pointed to multiple proven and cost-effective reforms across the life course that can be implemented to make communities safer and make Queensland safer. In my opening statement, what I really want to highlight is something that one of our Queensland patrons, Emeritus Professor Ross Homel, always says to me: it is never too early and it is never too late. For me, it has been really promising to see cross-party support for early intervention and prevention. All of the evidence shows that greater investment in these areas really will help to stop crime before it starts but also to prevent serious and repeat offending, which I know is a priority for the committee.

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For those children who have been deemed to commit serious and repeat offences it is not too late but, as Mindy has just touched on, we really need to look at the evidence that shows prisons, adult watch houses and punitive responses are not the answer but actually make reoffending more likely. This sentiment was recognised within the Queensland Police Union National Youth Crime Symposium report from 2021. There was a powerful and united view within that symposium that the punitive model for children is not effective and there has to be and is a better way. At the moment in Queensland, I think, any sensible and evidence-based policy commitments that have been implemented really are limited by their continued prioritisation of incarceration and punitive responses. Children need connection to culture, to family, to country and to community. They need to be held responsible in ways that work and, important to that, ways that are culturally relevant.

Many of the existing solutions in Queensland to serious and repeat offending are top-down, government-led and tertiary and lean heavily on the police and youth justice departments. Government data that was presented to this committee shows that, on average, 73 per cent of the young people who have been deemed to have committed serious and repeat offences are First Nations children. For me, that really shows that the answer to community safety and the question that the committee has around addressing serious and repeat offending sits outside of government departments and outside of the justice system and within communities. This really has been proven, as you will have seen within our report, across Australia and internationally.

Places like Hawaii, Spain, Scotland, Scandinavia and even states in America really have a whole-of-system-wide change process that has moved away from the traditional punitive incarceration model towards a trauma informed, restorative and healing approach that is community-led and takes a whole-of-community approach incorporating community services, the community and government departments as well. In Australia, other jurisdictions have taken really positive steps forward, like Tasmania and the ACT. My hope is that the collective evidence presented to this committee will lead to Queensland following a similar evidence-based reform agenda.

Mindy and I are really happy to take questions from the committee and to speak in more detail about the priority areas that you have identified. Thank you for having us today.

**Mr McDONALD:** Thank you very much for your detailed submission. We have heard from a number of different non-government organisations and communities. What is really clear is that the communities that have hope and support around their young people have a much better chance of being able to bring them out of the criminal justice system. We have also heard about a lack of early investment through parenting and the nought to five age group and the system around many kids not being registered for education and child safety through the next stage and each of those aspects. We are looking at all of those things.

I totally agree and understand what you are saying about that model and support through the system and bringing up kids well so they do not offend. The problem we have in Queensland is that we have a cohort that is committing very serious offences and, unfortunately, there are only two options right now for those young offenders: to go into an adult watch house or into other youth detention centres. There is no therapeutic support model, which is present in many other jurisdictions. We have had witnesses tell us that even the worst of the worst cohort need to be taken out of circulation to get that support, which, like you said, Mindy, takes them off the street and stops the offending and the creation of victims. Can you talk to us about models that you have seen where we can look at that cohort and give them support outside of the public threat?

**Dr Sotiri:** Absolutely. I might hand over to Aysha, because I know that Aysha has done quite a lot of work around those alternative residential models.

**Ms Kerr:** Firstly what I would say is that I think the problem of a small cohort of people committing the majority of offences is not a problem unique to Queensland. That is something that other jurisdictions have encountered as well and, I suppose, something that would have been taken into consideration in the development of alternative models. As we have highlighted within our report, children are best served by being in their home environment and being within their community, but, as was acknowledged in the Queensland Family and Child Commission report, we have seen that some of the reasons police are denying bail is that young people do not have a suitable home environment to go to or there is a lack of family support and that is why young people are out on the streets.

I acknowledge that the committee has a focus on looking at what those alternative residential models might look like. I think probably the models that are evidence-based and have been shown to work, particularly overseas, are very different to the way that we run detention centres here in Australia. Hawaii have managed to reduce youth crime by 86 per cent. They have reduced the

number of young people in youth detention or youth justice facilities by 82 per cent and at a point in time had zero young women in youth detention centres. Really, that has been a whole systems change approach that has been an Indigenous-led restorative model. Within that, the key has been at the point of police intervention, really looking to try to divert young people into alternative supports. They have implemented Indigenous-led therapeutic assessment centres. Instead of remanding young people into an adult watch house, young people go to an Indigenous-led therapeutic assessment centre. They have a comprehensive assessment completed to identify what supports and services that young person needs but also what supports and services their family needs, and then they are connected to those services from that point. Alongside those reforms they have implemented a healing centre. That healing centre is primarily community-led and Indigenous-led but also there are the wraparound supports and services available to young people. Within that centre there is the residential component, there is a school, there are homelessness and housing services, there are cultural supports and services, there are opportunities for young people to connect in with employment, training and education pathways and also connections to give back to the community. I know there is a community garden and young people grow food that is then distributed back to the community.

Similarly in Spain, the Diagrama model—I am sure you have heard of this model—is community-led and really focuses on providing wraparound supports to young people. The staff within those centres are not there based on control or authority; they are there to guide young people down a positive pathway. They also have a really strong team of staff members who can provide the really specialised support that young people need. With the Diagrama model—I am not sure you have seen it—they came to the Northern Territory a couple of years ago and produced a report that looked at how that model might be implemented within Australia. Within the report, one of the things they acknowledged was that in Australia we have really high numbers of young people on remand and they are staying in youth detention centres for really short periods. Within that report they mentioned that that is really setting young people up to fail.

Typically within the Diagrama model children spend an average of nine months receiving support. That support enables them to be a part of their community. It is very common for young people to leave the centre to participate in employment, in education, in training, to connect with family, to connect with culture and those sorts of things. Probably of note to the committee is that one of the things the report from the Northern Territory stated was that, with the Diagrama model, the young people who come through that facility have typically committed more serious and violent offences in comparison to children who are in youth detention centres in Australia. At the time they visited Northern Territory there were a lot of children in youth detention centres for breach of bail as an offence and low-level offences.

There is also the Missouri model, which has different stages of support that are available to young people. Across all of these models, the focus really is providing small, home-like environments in a young person's community. The Missouri model has different stages of that. There might be supported accommodation for young people to live independently but still receive those wraparound supports. Then there are more group-based facilities, where young people are given that residential component but still have access to therapeutic supports. Similarly, that model as well focuses on providing support for a much longer period—anywhere from four months to 12 months plus.

I will mention as well that there has been some research overseas in terms of multidimensional treatment care. One of the things that has typically come up in speaking to First Nations elders across Queensland is that a lot of the time kin are caring for these young people. A lot of the time, kin are taking in young people with a lack of resources and support. Models overseas have shown that when young people are placed in supportive environments while their family receive support it is an alternative to holding young people in residential facilities. I know that is something that First Nations elders have called for across Queensland as well.

**CHAIR:** I do not mean to cut you off, but I am mindful of time and I have a lot of members who want to ask questions. Do you mind if I go to the member for Thuringowa? I went through your very extensive submission and it was incredible. Take it that the submissions have been read.

**Mr HARPER:** Thank you both. It is a wicked problem we face. The Cleveland Youth Detention Centre was built 44 years ago, in 1980. You have done extensive research through that paper and submission, and well done. You have looked at all of the programs, including a number in Townsville. Members of the public—and we have some here—rightly, as you point out on page 6, deserve to feel safe. They want people to be held to account and to feel safe within their communities. We need to facilitate a safe community. I have a few questions and some will have to be taken on notice. What are the alternatives to detention, are they proven to work and can we establish them in Queensland?

**Dr Sotiri:** I can briefly add to Aysha's outline of some of those international models that have very strong evidence bases. One of the things we are trying to communicate is that the word 'alternative' is a bit of an awkward one at times, because it does not always mean alternative to the actual moment of detention. There are absolutely alternative detention models that work regardless of what the offence category is. We can see those internationally—we can see those in New Zealand—and we can also see them in some states in Australia.

When we are talking about alternatives, we are also talking about alternatives at all of those different touchpoints along the justice system. I guess the wicked problem part of this is that it is not one magic reform fix. There need to be alternatives at the point of policing. I know that there is some interesting, good stuff happening in Queensland in terms of co-responder models. We need to look more deeply at that in terms of alternative responder models. Again, there are great, evidence-based examples of alternative police responder models where, instead of it being police, it might be a mental health worker and a youth worker that go out or an AOD worker and a youth worker. Those are covered in the report as well. There is absolutely strong evidence.

There are also alternatives at the point of court—alternative frames in which the children and young people are actually attending court. I feel like Victoria and New South Wales are useful examples for Queensland to look at. I know that comparisons are not always useful, but I do think, given there has been, especially in New South Wales, which is also overincarcerated—not quite as much Queensland but comparable to Queensland—a dramatic reduction in the numbers of children going through, and although it is hard to see exactly what that driver is, it is very clear that what is happening at the point of court and at the point of court diversion in both Victoria and New South Wales has made a significant difference in terms of driving those numbers down. As Aysha was talking about, for Queensland especially, alternatives need to be focused at the point of bail. I think that is where there is a huge amount of work to be done. Again, there are a lot of examples internationally and some small examples around Australia of bail hostels, bail court. There are varying degrees of, I guess, coercion involved in those bail support models—varying degrees of compliance required depending what the child needs.

The key for the successful models of alternatives at all of those different touchpoints is that they tend to operate outside of government. They tend to be led by the community. If they are working with First Nations kids, they tend to absolutely have elders embedded in that. Again, it is not that people should not be held to account, because I do not think anyone would argue that. Even if someone is not able to be held criminally responsible, we still need to teach kids about what responsibility is and what accountability is in a way that is developmentally appropriate. These models are absolutely about doing that.

I worked in both youth justice and adult justice for 20 years. Aysha has a similar background but she is very young so not as many decades. From my own experience as a social worker, it is so clear that if you meet somebody where they are at and if you provide support, not just about the offending—you are not treating somebody about the bad behaviour but you are meeting somebody with all of their needs: if they need housing, that is what you are working on; if they need access to drug and alcohol, that is what you are working on—then you are going to have a very different outcome to what you get if you are focusing just on the offending. It is not to say that we do not need to take that incredibly seriously, but I guess what the research shows is that community safety absolutely requires us to look at why it is that somebody is offending in the first place. That is not to be bleeding heart and that is not to be soft; that is just what works if we want to stop it from happening again.

**Mr PURDIE:** Aysha, are the models you were telling us about, from Hawaii and elsewhere, done under compliance or is it voluntary? We heard from the police earlier that sometimes it is hard to get these kids engaged. Can you tell me more about that part of it?

**Ms Kerr:** Typically in the models overseas young people are sentenced, which means that they have been through the court process and that is, I suppose, for these models that are alternative residential options. In Queensland we have 89 per cent of young people held on remand. I think that is really the distinction: young people in these models overseas have been sentenced and it is part of their sentence. I think as well there are moments at the point of police and court interaction where there can be a requirement for young people to instead connect with those alternative models.

I know that one of the committee's priorities is really around how to get young people to engage in programs. I suppose I would really like to highlight, as I said in my opening statement, that in Queensland a lot of the programs are government-run and government-led and, particularly for First

Nations young people, it is really important that services are First Nations led and that young people are able to develop those trusted relationships with elders and people in their community as opposed to government officials, police and youth justice workers.

**Mrs McMAHON:** It is an amazingly detailed submission incorporating a number of different programs that I am interested in. There is a lot on Murri courts specifically and the expansion of Murri courts into the youth sector when it was previously for adults, but I have noticed that not all of them are successful. In terms of expanding a youth Murri court program, what other supports need to be in place in order to set up Murri courts to achieve their purpose and effectiveness?

**Dr Sotiri:** There is mixed evidence around the success of a number of First Nations courts, but I guess the thread that is seen through is exactly what you are identifying: if they are not successful, it is often because of an absence of other kinds of critical services around the court. There is a range of things: access, especially in regional and remote areas; access to alcohol and other drug treatment; access to mental health support—that is for adults and for kids but really important for kids because that is missing in many communities; and access to the wraparound family support that we know is absolutely critical in terms of sustaining any of those changes made.

**Ms Kerr:** Housing is a really critical issue at the moment. I know that a lot of youth housing services across Queensland have received funding to support young people who are leaving detention. If there is no housing available, the support they can provide is really limited.

**Mrs McMAHON:** On the housing issue, my second question was going to be around resi care. It is a big program that comes with a lot of issues. Where is resi care failing and where do we need to be providing that support, or is it a completely different model that we need for that cohort of people?

**Dr Sotiri:** I do not feel that I am an expert at all on resi care, I am sorry. We know very clearly—I am sure the committee has heard this many times—that the pathway of children from out-of-home care into youth justice is overwhelmingly shameful across Australia and certainly in Queensland. We have not spent a lot of time looking at the various models in out-of-home care or resi care, but I think it is absolutely part of this conversation—just not one that I am prepared to answer.

**Mrs GERBER:** The member for Ninderry was talking about the therapeutic models. In your submission you talk about a therapeutic and rehabilitative facility for kids on remand. I want to understand that a bit better. We know that kids are held on remand for between 30 or 50 days, and when they get sentenced they are released straightaway because of time served. If you are talking about a therapeutic model without compulsion, how do you propose that will work for kids on remand?

**Dr Sotiri:** There are parameters in terms of compulsion and voluntary. When we are talking about alternatives to remand, we need to look at bail. There are different levels of compliance that are required in the different models, some of which we have outlined in that report. Obviously, voluntary tends to be most effective but is not always possible. Some of those alternatives do require compliance: 'If not this, you are likely to have some sort of consequence.' At the moment, that consequence is often incarceration.

Those models do require compliance: there is a consequence if somebody does not comply with what the rules are. They need to have a number of features that are not currently there in a lot of what we have across Australia and in Queensland. There needs to be a reason for the children to want to be there, even if they have to be there. That usually is about the relationship between the children and the people staffing those centres. We have it really topsy-turvy in terms of growing this system out of the adult system, which is incredibly adversarial. We have this long history in Australia of running these prisons and youth justice centres where it is like there are these two opposing camps. That is just not what it looks like and that is not what it should look like in remand or alternatives to remand when people are on the point of bail.

The key things are: generally small, home-like environments; staff who are not youth justice or corrections officers; and consequences, but as much as possible working with the kids to actually have them want to be there and to engage. For a lot of kids, especially First Nations kids, the research shows us that there is indeed First Nations involvement—not sort of token—and that there is a real sense that everybody working there is working towards the same thing, so we are not working in that adversarial, oppositional kind of way. There is the need for voluntary bail support—and that should be available—but there may also be the need for support that requires a level of compliance. Even with those that require a level of compliance we need to be honest about that—'If you leave or if you break the rules, there is a consequence'—but, in order to make those workable with both of those systems, we still need the interactions and the quality of how those interactions happen to be very different to the existing youth justice system.

**Mrs GERBER:** Touching on what you said previously around the intersection of child safety and youth justice—I think you used the word ‘shameful’ in relation to the trajectory of children out of child safety into the youth justice system—can you talk to the committee a bit more about your experience of that intersection and the system failures there?

**Dr Sotiri:** Yes. I am very happy to provide some material that we have written previously on this. I do not have the statistics on me today to interpret the over-representation, so I am happy to provide that to the committee later. We see a massive over-representation of children who have been in the care of the state moving into youth justice. There are lots of reasons for that, but often it is also while kids are in resi care or while they are in the care of the state. People seem to be managed by the police rather than supported in the community in the way that a kid who has grown up in a different set of circumstances might be. There is some very important research out of UNSW around social determinants of incarceration and around what happens to children over their life course. What that shows very clearly is that out-of-home care is one of the key social determinants of whether or not somebody ends up there. That is often to do with the level of police interaction that children in out-of-home care have from a very young age.

**Mrs McMAHON:** One of the key points from your submission is that remanding of children and adults in custodial settings should be used only as a last resort. This is obviously a big issue that we are talking about here in Queensland. You have outlined a body of work and evidence that indicates that incarceration does not reduce offending behaviour generally. What options should we be looking at if it is not a custodial sentence, given that we have heard a lot of victims of crime talk about consequences for behaviour and there is a lot of appetite for people, including young children, being locked up because of the seriousness? How do we strike that balance between community safety, victims of crime expectations and the fact that ultimately custodial sentences do not work?

**Dr Sotiri:** I think that is the crux of it, isn't it? I am glad that we are at that pointy end. Firstly, victims' voices should be and have to be a critical part of this conversation. Of course, there is a diversity of views. Community safety should absolutely be central to what we are talking about. What most of the victims we have had conversations with—we have victims' representatives as some of our patrons as well—say very clearly, regardless of where victims are coming from and what their experiences are, is that they do not want what happened to them to happen to somebody else. When we are thinking about policy, that must be at the centre of what it is we are talking about. Although the Justice Reform Initiative is not an abolitionist organisation—we are saying that there is a role for incarceration—we are saying that for so many, children especially, it actually makes the community less safe, quite aside from the harms that it causes to the children and to their communities.

I know there are lots of ideas in Queensland around, for instance, 24-hour healing centres. We need youth services that are funded 24 hours that operate outside of the PCYCs. As fantastic as the PCYCs are, we need resources in communities so that services that at the moment are operating on the smell of an oily rag are able to do the things they need to do. We need to think about alternative detention models, but we also need to think about alternative systems that at the moment we just have not invested in. We are very good at investing in building new prisons because we know how to do that and we are habituated to it. What we in the Justice Reform Initiative are hoping is that the Queensland government and this committee really do zoom out in terms of the need for significant investment in the kinds of programs that work. It is difficult and it is piecemeal, because it is not all just one big program that is going to make the difference. It requires lots of different things at lots of different points—zero to five, five to 12, and 12 to 18. We need (indistinct) kids all along that trajectory and we also need stuff when people come out of prison.

I would never presume to speak on behalf of victims, but, from my own experience and my own interaction with a lot of victims—we get a lot of contact through our website and through the work that we do with people who have experienced terrible crime and we have different opinions about what should or could happen—there is this theme. That is, most victims I have spoken to say very clearly that they do not want what has happened to them to happen to other people. From the perspective of the Justice Reform Initiative, we know that prison makes it more likely, not less likely, that somebody will reoffend—prison as we currently do it, I should say.

**CHAIR:** I realise that we have run out of time. I have a lot of questions, but I will constrain myself to a couple. You have mentioned models in Hawaii and Spain. Not only is Queensland vast in size but also it is culturally vastly different from both of those areas. When we have been travelling regionally we have heard constantly that it has to be community-led and place-based. Everywhere we have travelled, there are capacities in some areas and not in others. In terms of the vastness of Queensland, one example is the differences between Indigenous clans or mobs and that programs taking place in certain areas do not consider that people are not on their own country so it is really



not connecting them. If that is already an issue, how do we then do a community-led, place-based residential facility across Queensland, because you are not talking about five or six but hundreds? Have you seen any model that has worked in Queensland that could be expanded with a residential component that is actually logistically possible?

**Dr Sotiri:** No, I do not know what model to point to in that, but I would say that we are not suggesting one be a residential setting for people on remand. I totally agree with the point you make about Queensland being unique in terms of geography, workforce, culture—a whole range of things—but in a way that means we can gain inspiration from other places, but we are going to need to back ourselves when we look at what will actually work. I guess that idea of having smaller bail support programs and lots of different places might be something that could be considered. Rather than it being one big thing, you should look at where those sorts of supports might be. Also, as a number of people outlined, it is about looking at where some of those place-based programs are working and really talking to the communities around what is and is not working. I will throw to Aysha, because I think she has lots move direct interaction with that particular issue.

**Ms Kerr:** One of the important things for me would be capacity building and also mobilising communities so that it is a whole-of-community approach. I know that for many First Nations communities often resources are quite slim, and the way that organisations are funded means they are constantly dedicating resources to applying for multiple different grant applications and all of the administrative tasks that come along with that. There is capacity building and support that could happen in that space.

In terms of mobilising communities, one of the models we spoke about in our report is the Communities That Care model. The way that works is by bringing different stakeholders together in a place to come up with solutions. They are not only coming up with those solutions but also implementing and evaluating those solutions alongside experts—they might be people from academics as well—to ensure they are evidence-based and they are going to work. That model has been implemented in Victoria and has been shown to reduce crime at the population level by two per cent to five per cent. Within my own First Nations community, there is a similar community collective that has been established. It has representatives from Police, Education and Youth Justice but also the local Aboriginal services, local community members and the local elders. Together we are able to pool resources and come up with solutions that are going to work for our communities. I know that other communities across Queensland are working in this way as well and are starting to form collectives as part of the National Justice Reinvestment Program that has funded this work to occur in communities. I think it really is a whole-of-community approach and it requires everyone and all supports and resources.

**CHAIR:** How can government help facilitate that? If you need it to be community-led, why do we not have a lot already springing up everywhere?

**Dr Sotiri:** I think there is a significant resourcing issue.

**CHAIR:** Resources for which particularly, if you are coming together?

**Ms Kerr:** I think resourcing communities in a long-term, sustainable way so that they can come up with place-based solutions and implement those solutions that will work within that community. Often within communities, programs might be funded for a 12-month pilot program, and communities spend all of this time preparing applications, getting the funding, developing the program, implementing the program and then after the 12 months the funding is discontinued and then communities have to keep going through that process. That can be really challenging in terms of implementing sustainable and enduring programs.

**CHAIR:** I am hearing you. I understand where you are coming from. I will write my further questions to you because I realise the time. I want to thank you both so much not only for the work that you do but also for the submission, which was so extensive, listing literally every program and everything that occurs. It was excellent. I want to thank you so much and wish you all the best for the coming months.

**ACKERMAN, Ms Michelle, Director, Youth Off the Streets**

**MARGERISON, Ms Amanda, Chief Executive Officer, Ipswich Community Youth Service**

**CHAIR:** Welcome. I invite you to make an opening statement and then we will ask some questions.

**Ms Margerison:** Good afternoon. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting here today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the room today and watching online and thank you for your continued guidance of our work in particular with our young people.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to inform the committee's inquiry into youth justice reform in Queensland. My name is Amanda Margerison and I am the proud CEO at ICYS, Ipswich Community Youth Service. As a multi-service organisation funded by four Queensland government departments and 17 partner schools, ICYS is uniquely positioned to provide a continuum of support, utilising a step-up step-down model of intervention to ensure children and young people and their families have streamlined access to the right support when they need it and as their needs change. We empower young people to make positive choices and decisions for their futures.

Each year, ICYS provides direct services to over 3,000 children and young people across six local government areas—Ipswich, Somerset, Lockyer Valley, Scenic Rim, the western suburbs of Brisbane and, most recently, Logan—from our three offices in Ipswich and Lowood. My team of 45 professionals provide support and assistance working alongside children and young people with a focus on individual needs, including assistance with educational engagement, housing and homelessness, vocational training, employment, crime prevention and intervention, after-hours street outreach, information, referral, practical assistance and prosocial activities six days and four nights a week. Our breadth of services allows integration across program areas within our organisation and across the sector to increase collaboration to achieve holistic support of young people.

ICYS is a key connector in our community, chairing the local Ipswich and West Moreton youth interagency meetings, attended by upwards of 70 stakeholders each month, representing local, state and federal agencies, government departments, community organisations and schools.

I follow state politics with keen interest and I applaud the committee's bipartisan approach to this inquiry. ICYS is a provider of services in a number of your electorates—member for Lockyer, member for Mount Ommaney—and I stalk the rest of you. The opportunity we all hold to create an impact is not lost on me, and I look forward to the conversation with you all today.

I acknowledge that the current dialogue and public interest in youth justice crime prevention and intervention is complex and layered and at its core involves children and young people who have fallen through the cracks in a social system that is not set up to support them. Amongst all the noise, those at the centre of this review are children and young people who have experienced a number of adverse childhood experiences in their short lifetime, a significant number who have had Child Safety engagement and even more that are known to Child Safety. Approximately half are disengaged from school, many for a number of years. Intergenerational trauma and family breakdown is common. First Nations young people are grossly over-represented in the youth justice system. We owe it to these children and all future children to make this review count.

In our 40 years of operation and my 19 years at ICYS, 14 years of those as CEO, we have seen funding come and go, policies shift and changes of government. We draw on this experience to inform our submission.

Our written submission shares the voices of frontline staff and young people focusing on five recommendations. Consistent with our holistic support of young people, our submission outlines five holistic opportunities to strengthen outcomes for young people engaging in youth offending or on a pathway to. One: increase funding to mid-tier intervention programs. Underpinned by the pillar of intervening early, the Queensland government must consider redirecting funds from punitive, costly measures to increasing funding to mid-tier support services, especially in high-growth areas. Assessments of where and how public moneys are currently being utilised in specific communities is paramount. The opportunity exists to increase funding to mid-tier youth support services to increase capacity to address the needs of young people and divert them from ever entering the youth justice system and allow continued post intervention support up to the age of 21.

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Two: revisit the previous youth support coordinator model, utilising community-based workers, with a renewed focus on early intervention crime prevention. We are particularly passionate about this recommendation due to our 27-year continued partnerships with local schools and the impact this program has on young people enrolled in our partner schools. Opportunities exist for the current YSC initiative to revert to utilising NGO staff in all YSC funded schools and to shift its primary focus to young people at risk of offending by addressing the many social indicators of risk.

Three: introduce locally-led multi-stakeholder panels for young people who are not yet entrenched in youth offending. To divert young people from a pathway of offending, it is imperative to have the right organisations around the table at an early stage. It is too late when there is already a serious repeat offender declaration against them. These could be established when key decisions are being made that place young people at risk of offending—for example, school suspensions and exclusions. The opportunity exists to have MACP style panels to support early intervention decisions; however, from our experience, this would need to be a requirement and not an option.

Four: fund transition back-to-school literacy and reading programs embedded in community-based organisations to prepare young people to re-engage in school. We have had significant outcomes utilising this model over the past few years. Education is a human right, and the opportunity exists to explore successful alternative options for young people who are not yet ready for flexi or mainstream schooling, who may be awaiting enrolment in a flexi or mainstream school and who require literacy and numeracy upskilling.

Five: implement statewide support and training models for sector workers. It is essential that structures and systems are put in place to enhance the sector's capacity to address the growing needs of service users, especially when it comes to children and young people being diverted from tertiary interventions such as police, courts and youth justice. The opportunity exists to strengthen the sector's capacity to support and divert children and young people from tertiary interventions.

These opportunities are expanded further within our written submission, and I welcome the opportunity to speak further about these recommendations either here today or with relevant ministers and shadow ministers after today's session.

**CHAIR:** Michelle, would you like to give an opening statement?

**Ms Ackerman:** My name is Michelle Ackerman and I am the director of youth support services for Youth off the Streets. Youth off the Streets has been working in the Logan community for over 12 years and more broadly across New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria for 30 years. We welcome the invitation from the select committee to appear today to share our evidence. For over 30 years we have provided early intervention, prevention, crisis and post-crisis support to children and young people aged from 12, their families and communities. Our work has provided a significant evidence base to inform and improve our operational responses as well as our systems analysis. Central to our evidence base are the voices of children and young people. Their stories and those of their families reflect the trauma, racism, disadvantage, barriers and injustices they have experienced throughout their young lives. Their stories reflect and highlight the failings of our systems, legislation, social policy and investment priorities, yet, importantly, their stories also reflect their strength and resilience and their openness to opportunities for change.

The six recommendations Youth off the Streets detailed in our submission were based on this evidence and the evidence from the sector—evidence that clearly demonstrates the causative links between cultural heritage, socio-economic position and adverse childhood experiences to connection to the justice system. Our systems and social structures view cultural heritage purely as a risk factor. As a result, we have missed significant opportunities to recognise and strengthen the protective factors that connection to culture and traditional practices provide. Our systems and social structures place a higher value on punitive actions and consequences over recognising the collective intergenerational trauma that permeates many of our communities and the individuals within them.

If as a society we agree that no child is born inherently bad or lawbreaking by nature, it is imperative that we examine and address the causative factors that act as a catalyst to any social behaviour and connection to the justice system. The voices of children and young people tell us that these factors include personal circumstances and significant lack of opportunities for age and culturally appropriate supports for health, wellbeing, safety, housing, education and training pathways to name a few—similar to what Amanda has identified.

We must adopt a narrative lens in the process of system reform and development. We must start to look at the behaviour and the system failures, not the individual child or young person as the problem we need to work collectively to solve. We must balance accountability with a genuine understanding of trauma and its impacts on behaviour.

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Youth off the Streets also submits that we must take an holistic and aligned approach across our systems and funding initiatives, bringing all levels of government, non-government and community together to share collective wisdom; actively seek evidence from other jurisdictions, both nationally and internationally, to inform our system designs, celebrating innovation while also valuing the tried and true community response; actively engage children and young people, families and communities in policy and funding development, recognising them as the experts in their lives and communities; and look past political terms in our horizon planning, building foundations for long-term sustainable change based on outcomes and impact imperatives and cost reductions. Right now the question we must ask ourselves is: are these children and young people hard to reach or are we just using the wrong tools?

**Mr McDONALD:** Thank you very much, ladies, for being here. It is great to see you again, Amanda. Thank you for the work that that you do in our community. One of the things that was highlighted to me when I read your submission was the lack of the increase in funding over the last 20 years. Can you talk to us about that, particularly where you are in the Ipswich region? It is one of the fastest growing regions by the ABS data.

**Ms Margerison:** Absolutely. It is probably relevant to a lot of communities across the state. Youth support services are located in 87 locations across Queensland—what we would refer to as mid-tier support services in that they capture a lot of young people who are not currently engaged in school and not linked to employment, have cultural disconnection, disconnection from family, so sort of that mid-range of young people. We are definitely not the only service that would provide that level of support, but if we are talking about a statewide model there are 87 of those services located around the state.

In Ipswich, for example, we just ticked over 250,000 residents. The funding for Ipswich youth support services has not increased in over 20 years. However, in the past 16 years there have been 108,000 new residents for Ipswich, which is a 43 per cent increase in that community. Of those 250,000 residents, 37 per cent are young people under the age of 25. There is a large number of young people that we are needing to support, but there is no additional funding so we are having to do the same amount of work supporting more young people.

When we are looking at Lockyer Somerset, we were grateful to receive a funding injection in 2015 due to the rapid growth in those communities; however, those communities have grown again. I think when looking at resourcing communities to deliver supports to young people, whether that is mid-tier or high-end, pointy young people, we need to be looking at whether the investment is keeping up with growth and not just growth. In some of the communities you represent it is probably complexity, not necessarily growth. So is the growth in numbers or is the growth in complexity? They are probably two different things that need to be looked at.

**Mr HARPER:** Thank you both for being here today and your opening statements. Amanda, thank you for following state politics. I still get asked, 'How is Canberra?' The reality is that, with violent crimes, some people just do not care about people's background; they just want to feel safe in the community. I can see that all of the work you have done over those many years in your own communities makes a difference in that early intervention. You mentioned funding. I think I read data recently of \$500 million since 2017-18 into all of those programs. In fact, the previous submitters listed about 50 programs that are running. How much more do we need? That is the first thing. Secondly, is it all on the state? Over those 20 years you have been operating, the federal government also has a community safety fund. Do you receive any community safety funding for any of those programs that you desperately want to bring into your communities? It is open to both of you to respond.

**Ms Margerison:** We receive federal funding through our homelessness programs. Funding comes from the feds to the state. Yes, I would agree that there has been investment from the state government into services for young people. I think where that funding is being directed probably is where I would see it might not be being directed at the right places. If I give an example of that, and I do this cautiously because we have such great partnerships with our schools. As I said, we have been working in three of our local high schools for almost 20 years, one of them for over 27 years—Ipswich State High School. They can choose to employ their own youth support coordinator but they choose to partner with us, so I say this cautiously.

There are large amounts of money currently going into schools. There is an assumption that all young people access schools. That does not happen. School funding is only relevant where young people are attending, and school funding is only relevant generally 40 weeks of the year. We talk about 12 weeks of the year which are often the most high risk for our children and young people

because they are in environments that are often unsafe for the young people we are talking about, and also they do not have that safety network and structure of support that schools provide. Attending school is one of the biggest protective factors for young people not entering the youth justice system. While I welcome, and I am sure schools welcome, the services that are going into schools—and, yes, we would agree they are needed—if funding is only going into schools, you are disadvantaging a large number of children and young people who are not able to access those services.

**Ms Ackerman:** Youth off the Streets has received federal funding for about eight years of our tenure up in Queensland. Currently we are unfunded. We have been funding our youth justice response in Logan for over 12 months through Youth off the Streets donations and corporate sponsors because we recognise the need there. We were successful in the Community Innovation Fund grants, and that has been running for the last eight months. That will end in June. It is a school suspension and disengagement program—early intervention—and we are achieving some fantastic outcomes for the young people engaged in that program. But that funding will stop. As Amanda said, the funding comes, there are pilot projects, they have great outcomes, they are evaluated, they demonstrate the benefit, they are never funded again and the community has to come up with yet another innovative idea. I guess that is why in my opening statement I said that, yes, we need to champion innovation but we also need to champion the tried and true programs that we know work and that the community have significant buy-in in.

**Mr LISTER:** Thank you very much for coming in today and for your work in the community. It is great to see that you have been involved in that for so long. Regarding your submission, you have said that the age of criminal responsibility should be raised to 14 years and that offenders aged between 14 and 16 should not be placed in custody or detention, that there should be therapeutic interventions only. I was very impressed by what you said before. You talked about long-term, sustainable change—I have not met anyone who disagrees with that—and the links between disadvantage and trauma and later exposure to the youth justice system. What do you say to people, for instance in Goondiwindi in my electorate, who agree with the need to intervene but are concerned that the long-term, sustainable change without incarcerating offenders means that they have to tolerate crime night after night—the home invasions and the car thefts and the assaults and so forth? Can you suggest what a balance might be to try to provide that community safety by restraining the offenders and giving them the therapeutic intervention that you talk about?

**Ms Ackerman:** I will make reference to my esteemed colleagues from the Justice Reform Initiative. Detention as we know it does not work. That is very clear. Our submission is very much pointing and wanting the government to look at alternatives to that. Again, that ‘alternative’ word can be a little bit deceiving sometimes. There are models that work that are running in other jurisdictions. We need to provide a therapeutic response that takes young people off the streets and gives them a safe environment to start to address those underlying personal traumas that they have experienced. That therapeutic, small, home-based environment is the best outcome for young people to build those skill sets and to start to change their patterns of behaviour and how they then engage in the community.

There is no one way. There is no one answer to this. It is about making sure that we have a systemic movement, a systems approach, that looks at the different opportunities across different locations because place based is really important. What is going to work in Brisbane is not going to work in Goondiwindi. It is about recognising that and bringing in your local communities to develop the most appropriate response for that community and it is definitely about resourcing.

**Mrs McMAHON:** I have two questions and the first is directed at Ipswich Community Youth Service. The school question is certainly one that I have heard. I note you said earlier that school is a useful vehicle for driving things but only when people are actually attending schools. I am wondering about the role of the alternative schools, the BUSY schools and the flexible schools, noting that they still generally only aim at the high school cohort. Having spoken to a lot of my principals over the past couple of weeks, they are noticing serious school refusal and disengagement in grades 2 and 3 post pandemic. That does not bode well for the future if we have grades 2 and 3 children already disengaged. What kind of model could we be looking at or should we be looking at for the primary school cohort? If we lose them in primary school, we have really very little hope of picking them up in high school. In terms of delivering in schools, most of what we do is in high schools. What do we need to be doing in the primary school space?

**Ms Margerison:** Probably what we are doing in the high school space but for a younger cohort. There are some fantastic schools in our community that really understand the value of partnering with community-based organisations. As community-based organisations, we have such strong networks

and understand how to navigate service systems. While I am not discounting that schools can do that, they are education facilities. While they may employ a range of service providers, we can get the most value out of those school-based service providers if they partner with community-based organisations to deliver services.

I referenced the youth support coordinator model in my application. I am very passionate about that. I will say up-front that I am the last person who looks backwards to go forwards. If someone says to me, 'But we have always done it this way so we have to keep doing it this way,' that is a bit of a trigger for me; it is a bit of a challenge. However, the youth support coordinator model works. The model has community-based organisation staff embedded in school systems. They provide a conduit between the schools and the limitations that they have with regard to providing supports to their students and families. Not only that; the conduit link is embedded in a community-based organisation that itself, when you are talking about an organisation like ICYS, has housing and homelessness services, has employment services, has training services, has crime prevention, intervention and street outreach that is going out to the communities where the schools are located. Children and young people see a friendly logo on a shirt and they do not care who that person is. There is trust that is built in an organisational framework. That model works.

When the model changed at the start of 2014, schools could choose to employ their own youth support coordinator or they could outsource that to a community-based organisation. It costs more to run it through a community-based organisation, I will be honest, because we provide things like vehicles so that we can do home visits. We can transport young people to access essential services. We can take them to dentists, eye appointments, mental health appointments. Those are all barriers to young people's engagement in learning. We will be the first to ensure young people are at school where they are needed, but if they are at school and they are not achieving or succeeding then sometimes it is about focusing on the barriers that are impacting on their succeeding and achieving.

The same structure could exist in primary schools. We have staff based in 12 primary schools currently. It is through the national chaplaincy and student wellbeing worker funding. \$20,000 a year pays for 8½ hours a week. That is not enough funding. The state government does provide funding for school youth workers. The state government does provide the student wellbeing packages that employ social workers, psychiatrists, the GPs in Schools model and all of those, again, for 40 weeks of the year. Our youth support coordinators work during the school break. They continue to provide support to students and families and they not only provide direct support to them but also link them into other connected services that exist in our community. It is a joined-up, connected, integrated approach that works.

There were evaluations done. The program ran in that iteration from 1997 through to 2013. It started as a homelessness intervention program, due to rising rates of youth homelessness. It then moved with the ETRF initiatives around earning, learning and achieving at school. I see no reason why that program model and logic cannot change to start focusing on crime prevention and intervention.

**Mrs McMAHON:** My second question is around custody. Michelle, in your submission you state that watch houses are unsuitable for any child or young person. I do not think anyone here would disagree with that. I spent time as the watch house sergeant at Richlands. Believe me when I say that police do not want young people and juveniles in a watch house, even if it is just for risk-averse reasons. In your submission you highlighted the New South Wales Bail and Accommodation Support Service. Could you tell me a bit about that? What does that look like as an alternative when the police have a young person but there is no suitable adult to give a notice to appear to or to release the young person into the custody of and, therefore, the watch house is the only suitable supervision? What does this alternative to a watch house look like?

**Ms Ackerman:** New South Wales has a similar population in terms of the cohort that is being held on remand, with around 90 per cent being held because they are experiencing homelessness or have nowhere to be bailed to. With the BASS program, the department of youth justice works with the youth specialist homelessness services. That program can provide linkages for a young person who meets the criteria to be housed in a crisis accommodation service for a period of up to three months. The BASS program will pay for additional staff to be on in the SHS crisis accommodation service so that there is an appropriate staff-to-young-person ratio because, obviously, there are additional risks. The young person, while they are in that program, will receive the same support as any other young person accessing a specialist homelessness service that we work with around their housing, their family integration, schooling, employment, financial management, capacity building et cetera.

**Mrs McMAHON:** Is it that the young person in custody is released into the care of this organisation?

**Ms Ackerman:** The young person is released into the care of Youth Justice and then Youth Justice provides the direction for the young person to remain there. In that system we have found that when there is complete compliance and they are bailed to the SHS provider it breaks down incredibly quickly. Challenging behaviours arise more often in the environment because young people feel like their self-determination and choice has been completely taken away from them. When they are bailed to Youth Justice but with a direction to reside at the 24/7, they engage much more positively.

**Mrs McMAHON:** That response is a 24/7 response? It is not that they get brought in at 10 o'clock at night and they will have to stay in there until the morning?

**Ms Ackerman:** It depends on vacancies, unfortunately, while the funding is there. They have not funded it very well so it certainly needs expanding. Where there is a 24-hour response, it is obviously a lot easier. The biggest risk is that the crisis accommodation does need to do their own risk assessment and look at what is happening in the crisis environment at that particular point in time. There are times when the SHS cannot take the young person in because the risk factors cannot be mitigated. There are barriers to it, but it is a model that shows potential in us having alternatives to remand in custody or watch houses.

**Mr McDONALD:** We are charged with looking at the whole system. I am sorry, Michelle: I am talking to Amanda again because I know the program and I understand the gaps. We have done some work on mapping. You failed to mention the leadership of organisations like yours. Some of the best communities in the world are those that help themselves, so that leadership and coordination is vitally important. I am really interested in the intersection with Education and Child Safety—coming into the system and seeing these kids picked up and registered in schools and attending schools. Can you talk to us about the gaps in that area so that we can make sure those kids are meaningfully engaged, whether it be in schools, in on-country programs or whatever?

**Ms Margerison:** I am not a child protection specialist, but I am happy to speak to that within the scope of my knowledge and role. We talk about young people in care. A lot of the time they are so disconnected and young people just want to be connected. School plays such a pivotal role for young people. It is where they form their social norms. A real example of that is: we have been providing our numeracy and literacy programs for young people who are significantly disengaged from school. Being asked what school you go to is a pretty normal question for a young person. You meet someone and you say, 'What school do you go to?' For young people who cannot answer that, it is very isolating. It further isolates them. With our young people, they were so proud to tell people they are going to the ICYS school. If that does not scream that kids want to go to school then I am not sure what does. We are far from a school but they want connection.

Any young person in care has huge challenges. They are in care for a reason. They have had a traumatic background. They have experienced neglect and abuse far beyond what we would ever care to think about. These are young people who need extra wrapped around them and probably more so. That is why it is so much more imperative to ensure that schools have multidisciplinary approaches and are connected. Some schools do that extremely well. Schools that understand the value of how they can leverage off other funding and other services in their community actually get so much more value for their dollar. There are other schools that will not open their doors to an external agency to come in and provide supports. The only people who miss out there are the children and young people.

**Ms Ackerman:** Youth off the Streets actually run six independent accredited schools in New South Wales with the same experience. Those young people cannot meet the criteria around the mainstream education system but they want that alternative. They want that opportunity to learn and to grow and to change. It is vitally important that that is resourced appropriately and there is that community connection and place-based response. Community is embedded in the environment. That is where the outcomes really are shown.

**Ms Margerison:** We did have a radio piece and I have put the links in the submission. It is a radio and a written ABC story with the voices of many young people throughout those. It is really fascinating to listen to.

**CHAIR:** During the hearings some of the other organisations have said that there are no programs anywhere for the eight- to 10-year-old group. There is nothing; is that correct?

**Ms Ackerman:** That is a bit of a black hole, from my understanding. I can only speak to Logan, because that is the area where we provide services up here. We do an outreach program every Wednesday afternoon. That is open to children and young people aged 12 to 25. As you can imagine,

their younger siblings often come along with them. While we do not directly provide services to them, we are building relationships with that younger cohort so that we can start to address things earlier if things are happening. That is such a critical point. It is about identifying early the family risks and the indicators that are happening and having early screening opportunities.

There was a question around what we do for the primary school age group. Amanda's response was 'the same for the high school'. That is exactly right. If you look at those young people, they probably have older siblings who have been through school refusal and are demonstrating some of those procedural learning elements based on their trauma. It is about looking at a family unit. We cannot just respond to the young person; we need to look at the whole family holistically. Those younger cohorts are watching their older siblings and their behaviours and learning from that. It is really important that we engage as early as possible.

**Ms Margerison:** I will just add that the state-funded youth support services, which do exist in those 87 locations around the state, are tailored to support 12- to 21-year-olds and eight- to 11-year-olds where they have an older sibling who is engaged in the service. Where they have a 12- to 21-year-old older sibling, we can, under the guidelines, support eight- to 11-year-olds.

**CHAIR:** So it is funding guidelines that set those ages?

**Ms Margerison:** That is right.

**CHAIR:** If the eight-year-old is the first to be the offender, there is no funding set for that age group?

**Ms Margerison:** We can sometimes be creative because the reality is that they would have some connection, whether that is an older sibling, cousin or kin contact that is likely engaging.

**Ms Ackerman:** It is a challenge. Obviously there is greater complexity for child protection requirements for that age group. It makes it difficult for services to do that as well as cover our own insurance and risk mitigation strategies.

**CHAIR:** The other matter you would have heard us talk about is around consent and mandating programs and assistance much earlier. At the moment there has to be consent. On the one hand, we are told that a child does not have the capacity to acknowledge some of the responsibility of their actions but then we are told that they need to have choice. You said, Michelle, that they are experts in their own lives. Even if they have been making many bad choices for themselves, doesn't there come a point when, before detention or courts, there should be a space where it is a mandated so they do not get to that point in courts?

**Ms Ackerman:** As I said before, there are different versions of that and there need to be different versions of that—for example, the bail assistance program. It clearly demonstrates that young people who make the choice to be there and are not mandated to be there work better in that environment. It is as simple as that because they feel a sense of self-determination. There is always going to have to be different levels of that. There will need to be mandated points in time where a young person will need to have an alternative incarceration or incarceration. It is about how we then deal with that young person and work with that young person to get a better outcome, rather than it just be that they are in detention and that is the end of it: 'We have fixed everything and you are going to come back out and everything will be fine.' That is not what is happening. We need to make sure that we have the appropriate programs and that we are looking at trauma informed responses, not just punitive responses.

**CHAIR:** The elephant in the room which we have not heard a lot about is that there is a proportion of young people who will need assistance for life. There is not going to be a program or some of the alternatives that have been spoken about that will work. The phrase 'secure mental health facilities' has been raised. What are your thoughts there? No-one seems to really want to talk about it.

**Ms Ackerman:** I will let you take that one.

**CHAIR:** I think it is really important that we do talk about it.

**Ms Margerison:** Yes. It can sometimes be an unpopular opinion in the sector around incarcerating young people. If you are talking about young people who are at risk to themselves at times, especially young people who are high substance users, sometimes we can have the best clarity with these young people when they are in detention. I am not saying that that is why we would put them in detention or that we continue to do that. That is our option at the moment. I am not saying that is the continued option. Sometimes intervention that we can have with young people while they are sober can commence discussions around how they reintegrate once they are out in community.



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In terms of other institutions, I would like to think that we would first look at community-based models and whether community-based models are appropriately funded. At the moment we make assumptions that all our government departments are fully resourced with staffing. We make assumptions that our community-based organisations are fully resourced and that there is enough workforce coming through with the appropriate skills. If I look back to when I started in the sector—I will not tell you, but it was pushing 25 years ago—the complexities we are seeing now are tenfold what we were seeing back then.

It is not just about how we resource; it is about how we continue to upskill the current sector. When I speak with some of my staff, they talk about the fact that in other services—this is not a criticism; this is the reality—not everyone has the skills to work with these young people. How can we ensure that we can upskill the service sector to ensure that, regardless of where a young person is accessing support around the state, regardless of where they turn up, they have consistent service? They are transient.

Years ago there was embedded funding within our budgets for practice development. The state government or peak bodies ran statewide sector meet-ups, training and practice forums to ensure those services were delivering the same service in Cooktown as they were in Coolangatta. That is really important. That funding no longer exists within budgets. It is being eroded by the high costs of running our programs, including insurances, fuel and other costs. We would prioritise expenditure on a young person over the expenditure on staff upskilling. That is probably the reality.

We should revisit why it was in budgets 20 or 15 years ago that staff could access statewide training relevant to their funded programs and their program logic and access external supervision to ensure we do not burn them out. That does not exist in our budgets anymore. I think what that means is that we are losing really good workers from the sector. The injection of funding into our government organisations is meaning that we are losing good community sector workers through our government organisations. There was a question earlier. I am not always convinced that state government services are the best services to be delivering social services to our children and young people because straightaway there is a target there.

**CHAIR:** Yes. We have had a lot of comments through this inquiry that with funded programs there does not seem to be a performance model or indicators as to what success looks like. From our understanding, with a lot of interventions with the lower level offending, it is hard to measure because they do not go on to commit the crimes. It is not something you can say, 'We stopped another 5,000 from becoming serious repeat offenders.' How do you develop a model to assess whether a program is successful? I have heard you both say that it works so well but how do you assess that?

**Ms Ackerman:** Social impact measurement is tricky and it is something that the sector is starting to move into. From an early intervention perspective it is definitely difficult, but it is about building the mechanisms across the short term, medium term and long term and looking at the cost-benefit ratios across the different sectors that you are working with. It is a bit of a numbers game because you cannot collect that data across multiple data points with those young people. You can definitely keep numbers in terms of access to other specific services so that you can capture 'this number of young people were serviced here'. It is difficult to prove the intervention, but what is the cost saving in this space? What has been the reduction in access to these different systems? I think there is a lot of sophistication starting to come from the social impact services sector.

**CHAIR:** Does that include tracking? For somebody who has gone through a program, how do you know that one year on or two years on they have not offended? Is that about information sharing? How do you know?

**Ms Ackerman:** One of the biggest challenges is that we never have that real-time, point-in-time data and we are constantly working with data that is 10, five or two years old. By the time that comes out, it is already irrelevant to us. It really is about building those data systems and knowledge sharing that is really essential. I think there has been some great work done in the homelessness space around that. With Advance to Zero and the data mechanisms they are using to try to track those young people experiencing rough sleeping across not just Australia but also international, they have some really sophisticated systems.

**CHAIR:** I and the whole committee want to thank you both for your time. It has been invaluable. If we have any further questions, which I am sure we do—we always do—do you mind if we send them through to you?

**Ms Ackerman:** Please do.

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**CHAIR:** Keep up the great work and all the best for the balance of the year. That concludes this public hearing. I want to thank everyone who has participated today but also those who have been here in the gallery. I know that some of you have been here all day. It can be quite exhausting for you. I want to thank our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings today will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. We did not have any questions on notice. I declare this public hearing now closed.

**The committee adjourned at 3.56 pm.**