

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

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**SUBMISSION TO: QUEENSLAND YOUTH
JUSTICE REFORM SELECT COMMITTEE**

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APPROVAL

The following submission to the Queensland Youth Justice Reform Select Committee is approved by:

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BACKGROUND:

YOUTH JUSTICE REFORM IN QUEENSLAND SHOULD BE THE HIGHEST PRIORITY IN 2024.

The youth justice system deals with the supervision of young people on legal orders.

They may be supervised in the community or in detention facilities. The vast majority under supervision are supervised in the community. This is partly because a key principle in Australian youth justice is that young people should be placed in detention only as a last resort. While youth detention is sometimes the only option for some young people, it costs the taxpayer significantly and has an extremely high recidivism rate.

TRENDS IN QUEENSLAND TO 2021-22

Over the 5 years to 2021-22, on an average day, in Queensland:

- the number of young people under supervision remained stable overall, from 1,620 in 2017-18 to 1,624 in 2021-22, with a high of 1,932 in 2018-19. This high in 2018-19 is partly due to legislation which came into effect on 12 February 2018, under which young people aged 17 were transferred from the adult justice system to youth justice supervision
- the rate of young people aged 10-17 under supervision fell overall from 28 to 21 per 10,000 young people aged 10-17
- in community-based supervision, the number fell slightly by 5% while the rate of those aged 10-17 fell from 24 to 17 per 10,000
- in detention, the number rose by 37% and the rate fluctuated between 3.6 and 4.8 per 10,000
- the rate of Indigenous young people under supervision decreased from 209 to 175 per 10,000

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) Youth justice in Australia 2021-22, catalogue number JUV 140, AIHW, Australian Government.

There is evidence that that there has been an increase in the level of youth crime in Queensland following the easing of COVID lockdowns and restrictions. The 2021-22 Queensland Crime Report showed a 13.7 percent increase in the number of children aged 10 to 17 being proceeded against by police, compared to the previous year.

However, it should be noted that for this period, the number of unique offenders increased from 10,608 to 10,620 - in other words, 12 new young offenders.



These figures may not coincide with the community's experience and it should be noted that the community's perception of crime also correlates with actual crime. That is - we need to consider how the community feels about crime too.

Still, these AIHW figures indicate that there is a significant number of recidivist young people having multiple contacts with the justice system. Implementing alternatives to current judicial approaches to address the longer-term, multi-factorial causes of youth crime, such as alcohol and drug use, childhood trauma, family dysfunction, disengagement from school and community and domestic violence, should be the highest priority in any reform agenda.

The Ted Noffs Foundation (Noffs) believes that evidence-based approaches, validated by independent research, will be most efficacious in reducing the levels of youth crime in Queensland. Tougher approaches to dealing with youth offenders are often popular with sections of the community but can exacerbate the issue - financially and systemically. While a justice approach is necessary, the Queensland Government recognises that it also needs a treatment and diversion approach to reduce recidivism.

The *Queensland Youth Justice Strategy 2019–2023* acknowledges that, in most cases, detention is less than desirable. It states, 'Children and young people who have been through detention are at more risk of committing offences when they return to the community.'

It is a sad reality that all jurisdictions need youth detention but it must also be acknowledged that treatment must be part of the system to ensure cost effective and evidence-based outcomes.

TED NOFFS FOUNDATION PROGRAMS: NOFFS IS AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST PROVIDER OF DRUG TREATMENT AND CRIME PREVENTION SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. ESTABLISHED IN 1992, NOFFS OPERATES IN NEW SOUTH WALES, QUEENSLAND AND THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY.

Delivering early intervention, counselling and case management, mentoring, homelessness and residential treatment services, Noffs works with one of the most at-risk populations in Australia.

These are young people who feel that they have never been in control. Their connections to family and community have broken down. They have serious psychological difficulty in saying 'no' - be it to drugs, involvement in crime, unsafe behaviour or inappropriate relationships. Almost without exception, our clients have experienced substantial trauma in their lives.

It is well known that young people who have experienced childhood trauma, neglect, abuse and family violence are significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system. Our programs aim to reduce or eliminate substance use and criminal behaviour and deal with other aspects of the clients' lives that contribute to problematic drug use, thereby assisting young people to manage their lives more effectively. A holistic strengths-based perspective is taken to facilitate sustainable, positive change.

Noffs acknowledges that there will always need to be the option of custodial supervision for the most serious of youth offenders, but consider diversion to community-based treatment (both residential and non-residential) is not only appropriate for most young offenders, but more likely to be effective in achieving positive outcomes.

NOFFS RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT: IN 1995, NOFFS IMPLEMENTED OUR RESIDENTIAL YOUTH TREATMENT SERVICE - PROGRAM FOR ADOLESCENT LIFE MANAGEMENT.

Based on a ground-breaking study by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre into best-practice in drug treatment for young people, our residential youth treatment service has, for twenty-eight years, provided adolescent residential treatment.

Our programs in Queensland, New South Wales and the ACT are based on world-leading research and have been extensively evaluated by university academics.

Our residential youth treatment service offers up to 3 months residential and 3-5 years post-residential treatment for young males and females aged 13 to 18 years who are experiencing criminality and/or substance use-related difficulties and underlying issues such as mental health.

Our residential youth treatment service aims to reduce or eliminate crime and substance use and deal with other aspects of the clients' lives that exacerbate problems, thereby assisting young people to manage their lives more effectively. A holistic perspective is taken to facilitate sustainable, positive change.

Our residential youth treatment service operates as a therapeutic community meaning it is a treatment facility in which the community itself, through self-help and mutual support, is the principal means for promoting personal change.

In a therapeutic community residents and staff participate in the management and operation of the community, contributing to a psychologically and physically safe learning environment where change can occur.

In addition, young people have access to individual, group and, where appropriate, family counselling.

EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS: IN 2008, NOFFS CONTINUED ITS INNOVATION IN YOUTH DRUG AND ALCOHOL TREATMENT WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FIRST STREET UNIVERSITY.

Designed as an early intervention treatment centre for young people who have drug, crime and mental health related issues, it offered a range of creative, vocational and therapeutic programs that would engage difficult to reach young people and bring them into our services.

We now operate 8 Street Universities in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. They are secure, interactive spaces that are curated by the young participants themselves to authentically reflect the local youth culture around them. These inclusive venues encourage extended drop-in visits that cater to therapeutic needs and various underlying life issues

Diverging from traditional health service settings, Street Universities offer an inviting environment, meticulously tailored by the youth themselves. These dynamic spaces are continually adapted to meet evolving local needs, showcasing the active involvement of young participants in shaping their surroundings. Before establishing a new Street University, Noffs undertakes extensive consultation with key stakeholders and local young people to ensure that the services offered will have relevance to community needs and interests.

The engagement element aims to foster a strong relationship with all participants up to the age of 25. This approach ensures the continued availability of support resources, making it easier for participants to access therapeutic interventions when they become necessary.

The Street University model acknowledges that engagement activities and treatment practices must work together to provide safe spaces, social supports, and therapeutic interventions to enable young people to positively manage their substance use, criminal activity and mental health in an environment that feels secure and encourages self-realisation and empowerment. The comprehensive engagement program attracts and retains young people in the service over the long-term and enables the delivery of effective counselling.

One of the salient characteristics of our client group is that they have, almost without exception, had previous contact with formal services provided by government agencies such as health, community services, police, and justice. Often, they will have attended numerous agencies for a range of issues and commonly exhibit symptoms of 'service fatigue'. They tend to be distrustful of traditional health and welfare services and disengage from them at the earliest opportunity. Noffs services actively seek to reverse this process and facilitate high quality therapeutic interventions.

No other youth treatment agency in Australia has the same level of clinical expertise or length of experience. A particular emphasis of our services is addressing not just criminal behaviour and the physical and mental health issues caused by drug use but also the family dysfunction and disconnection from school and community that our young clients experience. Our programs are among the few services in the country providing clinically proven adolescent criminality and drug treatment; and they produce results including safer communities.

RESEARCH:

THE TED NOFFS FOUNDATION IS THE ONLY YOUTH TREATMENT SERVICE WITH PEER-REVIEWED RESEARCH ARTICLES THAT DEMONSTRATE HOW ITS PROGRAMS REDUCE BOTH YOUTH CRIME AND DRUG USE.

The Ted Noffs Foundation is the only youth treatment service with peer-reviewed research articles that demonstrate how its programs reduce both youth crime and drug use.

A 2023 study published in the Journal of Criminal Justice, found that our residential youth treatment service is an effective intervention to reduce future convictions among young people with drug and alcohol problems who have a high number of convictions prior to referral.

‘Influence of a residential drug and alcohol program on young people’s criminal conviction trajectories’

[Click here to see the paper](#)

A 2022 study published in the international journal Drug and Alcohol Dependence, found that clients who attended our residential treatment service for 30 days or more had a substantially lower rate of hospitalisation for all diagnostic categories, physical injury, mental health problems, substance use disorder and organic illness, up to 15 years later. This was attributed to the intensive therapy and life-skills development approach that are a focus of our residential treatment service, which may lower the likelihood of risk-taking behaviours, improve life skills and help young people to create more supportive family environments.

‘Hospitalisation following therapeutic community drug and alcohol treatment for young people with and without a history of criminal conviction’

[Click here to see the paper](#)



A recent UNSW study investigated engagement and outcomes for young people that attended Street Universities. Its findings, published in the international journal Plos One, revealed that for those who received therapeutic services for more than 30 days, indicators of substance dependence, psychological distress, and quality of life all significantly improved. It further found that they had an over 60% retention rate for four or more treatment sessions, indicating the strong relevance of the engagement program to young people.

‘Engagement and outcomes of marginalised young people in an early intervention youth alcohol and other drug program: The Street Universities model’

[Click here to see the paper](#)

NOFFS QUEENSLAND INITIATIVES: NOFFS CURRENTLY OPERATES A 10 BED RESIDENTIAL YOUTH TREATMENT SERVICE IN CABOOLTURE AND STREET UNIVERSITIES IN LOGAN, SOUTHPORT AND TOWNSVILLE.

Despite only commencing a few months ago, the Townsville Street University, open 7 days a week until 10:00 pm, has engaged with a significant number of young people with previous involvement in criminal activity. Senior Police Service officers have cited that is already reducing the burden on their staff. By providing high quality programs coupled with therapeutic interventions the centre is having a positive impact on the lives of local youth.

Townsville Police were consulted extensively at all stages of the development of the Street University and remain committed to working collaboratively with us. We believe that this synergistic relationship is the key to overcoming some of the long-held antipathy that young people may have towards law enforcement officers. The centre provides an opportunity for youth and police to interact constructively in a safe, secure, welcoming environment.

As beneficial as this early intervention service is, there will always be a need for more intensive, evidence-based treatment services such as our residential treatment service for those young people with more entrenched problems.

By offering a complimentary suite of services that create opportunities for disadvantaged young people, a substantial reduction in youth crime in Queensland is not only possible, it is highly likely.

I thank you for the opportunity to present this submission to the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee.



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