Youth Justice Reform Select Committee inquiry into youth justice reform in Queensland

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Submitted by:	Dr Troy Allard and Dr Molly McCarthy
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Griffith Criminology Institute School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Mt Gravatt Campus Griffith University 176 Messines Ridge Road Mt Gravatt QLD 4122 Australia

www.griffith.edu.au

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

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Submission to Inquiry into Youth Justice Reform in Queensland

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute this submission to the Inquiry into Youth Justice Reform in Queensland. We base our submission on decades of research evidence and experience working with criminal justice agencies in Queensland and throughout Australia.

Fewer youth are committing crime than 10 years ago, which is consistent with international trends (McCarthy, 2021; McCarthy, McLaws, Matthews & Allard, 2023). This decline in youth offending appears to be primarily a decline in low-level offending, i.e., young people who are charged with between one to three offences between ages 10 to 17 years (McCarthy, 2021; McCarthy, McLaws, Matthews & Allard, 2023). The number of young people engaged in more chronic (high frequency) offending appears to have grown somewhat, though more notably these young people are offending at a higher rate than in previous cohorts (McCarthy et al., 2023). It is important to note that even with the recent changes to patterns of offending among young people, most young people who have contact with police for offending behaviour are still likely to be engaged in low-level or time-limited offending. However, young people engaged in chronic offending produce a substantial amount of crime, and thus can draw significant police attention and resources. These young people also tend to churn most frequently through youth justice systems, and youth justice systems spend most of their resources on this population of young people (Allard, McCarthy, &

Stewart, 2020). For this reason, we focus our submission on how to reshape responses to cohorts of young people engaged in chronic offending.

We know that this small group of young people (5-10 % of population) who engage in chronic or high frequency offending tend to come from backgrounds of cumulative disadvantage, often have experienced child maltreatment, neglect or trauma, have a high prevalence of diagnosed or undiagnosed cognitive disabilities, are often excluded or disengaged from school at an early age, have become connected to networks of delinquent peers, and that drug and alcohol use can be common among these young people (Allard et al., 2014; Fox et al., 2015; Whitten et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2021; McVilly et al., 2022). In general, these children and young people do not have strong relationships with pro-social adults in their lives.

While the youth justice system deals most frequently with children and young people engaged in chronic offending, it is not well-designed to facilitate desistance and rehabilitation among these cohorts. In fact, it often inadvertently further entrenches young peoples' offending identities, social networks, and skills, and forecloses opportunities for them to develop prosocial and productive futures (Case & Browning, 2021; Gatti et al., 2009; McCarthy et al., 2023; Meuller-Smith, & Schnepel, 2021). As chronic offenders have become the predominant cohort in the youth justice system, high recidivism rates for youth justice cohorts not only in Queensland but in other states of Australia (see Armytage & Ogloff, 2017) more clearly exposes the lack of effectiveness of traditional youth justice responses in prompting desistance among these young people progressing to a chronic offending pathway, and facilitate greater rates of desistance among those already engaged in chronic offending, drawing on well-established and emerging research evidence. We believe that any government responses should prioritise the components of the justice system that are working well, and invest in new solutions for to support prevention of, and desistance from, chronic offending.

In summary, we believe a continued focus on **police-led diversion** for young people who are engaged in their first few offences or in non-serious or non-violent offences, investments in **place-based prevention initiatives** for communities with high rates of youth offending, and the **development of a new model for community-based desistance interventions** for chronic youth offenders, building on an existing evidence-based model for youth sexual offending in Queensland, could collectively reduce the number of young people progressing to a chronic youth offending trajectory, and could increase desistance among current cohorts of young people engaged in chronic offending. We expand on these recommendations further below.

Diversion

The current suite of youth diversion options in Queensland, consisting primarily of police cautioning, Drug Diversion, and Youth Justice Conferencing, are appropriate and effective diversionary responses from the youth justice system for youth who are within their first few offences and/or less serious offenders. Most young people who have police contact for offending behaviour will only offend one to three times (McCarthy et al. 2023), and a diversionary response is sufficient to ensure that the criminal justice system does not having any lasting criminogenic effects and that these young people will not engage in repeat offending (Case & Browning, 2021; Gatti et al., 2009; McCarthy et al., 2023). This cost-effective response ensures that young people's future opportunities are not foreclosed by mistakes made during their developing years, including some quite serious mistakes.

In a recent study that we conducted using police data from QLD, VIC and NSW (McCarthy et al., 2023), we found that young people who had a higher probability of police-led diversion within their first three offences had a significantly lower overall volume of offending from ages 10 to 17 years, and were more likely to be classified as a low to moderate offender, rather than a chronic offender. In this same study, we also found that the rate of police-led diversion within the first three offences for young people had *declined* from older cohorts to more recent cohorts, and that reduced police-led diversion in the most recent cohort was associated with a higher frequency of offending. Figure 1 below which displays the interaction between cohort (defined by birth year) and the probability of diversion within the first three offences on the total number of offences diverted or prosecuted between ages 10 to 17 years. This shows that across all cohorts, higher levels of police-led diversion within the first three offences were associated with a reduction in total number of offences from ages 10 to 17 years.

This study supports the positive impacts of early diversion on youth offending that have been found in previous studies (Dennison et al., 2006; Payne & Weatherburn, 2015; Wilson & Hoge, 2013). It also indicated that police-led diversion within the first three offences had *decreased* for more recent cohorts of young people across all states. This would suggest that the rate of **police-led diversion may need to be increased** and that it needs to remain a centrepiece of police responses to youth offending, in order to exert downward pressure overall on the volume of youth offending.





In preliminary analyses for our current study, we have found that young people aged 10 to 14 years who engaged in what could be considered a serious offence within their first three offences also display a reduction in offending when these offences are diverted. In this study, we examine debut or strategic offences (see Townsley & Hutchins, 2023; Svensson, 2003), that is initial onset offences by young people that are most commonly associated with a chronic or persistent offending trajectory. Our preliminary analysis across a number of cohorts (born in 1994/95, 1997/98 and 2001/02), and states (QLD, NSW and VIC), indicates that higher levels of police-led diversion for young people aged 10 to 14 years who engage in a first offence classified as debut or strategic offence, namely vehicle theft, robbery, or burglary/break and enter, was associated with a significantly lower volume of overall re-offending in the three years following the initial offence, compared to young people who were not diverted. Figure 2 displays the association of the probability of diversion within the first three offences on re-offending within three years for young people whose initial offence suggests a high risk of a chronic offending trajectory.

We note that these findings are preliminary, and we can provide further information on this study as required. However, given the pertinence of this analysis to the Committee's Terms of Reference, we were keen to provide it as further evidence of the potential benefits of early police-led diversion, even for young people at high risk of chronic offending.



Figure 2: Interaction between the probability of diversion and initial offences that indicate a high-risk of a chronic offending trajectory on reoffending within the following three years [preliminary analysis]

These findings, and the broader evidence base on police-led diversion (Dennison et al., 2006; Payne & Weatherburn, 2015; Wilson & Hoge, 2013), support the substantial benefits of early diversion for reducing the total volume of youth offending and the number of children and young people who end up inadvertently entangled in the youth justice system. These findings also indicate the significant reductions in victimisation and improved community safety that can arise with high levels of diversion within a young person's first three offences. Therefore, we would have concerns about any criminal justice changes that could reduce access to police-led diversion, as the evidence suggests that this will contribute to increasing rates of victimisation and reductions in community safety over the medium to long term. In light of the evidence for diversion, we strongly recommend that police-led diversion remains a centrepiece of police responses for youth crime, particularly within the first few offences and for non-violent or non-serious offending.

Chronic offenders have mixed harm profiles in terms of their offending, and many chronic offenders engage in high frequency but low harm offences which can be suitable for diversion (McCarthy et al., 2021), even when they have a longer offending track record. More intensive 'diversion to' options for young people who have longer offending track records could also assist in supporting their desistance from offending, where associated interventions can be designed to effectively address the drivers of their offending behaviour. **Deferred Prosecution** may be a suitable new diversion model to trial with young people engaged in chronic offending, particularly for non-violent offence charges (Kinsella, Williams & Wong, 2023; Wier, Routledge, Kilili, 2021). Deferred Prosecution models generally involve a person having their prosecution deferred while they complete a community-based case-managed program which runs for about 4 months, and which is designed in collaboration with the individual to address key issues that are contributing to their offending behaviour. Recent trials in the U.K. have shown reductions in reoffending for individuals engaged in Deferred Prosecution pilots, and this model has recently been trialled with young people in England with positive initial findings (Kinsella, Williams & Wong, 2023; Wier, Routledge, Kilili, 2021).

This program has safeguards in terms of compliance, with successful completion of this program leading to charges being dropped, whereas if there is a lack of successful completion or if the individual offends again while on the program, police can then progress to prosecuting the charge. This program can also be completed while a person is on bail. This type of program can provide young people engaged in chronic offending an opportunity to be supported by an appropriate community-based case-manager who can coordinate a range of services to address their identified needs and can assist the young people could be connected to a range of services, including child and youth mental health, family support services, education, welfare, and mentoring services. This type of program would need to engage the young person's family, kin or guardians and be undertaken in their community, where possible. Community health services could be commissioned to deliver this type of case-managed coordinated support. Delivering this type of support from a community-based service will enable the support to be mostly removed from offending compliance and risk frameworks, and enable the young person to be responded to in a holistic, child-focussed manner.

New solutions required to facilitate desistance

While there may be a desire to implement traditional criminal justice solutions involving serious sanctions and detention in light of recent increases in the rate of chronic offending among young people, these are costly band-aid solutions that can appear to promote community safety in the short-term, but will lead to a range of negative unintended and counterproductive impacts in the medium to long term. These responses may result in casting the net wider and further - with more youths in the population identified as offenders, and more offenders being placed on supervision or detention orders – and for longer periods of time. Significant periods of detention (including on remand) can interrupt attachment and bonds to parents, school, and prosocial peers, can undermine educational engagement and achievement, and reduce opportunities for obtaining employment in the short term and over the life-course (Case & Browning, 2021; Gatti et al., 2009; McCarthy et al., 2023; Meuller-Smith, & Schnepel, 2021; Wilson & Hoge, 2013). These detention experiences also strengthen social networks with antisocial peers, and can further consolidate an offending identity for children and young people. Thus, exposing more young people to more frequent detention and serious sanction will lead to the increased criminalisation of a larger number of young people, and will contribute to the foreclosure of opportunities for prosocial and productive futures for more disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in Queensland. This will lead to a larger number of young people progressing to chronic offending trajectories, and greater persistence in offending through to adulthood, further expanding the adult correctional population. Importantly, this will likely mean more First Nations youth will be drawn into the criminal justice system, with life-opportunities further eroded given the criminogenic nature of continued processing through the youth justice system. Moreover, these responses set up intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and offending. Community safety is ultimately undermined by increasing the use of youth detention over the medium and long term.

The unintended criminalising consequences of the youth justice system have been recognised in England and Wales, where strategic reform is focussed on developing a 'Child First' youth justice system. The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales noted in their most recent Strategic Plan (2021-2024) that recognising the needs, capacities, rights and potential of children, and promoting their individual strengths and capacity to develop a pro-social identity, represent the most effective ways to achieve desistance and positive outcomes for justice-involved young people. This strategy recognises the challenges in delivering child first services within traditional youth justice systems, where the focus of youth justice workers is predominantly on risk and compliance, and where discussions often centre around offending behaviour (Case & Browning, 2021). Continual focus on offending behaviour or risks of offending can lead to the inadvertent entrenchment of an offending identity for children and young people whose identity is in a formative and malleable stage, as they increasingly build their self-concept in relation to their offending behaviour. A more entrenched self-concept as an offender can undermine efforts to promote desistance. This offending, compliance and risk focus which is embedded in the youth justice system can make it challenging for workers to shift focus to a whole-of-child response that sees the young person in terms of their capacities and strengths, and enables the establishment of a positive, collaborative relationship with the young person that can assist them in working towards productive and prosocial goals. In England and Wales, the Child First approach has now been embedded in their youth justice case-management approach.

The inadvertent criminalising effects of youth justice systems on disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people means that aside from short-term incapacitation, contact with the youth justice system will often result in increasing recidivism over the medium to long term, which can contribute to increases in

victimisation and reduced community safety. It is also apparent that the threat of detention is no longer a deterrent for a lot of young people engaged in chronic offending. Additionally, high costs are incurred in the repeated processing of chronic youth offenders through the youth justice system, and it has been estimated that 81% of youth justice costs are focussed on chronic youth offenders (Allard, McCarthy & Stewart, 2020). Any annual birth cohort of chronic offenders is estimated to generate in total \$288.5 million (2016-17 Australian dollars) in direct costs to the criminal justice system from ages to 10 to 31 years, and an average of \$149,000 in direct justice system costs per chronic offender over the same ages (Allard, McCarthy & Stewart, 2020).

The ineffectiveness and high costs of traditional youth justice approaches with chronic youth offenders suggest that new approaches that can effectively enable desistance are urgently needed. New approaches will be most successful in supporting desistance where they can engage with young person in their community context, can address a range of needs and challenges a child or young person is facing, can take a strengths-based and whole-of-child approach, and support the adoption of a prosocial identity (Case & Browning, 2021). While often touted as a 'softer' approach, it is often more difficult for young offenders to face and directly tackle the issues in their lives than to serve time on an order.

An alternative to detention that holds offenders accountable for their behaviour and addresses its root causes is exemplified by the **individual-focused field-based desistance treatment** model based on the Griffith Youth Forensic Service (GYFS) model. This model, initially designed for adjudicated youth sexual offenders, is suitable for serious violent youth offenders as well. The model integrates individual, ecological, and situational factors to understand and treat each adolescent's offending behaviour within the context of their development and environment. The model is field-based so operates Queensland-wide including in remote communities, provides multisystemic assessment and treatment interventions to young people, and has a focus on collaborative partnerships including being well linked-in community and government departments. While this model is low cost (<\$25,000/year per youth, 2018), it could be paired with or operate in a modular design with other programs to reduce offending and promote community safety (Allard, Rayment-McHugh, Smith, Smallbone & McKillop, 2015). For example, well designed and funded mentor programs that correctly pair mentee and mentor can be a very powerful way to promote positive change among young people in many contexts (Buck, 2021; Raposa et al., 2019). This type of desistance treatment could be provided as an alternative to detention for young people with adjudicated serious or violent charges, with the young person placed on a community-based order while completing the treatment.

Prevention

The drivers of chronic youth offending are cumulative, occur in multiple domains and can interact with and exacerbate each other. Background factors associated with chronic youth offending include poverty, disadvantage, poor parenting practices, out-of-home-care, family violence and abuse, cognitive and learning disabilities, criminal attitudes and peers, lack of suitable or unstable housing, substance abuse, poor life skills, mental illness, school non-attendance/drop-out, unemployment, excess of unstructured, unsupervised time and boredom (Allard et al., 2014; Basto-Pereira & Farrington, 2022; Fox et al., 2014; McVilly et al., 2022; Whitten et al., 2019).

A wide range of activities and programs can be tailored to the local context and implemented to reduce chronic youth offending in Queensland. Community-based initiatives are best when led by community-based and non-government organisations, as prevention initiatives can then be focussed on addressing some of the key local factors contributing to offending and can engage more fully in developing young people's pro-social identities. While police may play a role as partners in these initiatives, they are not the appropriate lead agency for community-based youth crime prevention initiatives, and young people should feel safe from formal police surveillance when engaged in prevention initiatives.

For communities experiencing higher-rates of offending or particularly types of youth offending, a **placed-based problem-solving approach** can be used to add an additional layer of community safety. This involves experts, community and government working to break down the problem behaviour/s and examine the main domains or areas where it is occurring, such as in the school or family (Allard, Stewart & Manning, 2019; Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh & Smith, 2013; Tilley et al., 2014). The focus is on what can be done to reduce or eliminate the problem, given the specific contextual factors, bringing to bear the body of evidence on crime prevention to design solutions. For example, situational crime prevention may be used to inform the altering of the physical environment to design-out crime, or random 'pulse patrols' may be used to engage the community and increase the risks for youth offenders. It is vital that these projects are conducted in communities with high offence rates to improve community safety. They must be driven by the right leadership and overarching governance (community-led and community-based, with relevant government partners) and have ongoing government funding and support. These types of place-based prevention initiatives could also complement any federally-funded justice reinvestment initiatives that might be occurring in the same communities.

Conclusions

Despite well-meaning effort and investment, the youth justice system is not effectively designed to promote desistance among young people engaged in chronic offending behaviour. This issue is not isolated to Queensland, but is evident in other national and international jurisdictions (Armytage & Ogloff, 2017; Case & Browning, 2021). An increased use of pre-charge diversion for early offences, the introduction of Deferred Prosecution programs to enable diversion of young people with longer offending histories, greater investment in place-based prevention initiatives, and the introduction of a new specialised field-based desistance support model, could collectively reduce the number of young people progressing to chronic offending behaviour, and increase successful desistance efforts among those already engaged in chronic offending behaviour. These kinds of responses could prevent offending behaviours from occurring and more effectively address the complex underlying drivers of chronic youth offending through a whole-of-child, strengths-based framework. These types of initiatives have the potential to effectively reduce victimisation and improving community safety in Queensland over the medium and long term.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. We look forward to appearing at the hearing to discuss the evidence-base further and ways that community safety can be enhanced through the reduction of serious and persistent youth offending in Queensland.

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

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