

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

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Inquiry into Youth Justice Reform in Queensland

The rationale for this submission is to inform the Inquiry into Youth Justice Reform in Queensland about a current research project titled “A Collaborative Throughcare Model for Reducing the Overrepresentation of Australian Indigenous youth living in remote and rural Northern Australia”. I am the chief investigator for this research working with a multi-disciplinary team in collaboration with communities to develop a model of throughcare to address the high incidence of re-offending among young Indigenous people. The two-year project is funded by The Indigenous Justice Research Program (the Program) which is a joint initiative by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and the Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse (IJC). While the research will not be completed until the end of August 2024, I am willing to discuss the current progress of the study as a means of identifying potentially alternative approaches to reducing the current high rates of recidivism among Indigenous young people through this evidence based research.

Background to the Study

There is an increase in the numbers of young Indigenous people involved in a cycle of reoffending behaviour. Research states that breaking the cycle of crime can be achieved through programmes that address the drivers of crime particularly when young people leave detention and re-enter their communities. However, there are challenges to providing a co-ordinated approach of throughcare due to the “siloization” of services particularly in remote and rural Indigenous communities. This research attempts to address these challenges by conducting community-based research leading to the development of throughcare beginning when young people enter detention to when they re-enter their communities. The communities selected for the research are Mt Isa, Mornington Island, Cairns and Mareeba. The resultant community based throughcare model aims to identify, engage and divert Indigenous young people living in remote and regional communities from further offending.

Research Question:

How can professional practitioners, service providers, and youth justice employees work in collaboration with Indigenous communities to facilitate the development of a throughcare model to reduce the high incidence of re-offending among Indigenous youth in Northern Australia?

Aims of the Research:

1. To identify place-based, context-specific factors contributing to young Indigenous people's interactions with the juvenile justice system in remote communities.
2. To identify service or systemic barriers and enablers for supporting Indigenous youth as they transition from detention back to their communities.
3. To develop specific throughcare models responding to the needs of young people and their support networks in their local context.
4. Assess common mechanisms that contribute to successful local implementation to make recommendations for translation to other sites.

Scope of the Research

A major aim of the proposed research is to identify a holistic throughcare model to assist young people to make successful transitions from detention back to their communities as a means of reducing further re-offending. The research consists of three phases.

Phase One: A comprehensive literature review has been undertaken. The aim of the literature review is to locate information on existing throughcare programs that address youth recidivism in countries with a legal system similar to that of Australia (i.e., a common law or adversarial legal system). By focusing the search forensically in this way, it allows throughcare strategies to emerge and be considered that are compatible with Australia's legal system generally and the Queensland youth justice system specifically.

Phase Two: Quantitative Data:

Quantitative data has been obtained from statistics about youth crime from the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre catchment area namely: remote areas of Queensland, Mackay-Isaac-Whitsunday, Central Queensland as well as the balance of Qld for comparison purposes. Reference period of interest for an index offence during the five-year period: 2018-19 to 2022-23

Population of interest:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with offenders of 'other ethnicity' for comparison
- Number of unique young offenders who were aged 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17 years at their first offence during the five-year reference period (aggregated where necessary to prevent potential for identification)
- Gender
- Year of earliest police action against a young offender during the reference period
- Number of proceedings by police against the young offenders during the reference period (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 or more) by three main types of offence category: 'property'; 'personal'; and 'other'.

Phase Three Qualitative Interviews:

This phase of the research consists of gaining Indigenous community responses regarding their perceptions about the levels and types of throughcare services that are available for youth upon their return from detention. A major focus of these interviews is about gaining insights about the effectiveness of existing services, as well as identifying gaps in service delivery within each of the communities.

- a. Forty (40) semi-structured interviews of 30-45 minutes duration conducted with young people who have previously been detained in Cleveland Detention Centre. Young people will be asked to reflect on how their transition plan assisted them with the re-entry into their communities through reconnecting with their families and community following detention. Youth will be asked about the level of throughcare support they are currently receiving and whether there are any other services which would be helpful to them.
- b. Four (4) focus group interviews of 45 minutes duration with the family members (3-4 persons) of each young person will be conducted. These interviews will focus on how the family was impacted when the young person was taken out of the community, any challenges that confronted the family when the young person returned to the community post-detention as well as accounts of progress made by the young person since their return home.
- c. Two (2) focus group interviews of 45 minutes in duration conducted with members of the Justice Groups as well as elders at each site (2-3 persons). These interviews will focus on obtaining the perceptions of members about the effectiveness of current throughcare services, their experiences of visiting young people at the detention centre and alternative

diversionary programs such as the Children's Murri Court as a means of reducing crime in their communities.

- d. Five (5) interviews at each site will be conducted with community-based service providers who support young people when they return to their communities. These may range from professionals in the areas of education, employment, training, mental health, or existing programs which directly target recidivism.

Perceived Benefits of the Research

It will lead to achievable outcomes in terms of the development of a seamless model of throughcare ensuring young people are successfully prepared for the transition back to their communities while in detention with co-ordinated services and programmes within communities.

The impact of the model will see a reduction of young people returning to the juvenile justice system and less youth transitioning into the adult criminal justice system.

Young people who desist from further offending will contribute to an increase in social- capital within their communities as they become successful role models and mentors for the next generation of young people which in turn has the potential to disrupt intergenerational trends in crime.

The model lends itself to the development of a clear framework of evaluation which measures its effectiveness in terms of addressing the current high levels of over-representation of Indigenous people in the juvenile as well as the adult criminal justice systems.

Regular evaluations of the model in terms of the processes and outcomes will inform its applicability to be replicated and modified to suit other contexts across other sites across the Queensland.