

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

Submission No: 152
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Publication: Making the submission and your name public
Attachments: See attachment
Submitter Comments:

11 February 2024

Committee Secretary
Youth Justice Reform Select Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

RE: Sport and recreation program to reduce youth crime in Mount Isa

Dear Committee Secretary,

I am a teacher at a special assistance school in Mount Isa that caters to young people who are marginalised for a variety of reasons.

I attended the public forum on 9 February and I thank you for taking the time to hear from our community.

Why are young people committing crimes?

These young people are bored and disenfranchised: this is the only school I have ever worked at where students hate the weekends and school holidays.

They frequently describe their home lives as boring, marked by a lack of money and mobility, or even dangerous. They can't wait to return to school where they can socialise and play in a safe environment.

Schools can meet this need during their operating hours, but **there is a desperate need for a sport and recreation program** to engage young people on weeknights, weekends and during the school holidays.

The many sporting clubs in town are inaccessible to disadvantaged young people due to the cost of registration and the difficulty of transport. We live in a city with no public transport, despite repeated requests for a bus system¹.

There is also a complete lack of services and businesses in Pioneer, the most disadvantaged suburb in Mount Isa: no playing fields, no shops, no pool, no cinema, leaving young people with no positive outlet for their free time and energy.

This is why a lot of the youth crime in Mount Isa is not financially motivated: young people are not stealing TVs and laptops to sell, they are stealing cars for joyrides.

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-22/mount-isa-residents-calling-for-public-transport/101169458>

Why are existing programs failing?

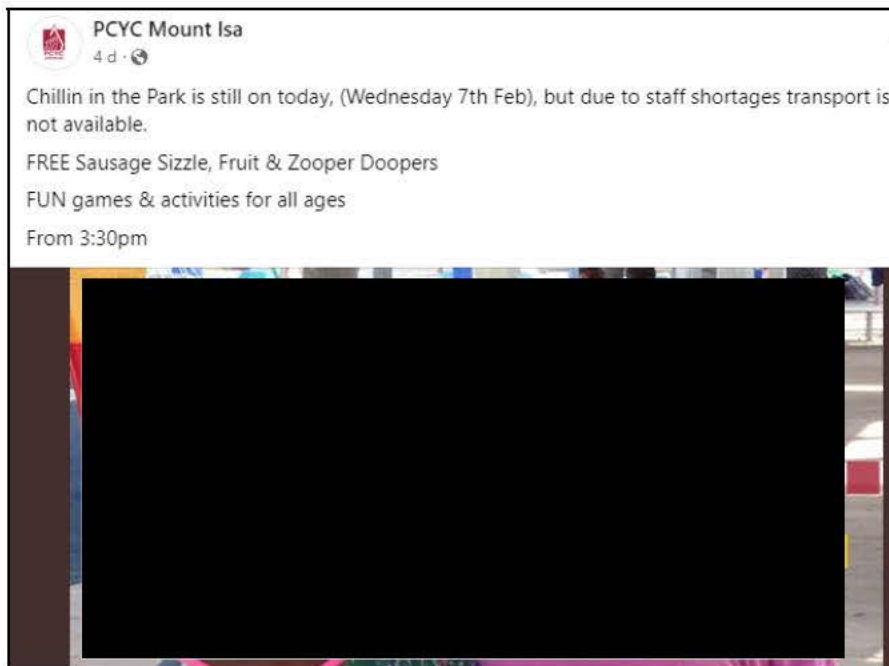
Sport and recreation programs are proven to improve physical and mental health, help young people engage positively with their communities, and reduce boredom².

Our school started two basketball teams last year: we pay for students' registrations and equipment, and volunteer our time after school and on weekends to drive them to training and games. We do the same for other students who play in local soccer, AFL and rugby league teams. This has led to enormous improvements in school attendance, community engagement and self-esteem. However, we are a small team and the impact we can make is limited.

When we are unable to provide this service due to our busy schedules, our attendance suffers and students' mental wellbeing is markedly reduced. **There is a clear connection between access to sports programs and positive outcomes in school and life.**

There are several sport and recreation programs in Mount Isa, such as PCYC's 'Boxing After Dark' and 'Chillin in the Park', as well as the 'Friday Youth' sports nights run by a local church group³. These are the only major sport and recreation programs for young people that I am aware of, and while they are very popular, there are significant barriers that limit their effectiveness and reach:

- They are not frequent enough: each of these programs runs one night per week.
- PCYC often cannot provide transport due to understaffing (see image below)⁴.
- Friday Youth does not provide transport.



² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5ykKrMZ-PI>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/COCMtIsa/posts/pfbid0Ni4S7zcCjKakhrfPEEVounb98ket2oL1nzTLCG2qpAbQnD4nXEzBsBMuohYX95k>

⁴ Image source: <https://www.facebook.com/PCYCMtIsa/>, 11 February 2024

How could a better program be set up?

I propose that PCYC and the Youth Co-Responder Team should be expanded to run a comprehensive sport and recreation program, including:

- Activities every weeknight, weekends and school holidays
- Free transport with large buses
- Food and drink
- Shower access to promote hygiene and self-esteem

This would require more staff and vehicles, but it is an investment that would pay off handsomely for the community. It would reduce the significant cost of the policing and imprisonment of young people, as well as the lifelong costs to the state associated with recidivism and dealing with the trauma experienced by young people in the justice system.

I would be happy to discuss this idea further and do anything I can to help, including providing community contacts. Please feel free to contact me at the email address provided.

Sincerely,
Thomas Lodewyke