

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

Submission No: 39
Submitted by: Queensland African Communities Council
Publication:
Attachments: No attachment
Submitter Comments:

5 December 2023



Youth Justice Reform Select Committee

Parliament House

George Street

Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Committee,

Submission: Youth Justice Reform in Queensland

On behalf of the African Youth Support Council (AYSC) – an independent specialised community youth agency under the Queensland African Communities Council (QACC) – the umbrella organisation that represents more than 80,000 people and organisations of African descent residing in Queensland, I make the following submission in the attachment for the Youth Justice Reform in Queensland.

Sincerely


Beny Bol OAM

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“Australian identities crisis’ are playing out in the absence of leadership. When will a white Australian political leader own these youth as our own and squarely face the challenges they endure and make clear the high expectations their country has of them? That they have rights and responsibilities, as surely as everyone else? That we want from them the best habits of their heritage and to avoid the worst of ours, so they can own the future as much as Australian youth of Aboriginal, Asian or European heritage? There is nothing to be gained from trying to hector people to deny a layer of their identity in the name of shared nationhood, especially if that identity has been denied dignity and respect. Similarly there is nothing to be gained from making one part of our identity the only thing that matters, and in the process denying and denigrating other parts, not least our common citizenship,”

Noel Pearson, The Australian Newspaper, 25 January 2019.

“Compromised attachment takes place when there is disconnection from primary attachments such as important figures in the child’s life like parents, teachers, extended family, guardians and other role models. The consequence of this is that similar compromised attachment is passed on by the child to the next generations and future relationships hence producing intergenerational disadvantage. The children need to know that the “love and support of their primary carers is there in a predictable and consistent way. Children disconnected from those key figures tend to develop self-loathing alongside the feeling that they have nothing to lose and that means they “no longer fear anything including committing crime and going to prison,”

Dr Tracey Westerman

“It takes a village to raise a child.” Most people are very familiar with the concept “it takes a village to raise a child.” But probably not many people know what this actually means in real practical terms when it comes to raising a child within the context of the African community.

Culturally and traditionally, majority of African people believe that a child belongs to everyone in the community. If a child does something great, everyone takes pride in that, celebrate and use it to encourage and motivate other children to do the same. Equally, everybody in the community or village has a moral obligation to contribute to the upbringing of a child regardless of whether they relate to them or not. As a child, you would grow up knowing that this is the norm and one of the key customary principles and values of raising children in the village.

We believe some of our parents residing in the Western world still value the concept of “it takes a village to raise a child” approach. The question is how you would apply this concept in our current situation in Queensland or Australia. Most parents and community’s members complain a lot privately about the system that is disempowering them as they allegedly believe children are misusing the system against their parents. Some children normally threaten their parents to call the police on them if they did not stop talking to them about their parental responsibilities.

A collective approach, shared responsibility, acknowledgement of unwavering love of parents for their children, practical empowerment of families and local communities involving transparent, genuine and intensive engagement, underpins by trust and positive relationship-building between the system and the community is paramount. Systems must be embedded in local communities in a way that gives local communities the responsibilities to determine their futures. These are collectivist cultures strongly knitted by their common cultural and traditional values. Understanding their social infrastructure and systems is critical. Every parent loves their children and want the best for them. Every child has some aspirations, and it is a dream of every parent to see their children succeed and do great things. And for every African parent and those from similar collectivist cultures, their children are their savings for retirement. They only came to, and or want to come to Australia to see their children succeed because this means their legacy and dignified retirement or aging is guaranteed. These parents, their children and communities simply need to be understood, actively listened to, respected and supported without prejudice. They want to do the best for Australia and its community because Australia had reached out to them and offered safety, protection, human rights, justice and freedom.

The government's funding model at all levels is contributing to the vulnerabilities of the newly emerging Australian communities. Government tends to place more emphasis on quantitative data and requirements that meet government's strategic policy objectives and goals than the measurement of indicators that show positive impact and needs of the local communities, families and individuals. And because of the government's emphasis on quantitative data and its interests, all the service providers that are meant to deliver services to the local multicultural communities tend to spend a lot of their efforts and resources on meeting the government's funding requirements rather effectively addressing the needs of the communities and families that they are funded by the government to support.

The nature of the competitive funding cycle also encourage the service providers to be competitive with each other and mostly form false partnerships that never serve the best interests of the local communities and families – creating sense and feeling of exploitation, commercialisation of community vulnerabilities and problems, distrust of institutions, organisations and individuals that try to help the community. The community feel like organisations and individuals are building large industry and power on the back of vulnerable communities and families rather genuinely addressing their needs to be independent and self-reliable.

The social complexities of the local communities also seem to discourage the government from meaningfully engaging directly with the grassroots communities and families to find a better solution and approach that meet those complexities. The government chooses a simple way of giving the responsibility to the mainstream services that are given conditions under the contract to meet the government's requirements that fit the established system and processes for easy decision-making – the processes and systems that don't take into account the social complexities and knowledge and gaps that exist in the local communities.

The African Youth support Council was established by the Queensland African Communities Council to increase engagement with the youth from the community. To understand young persons, you need to engage closely with them. AYSC is committed to ensuring that every young person in our community is being valued, supported, empowered and understood without judgement in what they do. At AYSC we ensure that the youth have reliable access to local service providers and support to building positive relationships with their family, schools and communities.

To ensure the independence and quality delivery of the critically important services to the young people, families and communities, QACC continued to keep the African Youth Support Council (AYSC)'s operation separately under the constituted Community Services & Compliance which is staffed by paid employees.

Vision

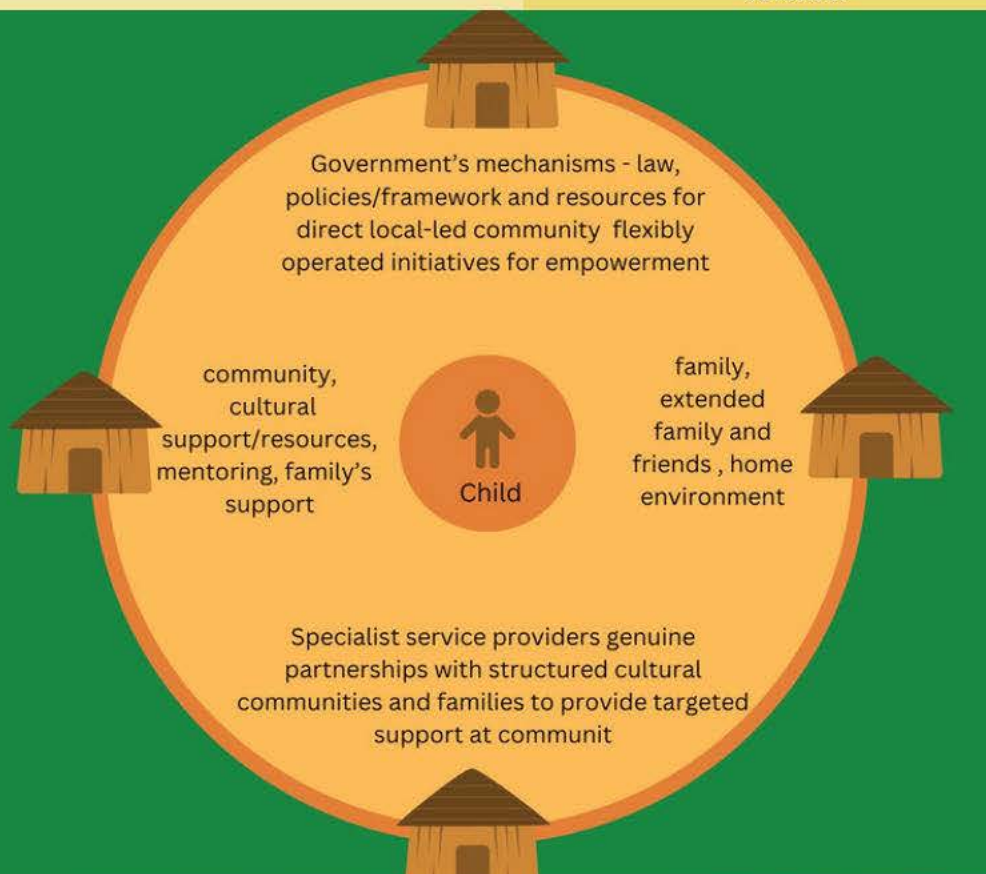
Every African Australian child in Queensland grow up feeling adequately supported, belonged, ambitious and optimistic about their future.

Mission

Our children and young people can see themselves as fully embraced, valued, included at various levels of decision-making processes, with unquestionable equal access to professional opportunities in private, community and public sectors.

Values

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Integrity
- Accountability
- Dedication
- Non-judgmental



THE AFRICAN VILLAGE MODEL

YOUTH AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

A family for a typical African cultural and social conservative person include not only members of the extended family, but all aunties, uncles, cousins, clan members, friends of the family's members and their associates well-known to the family. You would only distinguish, observe and follow strict cultural protocols that exclusively and clearly identify and allocate specific roles and responsibilities during social formalities and ceremonies such as marriages. All immediate, or nuclear and extended family's members and carefully selected clan's members and friends would be allocated specific responsibilities when it comes to formalities. But in terms of guidance for children, anybody who would see something wrong would assume the responsibility to either take action or report the matter to the concerned family.

Major issues identified in schools and community

- Trauma
- Racism and discrimination in schools and at workplaces as children reported some teachers have used N-word and dismissive statements to silence them when there are issues involving students from different cultural backgrounds in school.
- Drugs and other alcohol widely used by some people both youth and adults as coping mechanisms for stress
- Family breakdowns and DFV
- Communication barriers or lack of engagement between parents and schools and between parents and children
- Gang's affiliation and youth crime and identity crisis among young people
- Distrust of institutions and system as a whole - underpinned by the community's wide perceptions of systemic discrimination, racism and deliberate practices by agencies that disempowers the families and keep the community vulnerable and dependent

Most of the parents and people who settled in Australia on humanitarian visas have gone through numerous phases of traumatic journeys across different countries before they settled in Australia. While travelling and finding safe place for their families, their lives were shaped by different traumatic, cultural, social and political events. Their families comprise of children who probably were all born in different countries including Australia. A parent would typically be born in their home of origin, and maybe some of their children were born in the second country (refugee camps) and others finally in Australia. The family may have some members who are still in the refugee camps in different countries, some may have gone to other Western countries like U.S.A, Canada, U.K and others and majority of them may still be in their original home country. Some families may have lost a number of family's members during these journeys and are caring for others somewhere else. The children while born in Australia or in the refugee camps and settled in Australia at a very young age, may not fully comprehend or understand this and what their parents may have gone through and still dealing with as they continue to support those left behind. These family dynamics and even cultural diversity within our families including communication barriers and limited knowledge of the new system in Australia and external influence are mainly the cause of most of the relationship's issues across our community. The complex social environment and the system also cause trust issues. Many people feel like they can't trust anyone because they would assume that those approaching them for assistance would not do so in line with their cultural norms, values and principles.

Recommendations

1. Embed the system in the local communities.

- The best way to engage, support and, design and deliver quality services to the new and socially complex communities of collectivist cultures is to:
- Ensure mainstream service providers establish, build and maintain genuine and transparent strategic partnerships and collaboration with local communities to deliver targeted programs.
- Identify and invest in local social infrastructure and innovative programs developed by the local communities,
- Support placed-based systemic development and local safe places of cultural significance where families and young people and new arrivals meet, socialise, learn their language, culture, traditional dances, receive homework support, parenting support, learn basic Australian legal and other systems, meet specialist service providers and experts, and government officials.

- Develop community-agreed or accepted definitions of partnership with community, practical empowerment of community, community engagement and co-design and delivery.
 - Design and implement community-led flexible and targeted services/programs that also operate after hours and on weekends where most community members can be reached.
2. Resources investment in local cultural and community groups to support new humanitarian arrivals settlement locally.
 3. Whole-family case management approach as opposed to individual young person case management alone.
 4. School-based youth mentors and cultural liaison officers empowered to assess issues at early stage and recommend appropriate early intervention support for students and their families.
 5. Incentives for genuine and proven strategic partnerships between mainstream service providers and local community cultural groups to deliver government-funded family-support program. Reward proven partnerships would encourage meaningful partnerships and avoid unnecessary competition or fake partnerships sometime caused by funding competition that leave young people and families falling through the system's cracks because the service providers spend more resources on meeting the funding conditions/requirements and data as opposed to the real outcome/impact on families and young people.
 6. Employment of young leaders in policy positions and promotion of people from CALD or indigenous backgrounds into leadership's roles to inspire young people from their communities and provide lived-experience policy advice to the organisations and agencies working with the community.
 7. Empowerment of parents from newly emerging communities with new skills, knowledge and information about the system.
 8. Understanding and respect for families and parents' knowledge of the issues and solutions for their families.
 9. Establishment of independent community-based body that assess the impact of government-funded programs that support local communities.
 10. Emphasis on qualitative data as opposed to quantitative data that do not measure the practical outcomes/impact.
 11. Quota for staff from newly emerging communities in senior management and boards of mainstream community service providers that support new families, parents and children.

12. Local community-led transitional justice and rehabilitation programs inside and outside the prison system
13. Banning of mobile phones in schools/classrooms
14. After-hours and weekend family, parents and youth engagement programs in local community-managed centres/spaces
15. Employment of court-based elders and people with cultural authority and knowledge to advise magistrates on local community rehabilitation programs and cultural support and connections that should be incorporated into the bail conditions.

AYSC early intervention strategy

Our youth early intervention strategy is designed holistically to produce a strong, optimistic, ambitious, competitive, resilient and relatively integrated future generation of the African community in Queensland and Australia as a whole.

For several years now, we've observed our children struggling to find their place within their families, communities and schools. Communications between parents and their children, parents and schools or local authorities and with their communities are profoundly inconsistent, inadequate, uncoordinated and ineffective altogether. Such breakdowns in effective and positive communication strategies have consequently led to widespread high levels of distrust, conflicting expectations, frustrations and finally leaving most young people highly disconnected, disengaged and subsequently involved in anti-social behaviour.

Most parents also struggle to engage and understand the new system and institutions they live in due to communication barriers. This leaves most of them in social-isolation from the mainstream community. They feel disempowered by the system and as such, they're unable to exercise their proper authority as parents to raise their children responsibly. Their limited knowledge of, and interactions with the system also make it extremely difficult for them to adjust their parenting styles and communications with children at home. All of these frustrations and pessimisms unsurprisingly cause a lot of mental health illnesses and family's relationship-breakdowns and many other associated ramifications and negative spillovers. The AYSC's youth and family's early intervention strategy employs a variety of specifically, culturally appropriate and strategically targeted mechanisms to support families and children at home and in identified schools.

The mentors also work very closely with students' career experts, parents and teachers to ensure communication is consistent and expectations are managed and aligned to the student's needs and interests. There are activities similarly co-designed by mentors with parents to help them improve their styles and means of communication and parenting techniques at home with their children and with schools and other child welfare institutions.

The purpose of the school-based program is to ensure our young people continue to be engaged, supported and connected through relationship and trust-building in their safe spaces of gathering at schools and in the community. The programs are inclusive of students from all backgrounds.

The program also assists the schools to better connect and build relationships with parents to ensure they're actively involved in their children's education and have better understanding of the Australian education system. The activities under this program are tailored to specifically meet each school's needs after extensive discussions with the school to identify the existing resources/programs and where the gaps are to be filled.

The program incorporates some outreach's support for parents who may be struggling to engage with the school to support their children in their learning journeys or want to look for job to support their families. Those parents can be identified through the school and their children who are involved in the program. The program is run by AYSC's Youth Mentors in selected schools where there's a significant number of African students, or reports of disengagement from learning and other negative activities involving our young people locally.

It also involves suspension elements where our mentors can support any African students on school suspension to ensure they continue to complete their schoolwork at home, get a job, driving or learner's license and positively engaged in social activities and stay out of trouble while on suspension.

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Advocacy for youth voices to be represented at key reference groups, and encouragement for employers to diversify their work force, especially on senior leadership's roles where key decisions around resources allocations are made.

Investment of resources in career and leadership's mentoring in schools, at families and within the community. This process will involve identifying potential leaders at a young age and working consistently to motivate, mentor and work with their families to support them through their education and career journeys.

QAACC's recognition of young Africans who're excelling well in schools, universities, sport, business, art/music and other professional fields in order to motivate younger ones to follow similar footsteps and instill positive values in children to remain optimistic and focused.

Rehabilitation strategy

- Intensive therapeutic, cultural and mentoring programs inside and outside the juvenile centres
- Case management
- Proper coordination of the release of a young person/transitional management from juvenile centres back into the community and engagement outside
- Transition of young adults from corrections to the community, and from juvenile centres to corrections
- Court support and referral pathways to housing, transport, employment, AOD and counselling services – with some trusted specialist services such as QPASTT to be invited to deliver further specific services at AYSC's African Village centres and similar centres in other communities
- Māori-like court with participation of respected elders and people with cultural authority alongside the children magistrates
- Mandatory community-based and led restorative conferencing and community service
- Local community-initiated and led programs at community's centres

Evidence

Data independently collected and analysed by the Queensland University of Technology indicates that more than 90% of participants in the AYSC's programs have felt strong sense of belonging, identity, agency, and collection to culture. Evidence also suggests that there has been zero major gang-related incident involving our young people who participated in the African Village's program over the past 12 months.

Dr Tracey Westerman also made some interesting observations around intergenerational issues and trauma. She stated that “compromised attachment” takes place when “there is disconnection from primary attachments” such as important figures in the child’s life like parents, teachers, extended family, guardians and other role models. The consequence of this is that similar compromised attachment is passed on by the child to the next “generations and future relationships” hence producing intergenerational disadvantage. The children need to know that the “love and support of their primary carers is there in a predictable and consistent way.” Dr Westerman believes that children disconnected from those key figures tend to develop “self-loathing alongside the feeling that they have nothing to lose” and that means they “no longer fear anything” including committing crime and going to prison.

Various studies indicate that between “80 and 93 per cent of kids in prison have trauma.” Dr Westerman stated that “untreated childhood trauma has strong links with substance abuse and violence” and that those children have limited capacity to “calm themselves.” She pointed out that placing “traumatised children with other traumatised children can create an environment that ensure heightened reactivity to others becomes normalised” and this increases the chances of future criminal offending by those children. Therefore, treating the trauma is also a critical part of crime prevention strategy.

Savings to the government

If the report that it costs up to \$761,509 to keep one child in jail is correct, then it equally means that the costs to the government in keeping about 36 African youth in jail is roughly around \$27,414324 million a year. And it would cost government less than half a million dollar a year to fully support the AYSC’s strategy that could potentially prevent many of our kids from going to jail. Based on these numbers, it could save government \$26.5 million a year to support early intervention and rehabilitation strategies. These numbers may have not incorporated savings/costs associated with their economic contributions, community safety and so forth.

Need for the national approach.

A meaningful change can only take place under a nationally adapted and consistently implemented strategy because our young people are mobile and influence each other nationally. We have previously come across a significant number of our young people in Queensland’s prisons after they either escaped problems in other states and came to Queensland to stay with friends or relatives, but ended up committing further offences in Queensland.



African Village at Moorooka



African Village at Geebung



Official opening of Moorooka African Village



Meeting of African soccer coaches at the African Village in Moorooka



Meeting of African soccer coaches at the African Village in Moorooka



Young people at the African Village in Moorooka, Queensland