

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

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Committee Secretary
Youth Justice Reform Select Committee
Parliament House
George Street
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Re: Youth Justice Reform Inquiry

I welcome the establishment of this committee and I fervently hope that committee members will take great pains to avoid the partisan politicking that has hitherto blighted progress on Youth Justice Reform in Queensland. I wish members the moral strength to resist pressure from their respective parties to advocate for solutions that align with party self-interest rather than what is needed to make a positive impact on youth crime, which has been so horrifically damaging to the lives of both victims and perpetrators, their respective families, and to social cohesion in affected Queensland communities.

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Youth Justice Reform Inquiry ('the Inquiry').

As an Amnesty International Australia member supporting human rights, I participate in a local action group and am an elected volunteer leader of the Amnesty QLD & Northern NSW Activism Leadership Committee (ALC), a group of nine human rights leaders representing the region including from Townsville, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Toowoomba and Brisbane. Our role is to mentor, coordinate and develop local human rights responses and advocacy.

Like other member of the ALC, supporting Amnesty's Community is Everything youth justice campaign since 2016, "I have been dismayed to witness regression in the protection of the human rights of young people in the justice system in Queensland, disproportionately affecting Indigenous children with no evidence that measures taken decrease youth crime." (See Ruth Gould's Submission 30/12/23.)

I am also dismayed to have witnessed a regression in the extent of government support for, and confidence in, effective preventative and diversionary programs.

I support the Inquiry's goals to examine ongoing reforms to the youth justice system and support for victims of crime.

Early Intervention

Incarcerating children is not keeping our communities safe. Queensland detains more children each day than any other state and has the worst recidivist rate in Australia.¹ 95 per

¹ Productivity Commission 2023, *Report on Government Services 2023*, Part F, section 17: released 25 January 2023, Table 17A.26.

cent of young people that go to Cleveland Detention Centre allegedly reoffend within the year of their release.²

The earlier a child is exposed to the justice system the more likely they are to reoffend.³ To keep the community safe, the Queensland Government should remove children younger than 14 from the justice system and invest in services and supports.

Early intervention programs in Queensland support children and make communities safer for everyone.⁴ Unfortunately, the Queensland Government is underfunding community led programs focused on prevention and diversion.⁵

Programs in Toowoomba that directly or indirectly support young people in contact with Youth Justice

Murri Court

Referrals are made by Murri Court to *Strong Fathers Strong Families* and *Strong Mothers Strong Families*, both six-week programs, and since 2023 *Mau Youth Program*

Department of Youth Justice programs

Youth Bail Support – Catholic Care Services. (Very successful in supporting youth; attendance is voluntary.)

Adapt – mentoring consultancy working with Youth Bail Support

Family-led decision making – Goolburri Aboriginal Health Advancement

Strong Fathers Strong Family – 6 week program at Carbal Medical services

Strong Mother Strong Families – 6 week program at Carbal Medical Services

Malu Youth Program – 6 week program at Carbal Medical Services

PCYC

Various Youth and Community programs accessible to or specifically aimed at youth at risk and *Ruby Rise Up* – for women who are or have been suffering domestic violence.

Base Services

Offers skills training and personal development with aim of providing participants with employment in hospitality.

Emerge Café – closed at present.

Offered safe haven for homeless young people, support, mentoring, personal development and hospitality skills training and employment.

Systemic facilities catering specifically for students challenged by their backgrounds

Flexi School, Denise Kable youth Services Centre – Qld Dept Education;

Good Samaritan College – Catholic Education

² Queensland Government. (2022). *Response to Question on Notice, No. 859*.

<https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/tableoffice/questionsanswers/2022/859-2022.pdf>

³ Sentencing Advisory Council (2016). *Reoffending by children and young people in Victoria* (p. xiii).

[https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Reoffending by Children and Young People in Victoria.pdf](https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Reoffending_by_Children_and_Young_People_in_Victoria.pdf)

⁴ Justice Reform Initiative. (2023). *Alternatives to Incarceration in Queensland*. (pp.18 – 27).

[https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/337/attachments/original/1685393777/JRI Alternatives QLD FULL REPORT.pdf?1685393777](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/337/attachments/original/1685393777/JRI_Alternatives_QLD_FULL_REPORT.pdf?1685393777)

⁵ Queensland Council of Social Service. (2023). *QCOSS: Queensland budget analysis 2023-2024, Investing in Queensland's Youth Services*. <https://www.qcoss.org.au/publication/state-budget-2023-2024-our-analysis/>

Early intervention

In a 2017 informal survey of Aboriginal professional people involved in various health, education and social services, the lack of generally available programs in Early Childhood pre- and post-natal stages was obvious. (SEE Appendix.) Yet it is these stages where people are beginning to experience the demands of parenting that conditions essential to developing better child outcomes in health, education, employment and self-actualisation can be established. Young parents who do not have good parenting role models will not develop parenting skills without help.

Respond to root causes

SEE submission by Ruth Gould 30th December, 2023

First Nations led solutions

SEE submission by Ruth Gould 30th December, 2023

Children out of watch houses

SEE submission by Ruth Gould 30th December, 2023

The role of politicians in changing perceptions

During the campaign for the 2020 state election, **both** leaders of the two main parties fought verbal battles on law and order in Townsville, each trying to outdo the other in their “toughness on crime”. Leaders’ language and community sentiment fed off each other and the level of anger in that community about the youth crime rose significantly - not great for community cohesion or getting grass roots agreement to trial solutions.

After that campaign there seemed to be a decline in government confidence in *Working Together Changing the Story*⁶ with government enacting legislation after legislation counter in intent to the thrust of the strategy and breaching the government own Human Rights Act.

To tackle youth crime seriously, politicians must forego their indulgence in these competitions. Perhaps there needs to be an informal cross-party task force to come up with a protocol which outlines what they can and can’t say and how they speak about youth crime in election campaigns.

The Transition

Politicians, magistrates, the police, YJ officers, service providers and many members of the general public all know that the status quo regarding management of youth crime cannot continue.

To help transition into effective YJ reform, there needs to be an independent oversight body – a YJ commission – which can devise goals and timelines and monitor progress on transition. Given the nature and volume of the work that demand politicians’ attention, they are not best placed to commit energy to task of transitioning to a more effective YJ system which might take one or more decades to complete.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry.

⁶ *Working Together Changing the Story. Youth Justice Strategy 2019 – 2023.*

Yours sincerely,

Phil Armit