

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

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# Together Submission

# YOUTH JUSTICE REFORM IN QUEENSLAND

Youth Justice Reform Select Committee

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Together thanks the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee for the opportunity to make submissions regarding its inquiry into ongoing reforms to the youth justice system and support for victims of crime.

Together is the union for the significant majority of staff employed by the Department of Youth Justice, as well as having coverage in other public service departments such as the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services, Department of Education and Queensland Health. Together acknowledges the impact that crime has, and continues to have, on individuals and communities, noting that this submission is focused on the Youth Justice system itself, rather than support for victims of crime.

Together members in Youth Justice were surveyed about their views of the current challenges facing Youth Justice, with regard to the Committee's Terms of Reference. These issues have been collated into the following themes:

- Staffing levels in the Department of Youth Justice
- Resource deficiencies and gaps
- Organisational culture in the Department of Youth Justice
- Preventing young people from entering the Youth Justice system
- Government strategies for prevention and diversion
- Factors contributing to high levels of Youth Detention

In addition to identifying these challenges, Together members have identified possible solutions.

## Staffing levels in the Department of Youth Justice

Together members are deeply concerned about understaffing within the Department of Youth Justice, which affects the quality and availability of service delivery for young people and other stakeholders. Members highlighted the impact of high caseloads, particularly for employees working on targeted interventions. Members see the Department facing recruitment challenges and difficulty retaining qualified staff, which has compounded the issue. Significant turnover also impacts the ability of staff to have relationships with young people, which is critical in many aspects of Youth Justice work.

### Proposed solutions:

- A substantial increase in staffing to match service delivery demands. Dedicated Youth Justice staff are stretched thin, which impacts on the level of service delivery they can provide.
- In order to retain skilled and experienced staff, the Department should seek to revisit role profiles and address leadership and workplace culture with an eye to improving career paths and enhancing retention.

## Resource deficiencies and gaps

Together members are concerned about insufficient resources, which hinder effective program delivery and training. In addition to staffing levels as previously outlined, training and professional development offered or supported by the Department requires attention and investment. Some Youth Justice Service Centres (YJSCs) are now unfit for purpose (if they were indeed in the first place). Further, the Department's technology has not kept up with industry standards and is hindering the ability to provide best practice.

### Proposed solutions:

- Invest in modern technology and infrastructure, in order to enhance service delivery.
- Increase funding for training (ideally in-person/face-to-face) for Departmental staff to bridge the resource gaps affecting service delivery.

### Organisational culture in the Department of Youth Justice

Together members report feeling as if not enough resources are making it to YJSCs, and that there have been increases in higher-level positions that do not directly contribute to service delivery. In some circumstances, this has contributed to a feeling of disparity between 'frontline' service delivery and other areas of the Department.

Members also identified limitations around transparency and communication from their leadership, which contributes to a sense of frustration amongst staff. It should also be noted that some members spoke highly of the culture within their workplace, characterised by transparent decision-making and information sharing, and management's ability to listen to feedback from frontline staff.

The constant targeting of Youth Justice in the media also has a deleterious effect on staff wellbeing, which contributes to turnover and attraction/retention challenges.

### Proposed solutions:

- A greater focus on fostering a positive organisational culture, in order for staff to feel heard and supported by Departmental leadership.
- The safety and wellbeing of staff, particularly in relation to psychosocial hazards, should be prioritised to improve overall organisational wellbeing.

## Preventing young people from entering the Youth Justice system

Cross-agency collaboration is crucial for successful early intervention, and greater connections between agencies such as Queensland Health, Department of Education, Child Safety and others would benefit at-risk young people and other stakeholders. Whilst much focus is placed on Youth Justice as the 'tertiary' agency, Together members working with children, young people and families across many of these agencies reflect that, by the time a young person is case managed by Youth Justice, in many cases it is that of "too little, too late" – that much more needs to be done with the support of other agencies (both government and non-government, particularly community-controlled) to prevent entry into the Youth Justice system. The December 2023 Machinery of Government and Ministerial portfolio changes to bring Youth Justice and Education under the purview of one Minister is welcomed, as it provides an opportunity for greater collaboration between these two key agencies.

Whilst more energy and focus has been directed towards cultural competency and safety in practice, this is an area where much more needs to be done to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people within the Youth Justice system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff report not feeling adequately supported in their critical work, which subsequently impacts the young people they work with and further entrenches systematic racism.

### Proposed solutions:

- Strengthen collaboration across agencies to address root causes and find preventative or diversionary alternatives to Youth Justice (including Youth Detention).
- Greater support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees of the Department, with a focus on attraction and retention of experienced staff.

Identified roles are crucial in ensuring a culturally appropriate approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people engaged with Youth Justice.

## **Government strategies for prevention and diversion**

A majority of respondents did not feel there were adequate resources within the Department to effectively focus on early intervention and diversion strategies. Further to an inability to provide these services, Together members are strongly of the belief that holistic, 'wrap-around' responses must be implemented to see real improvement in diversion and recidivism.

In addition to well-resourced government Departments, Together members also acknowledge the importance of community engagement and support for young people and their families.

As previously highlighted, the continuous blame laid at the feet of the Department is a significant concern of Together members and contributes to a lack of confidence from community members in the work that Youth Justice and other Departments undertake with at-risk or in-system young people.

### **Proposed solutions:**

- Collaborative frameworks and alternative learning opportunities should be prioritised to enhance prevention and diversion efforts. This should include programs that foster inclusion within schools and the community, strategies that identify vulnerabilities in children at an early age and the provision of appropriate support to see the children succeed at school.
- Community engagement and support are key components in addressing the root causes of involvement in the youth justice system.



## Factors contributing to high levels of Youth Detention

Fundamentally, the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people must be addressed in order to reduce the number of young people held in Youth Detention. The root causes of this over-representation within Youth Justice broadly are myriad and cannot be solved by continuing to incarcerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people at a rate unseen for any other people world-wide. Addressing systemic racism is essential to creating healthy, safe and fair communities across Queensland.

Further, excessive adjournments and slow legal processes contribute to extended periods of detention for young people. Together understands that a high percentage of detained young people are on remand and have not yet been sentenced.

Additional factors contributing to high levels of young people in Youth Detention are the lack of resources and capacity across foster and residential care, impacting on children and young people known to Child Safety, which in turn has been exacerbated by the rising cost of living and the housing crisis.

Whilst Together members support the principle of detention as a last resort, the current reality of over-crowded and under-staffed Youth Detention Centres must not be denied, and the safety and wellbeing of young people and staff must be a priority.

Notwithstanding Together members' desire for fewer young people in detention, the West Moreton Youth Detention Centre model—which is therapeutic in practice and provides for better ratios of staff to young people—should be preferred for any future Youth Detention facilities.

### Proposed solutions:

- Dedicated focus on addressing systemic racism throughout government systems.
- Streamline legal processes and explore alternative bail address options.

- Any future Youth Detention facilities should be built to accommodate therapeutic practice and increased staffing ratios.
- Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14.