

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

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Submitter Comments:

I thank you for taking the time to read my submission. I am a young person with a lengthy youth justice history, including several youth detention stays and watch house stays. I was subject to a child protection order at the time of my offending. Despite being subject to a child protection order, I was not given a placement from child safety so I slept at a bus stop. I was a 12 year old girl with no where safe to sleep. I had no money or food. I remembered when I was younger and my parents used to take me to the store and have me eat my one meal for the day in the grocery shop and hide my rubbish there because they had no money to feed me. I started to shoplift food from Woolworths so that I could eat. My first ever offence that I was charged with was a shoplifting charge after I tried to steal some Rice Bubbles and milk for breakfast after not eating for days. The food I attempted to shoplift was confiscated, I was arrested, given a court date and let go. No adults intervened or asked why a 12 year old girl was so desperate for food that she was stealing cereal from Woolworths. The same afternoon I was charged by police for trespassing because I was sleeping in an external staircase at a shopping centre. I was moved on, charged and again offered no support or care from the adults employed to protect citizens. I befriended other homeless kids in the area and we all became targets for the police. Usually we were being charged with minor offences like trespassing when we were just trying to charge a phone or sleep. We were homeless and had no other options because the child protection system failed us. We began to dislike the police because most of us came from a home with at least one parent that had been incarcerated, but also because the police targeted us simply for existing in public spaces. Why did the police not refer us to outreach support or contact child safety? I used to shoplift toothbrushes and toothpaste, shampoo and conditioner and new underwear so that I could be clean. I thought that if I was clean, someone would care about me enough to take me home. I used to shower at beach showers during the night and I was always so fearful that a man would see me showering alone and sexually assault me. One night I saw a surf club patrol buggy that was left out on the sand so I drove it along the beach where a group of adults asked me to give it to them. The police had already been called and I was arrested shortly after and taken to the watch house. I remember feeling so scared but also so relieved. I became so tired of being homeless, hungry and scared that I wanted to do anything I could to get one night of sleep under a roof. I arrived at the watch house as a scared 12 year old girl to see grown men staring at me, cat calling me and screaming at me. I was sat in a cell directly opposite a man. The walls were clear so we could see each other. He began to [REDACTED] in front of me and began yelling to me. I was only 12. I was a 12 year old girl in a police watch house designed for adults. I was in the watch house for 4 nights. In this time I was offered a phone call but my child safety officer didn't answer. I had no one else to call. I was allowed to shower and was given clean clothes. It was the first shower and clean clothes I'd had in a long time. I was even fed breakfast and dinner. I was then sent to the youth detention centre. I was given clean clothes, meals AND snacks, shower, adults that cared about me, education and connection to my culture. I had none of this on the streets. It was the first time I truly felt cared for by an adult in all of my life. I did not want to leave. I would purposely reoffend inside of the detention centre in an attempt to prolong my sentence. Once I would get out of juvi, I would reoffend by doing anything I could to get sent back to juvi. Juvi was my safe place. It was the only place with routine, predictability, safe adults, food, school, culture. If I had this stuff on the outside, I would have never wanted to be there. It's crazy to think that I should have been in my final year of primary school but instead I was trying to get into juvi to ensure I had access to the bare minimum level of care and necessities. The Department of Child Safety failed me, my friends, and the young people that I now work with in the

system. We know that a substantial amount of young people in detention are either on CPO's or have touched with the child protection system. What is being done to ensure that young people on child protection orders are in safe placements? Or have been given somewhere to live? It's not just a few kids that are choosing to go to juvi. A lot of us did it because it was the only safe space we had.

Imagine feeling safer inside of detention than outside. I was only a little girl. What did I do to deserve the life child safety gave me?