

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

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ICYS Ipswich Community Youth Service Submission to the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee

Youth Justice Reform in Queensland

14th February 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to inform the committee's inquiry into Youth Justice Reform in Queensland. For over 40 years ICYS Ipswich Community Youth Service has been funded to be a key provider of youth and community support services across our region, and we are grateful for funding support from the Queensland Government.

We acknowledge that the current dialogue and public interest in youth justice, crime prevention and intervention is complex and layered, and at its core involves children and young people who have fallen through the cracks in a social system that is set up to support them. Amongst all the noise, those at the centre of this review are children and young people who most, if not all, have experienced a number of adverse childhood experiences in their short lifetime, a significant number who have had child safety engagement and even more that would be flagged with child safety where no intervention was made. Approximately half are disengaged from school, many for a number of years. Intergenerational trauma and familial breakdown is common. First Nations young people are grossly overrepresented in the youth justice system. We owe it to these children, and all future children, to make this review count.

In our 40 years of operation, and my 19 years at ICYS, we have seen funding come and go, policies shift and changes of government. We draw on this experience to inform the following submission.

Sincerely

Amanda Margerison
Chief Executive Officer

About ICYS

ICYS Ipswich Community Youth Service, a not-for-profit community-based organisation, has been providing assistance and support to at-risk children, young people, their families and their communities in the Ipswich and surrounding regions since 1983. As a multi-service organisation funded by four (4) Queensland Government departments, ICYS provides a range of support programs and activities to assist and empower young people to make positive choices and decisions for their future.

For over 40 years, ICYS has been providing support and assistance, working alongside children and young people with a focus on individual needs including assistance with educational engagement, housing and homelessness, vocational training, employment assistance, crime prevention & intervention, information, referral, advocacy, practical assistance, drop-in, emergency relief and pro-social activities in the Ipswich and surrounding regions. Each year ICYS provides direct services to over 3000 children and young people across six (6) Local Government Areas (Ipswich, Somerset, Lockyer Valley, Scenic Rim, Logan and the western suburbs of Brisbane) from our offices in Ipswich and Lowood.

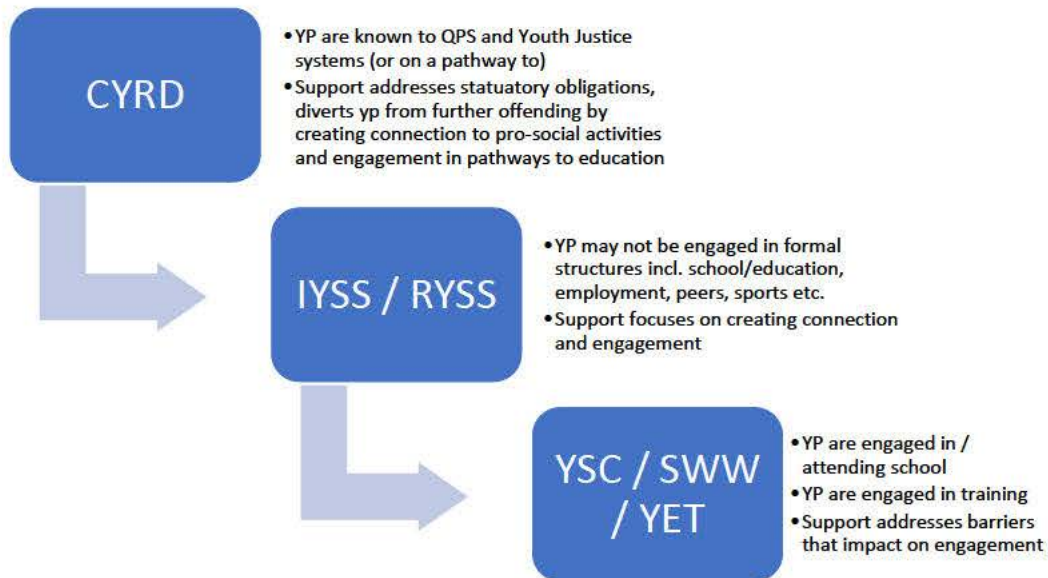
Our funded services

ICYS currently delivers services via direct funding contracts with four (4) State Government departments and seventeen (17) partner-schools:

Program	Funding received from
Community Youth Response & Diversion (CYRD)	Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training
Ipswich Youth Support Service (IYSS)	Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services
Regional Youth Support Service (RYSS) (Somerset & Lockyer Valley)	Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services
Youth Housing and Support Program (YHAS)	Department of Housing
Youth Employment & Training Program (YET)	Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training
Youth Support Coordinator Program (YSC) (school based: 3 State High Schools)	Partner-schools via Department of Education funding
Student Wellbeing Worker Program (SWW) (school based: 12 State Primary Schools, 1 State High School, 1 Special School)	Partner-schools via Department of Education funding

EMPOWERING tomorrow's decisions

ICYS services operate on a continuum, utilising a step up / step down model of support, with various entry and exit points, and opportunities to collaborate across both the organisation and across sector. Our Youth Housing and Support Program (YHAS) has a reach over all 3 stepped levels. At ICYS, children and young people, and their families, have streamlined access to the right support, when they need it, and as their needs change:



Last financial year, ICYS provided direct support to over 3000 children and young people. Visit our 2022/2023 Annual Impact Report for further information¹.

Research and evidence of the current system

ICYS acknowledges the submissions presented by other community sector organisations to this review committee, in particular the submissions of various peak bodies who represent hundreds of member organisations across the State (including QCOS, PeakCare Queensland and Queensland Youth Housing Coalition). This submission will not rehash the large amount of research and evidence presented within these submissions, as they speak on behalf of member organisations, including ICYS. Instead, this submission will speak more broadly to the experiences of frontline staff operating across ICYS' suite of services, and more importantly the experiences of our children and young people.

¹ ICYS 2022/2023 Annual Impact Report <https://icysagmtest.my.canva.site/icys-impact-report-2022-2023>

Recommendations

1. Increase funding to mid-tier intervention programs
2. Revisit the previous Youth Support Coordinator model that promoted school-community holistic outcomes, with a renewed focus on early intervention crime prevention
3. Introduce locally-led multi-stakeholder panels for young people that are not yet entrenched in youth offending
4. Fund transition back to school literacy and reading programs embedded in community-based organisations to prepare young people to reengage in school
5. Implement state-wide support and training models for sector workers.

Increase funding to mid-tier intervention programs

“Young people regularly tell me that they just want to be spoken to as an equal and for their voice to be heard, rather than for people to make assumptions about what is going on for them. It is amazing how well young people respond to a strengths-based / therapeutic model of support”
~ ICYS frontline worker

Watch houses and detention centres are no place for children, and ICYS stands with the sector in calling for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised to 14, and children under this age to be diverted to community-based alternatives.

Underpinned by the pillar of intervening early, the Queensland Government must consider redirecting funds from punitive costly measures (e.g. building more detention centres) to increasing funding to mid-tier support services, especially in high growth areas. In Queensland, funding for Youth Support Services would fall into what we define as mid-tier support services. The Department’s website² lists 87 Youth Support Service locations across the state, which are funded and are targeted specifically to support young people aged 8 to 21 years of age who are at risk of:

- Disconnection from family, community, prosocial or recreational activities or informal support networks;
- Disengaging from school, training and/or employment;
- Harm, including substance use, self-harm and suicide;
- Cultural disconnection;
- Homelessness;
- Entering criminal justice systems including Youth Justice.

It would be generally accepted that the best way to deal with youth offending is to prevent it occurring in the first instance. Sufficiently funding mid-tier support services is critical to stop the pipeline of young people coming in contact with Police, courts and Youth Justice. Funded Youth Support Services are impactful as they are the safety net for those young people who are not connected to school (or

² Queensland Government, Find a Youth Support Service <https://www.qld.gov.au/youth/support-services/youth-support-services>

only tenuously engaged), not engaged in employment or training, and generally not yet on the radar of police or other tertiary interventions.

ICYS is funded for two Youth Support Services, one in Ipswich and one across the Somerset/Lockyer Valley. While the Somerset/Lockyer Valley funding was introduced in late 2015 to meet growth in the outer regions, the Youth Support Services funding allocated to Ipswich has not increased in over 20 years. Ipswich is the fastest growing region in Queensland, and recently amassed 250,000 residents. ABS data indicates that since 2006, Ipswich's population has increased by over 108,000 residents, a 43% increase in 18 years. 2021 census data demonstrates 37% of Ipswich residents are aged 24 and under, and the number in this age bracket increased over 10,000 from only 5 years prior.

Cost of living pressures and low rental tenancy rates is resulting in more families moving outside the major cities, subsequently we are seeing the growth in regional cities and towns. It is imperative that place-based approaches are implemented to address the growing social issues that come with growing regions, and funding must match this growth. In effect, one of the government's core youth funded initiatives providing mid-tier support to those at risk of entering a pathway to youth offending, is not increasing funding in line with growth and demand. We are needing to service more children and young people, with the same amount of funding.

The opportunity exists to increase funding to mid-tier Youth Support Services to increase capacity to address the needs of young people, and divert them from ever entering the youth justice system.

Revisit the previous Youth Support Coordinator model that promoted school-community holistic outcomes, with a renewed focus on early intervention crime prevention

"Sometimes all it takes to find out what is actually going on for a young person experiencing school disengagement is a home visit. Sadly, I am finding that our disengaged young people are regularly being put in the "too hard" basket by support staff at school due to their extended absences. Often there are serious things going on for them at home that make it very difficult for them to go to school and engage in school work. Sometimes it is something as simple as them living rurally and their parents having no money for fuel, or them not having the correct uniform and skipping school to avoid getting in trouble. Once the structure and routine of schooling is disrupted, it is very easy for them to fall into a pattern of wandering the streets with other disengaged young people and getting up to no good" ~ ICYS frontline worker

In 1997, the Queensland Government piloted the Youth Support Coordinator Initiative (YSCI), initially introduced to address the growing rates of youth homelessness. The initiative was co-funded by the then Department of Communities and the Department of Education. The YSCI was administered through the Department of Communities, who funded non-government organisations to employ Youth Support Coordinators (YSCs) to be based in local high schools and be a conduit linking the school with supports available within their host organisation and the wider service system relevant to students in need. By 2005, the initiative had received two further funding boosts, had a change of intent to now focus on supporting young people to remain engaged in education by addressing social

EMPOWERING TOMORROW'S DECISIONS

barriers, and by that year boasted an impressive total of 113 FTE Youth Support Coordinators across Queensland. While YSC's worked within key policies in the school, they were informed by their organisation's policies and procedures which included the ability to conduct home visits, transport students, accompany students to key services that addressed barriers to their engagement, provided support to school staff not familiar with navigating the service system outside of the school, and bridged the divide between schools and community utilising a framework of support.

In 2012, after a change of Government, it was announced that the YSCI was to be dismantled on the premise that keeping young people at school by addressing social barriers to engagement was not in the remit of the Department of Communities. Hence at the end of 2013, the Department of Communities funding was pulled, and the Department of Education redirected their portion of the funding direct to schools to either employ their own YSC or make a partnership with an approved NGO to deliver the services. Over the past 10 years, this new model has resulted in only 5 NGO's across the state continuing their partnerships with local schools, resulting in less than 10FTE positions across Queensland still employed by local place-based, well connected and integrated community service organisations (ICYS is one of these 5 organisations). The remaining YSC positions are employed directly by schools, operational only 40 weeks of the year (absent during school holidays which is a high-risk period for young people), with limitations to how YSC's understand and navigate the social service system employed by an education institution.

ICYS would like to acknowledge our 27+ year continued partnership with Ipswich State High School, our 19+ year continued partnership with Woodcrest State College (Springfield) and our 17+ year partnership with Bundamba State Secondary College. It is through these partnerships that young people at these 3 high schools are able to be identified early, be supported to access relevant services from within ICYS' suite of funded services (Housing & Homelessness, Employment & Training, Youth Support Services, Crime Prevention & Intervention, Diversion and more) and be diverted from tertiary services including youth justice by addressing barriers that contribute to offending behaviour. These schools are also more willing to maintain enrolment of a young person that is receiving support from an ICYS YSC, and more often than not, receiving other ICYS supports from our other program areas.

We recommend that the YSCI funding model be revisited, including consultation with NGO's who continue to deliver the program in their local communities. **The opportunity exists for the YSCI to have a primary focus on young people at risk of offending, by addressing many of the social indicators of risk. We welcome a further discussion about this.**

Introduce locally-led multi-stakeholder panels for young people that are not yet entrenched in youth offending

"Early intervention is key. We can often see the pathway a young person is on, however are powerless to influence decisions that are made without our involvement. Young people are the experts in their own lives, they place so much faith in us to advocate for them, however we are not always invited to the table when decisions are made by others who know less about a young person's overall situation" ~ ICYS frontline worker

EMPOWERING TOMORROW'S DECISIONS

Multi-agency Collaborative Panels (MACPs) are now enshrined in legislation “to coordinate the provision of services, including assessments and referrals, to meet the needs of particular children charged with offences or at risk of being charged with offences”³. These ‘particular children’ are those often referred to as ‘Serious Repeat Offenders’, and the collaboration of services, both government and non-government, ensures coordinated approaches based on shared information. ICYS has been a member of the local MACP for a number of years now (previously SMART panel) and we have sat at the table as an equal contributor, with great success.

Queensland’s community service sector forms part of the largest employer group in Queensland, and is a trusted partner of the Queensland government in delivering support services within our communities. The community sector, and organisations like ICYS, continue to ‘hold’ children and young people as they move in and out of statutory services (e.g. child safety, youth justice, detention) and other government institutions (e.g. schools), providing a safe and consistent place to land when they have met their statutory obligations. In an organisation like ICYS, this could mean a young person engages with a number of program areas within our organisation for support with meeting their youth justice obligations, being transported to a safe place by our after-hours street outreach team, getting assistance to obtain their social ID from our youth support service, reengaging with school through our school based YSC program, obtaining assistance from our homelessness team, and support from our employment & training staff – all without knowing they were accessing 4 or 5 different funding buckets to support them. This seamless support also means we hold a lot of information about our young people, information they trust us with and we feel privileged to hold, and information that forms a holistic picture of their lives.

To divert young people from a pathway of youth offending, it is imperative to have the right organisations around the table at an early stage; it is too late when there is already a serious repeat offender declaration against them. Unfortunately, decisions including school suspensions and exclusions, service decisions to not accept a young person for a crisis accommodation placement, decisions made in child safety practice panels (of which we often attend) etc. should have the people around the table who have all the information, and where suitable, involve the young person and their family/carer. **The opportunity exists to have MACP style panels to support early intervention decisions, however from our experience this would need to be a requirement, not an option.**

Fund literacy and reading programs embedded in community organisations to prepare young people to reengage in school

"I went to school nearly every day for grade 7 and 8, but I got shame and they wouldn't help so I just did my own thing and went downhill...I was vandalising and public nuisance and got into cars... One day when I was in the watch house, I called up, and then I got out and started coming here... I always used to [experience] shame about [reading] and not liking it, but now I don't feel shame... I've got stuff to do. When I don't have stuff to do I just go and do stuff that's naughty. That's all I know"
~ Young Person accessing ICYS literacy and reading program

³ <https://www.dcssds.qld.gov.au/resources/dcsyw/youth-justice/reform/multi-agency-collaborative-panel.pdf>

EMPOWERING TOMORROW'S DECISIONS

Research demonstrates that approximately 50% of young people in the youth justice system are disengaged from education, with as many as 70% not attending regularly. This is concerning when engagement in school is one of the biggest protective factors for young people.

ICYS has piloted the use of a teacher two days a week as part of our Queensland Government funded CYRD Program. Our model employed a teacher to provide literacy and reading assessments and individualised teaching within a 'classroom' setting in our Ipswich Youth Hub. The model was aimed at young people who had exited detention, had engagement with youth justice, or were on a trajectory to offending with the purpose of increasing reading skills and the confidence to transition back into flexi or mainstream schooling. Prior to their referral, many of these young people had not been engaged in education for a number of years, had a literacy / reading age up to 8 years younger than their actual age, and were ashamed to attend school.

Last financial year, 29 young people were referred to our Bridging to Education program, of which only 3 were enrolled in an education setting at time of referral. There were 663 education contacts in Bridging to Education, with an average session time of 50 minutes per young person. Following support from the teacher, 69% of young people were engaged in education (flexi or mainstream) or employment. In September 2023, ABC Radio visited ICYS to speak with young people engaged with the program and produced a written article⁴ and a radio segment⁵.

“Young people yearn for human connection. If that need isn't being met at home or school, they seek it out in other places that aren't always safe. Many young people have found that connection at ICYS; regularly dropping in to the office just to say “hello”” ~ ICYS frontline worker

For any child, getting asked what school you go to is a normal question. For young people who don't attend school, this question only alienates them further. In a clear indication of our Bridging to Education young people wanting to be like any other young person, when asked what school they went to, many would proudly proclaim “I go to the ICYS school”. Our model is in no way a school, but the closest thing some young people have to one.

“School disengagement is a social concern that seems to be worsening. It is not always the case that a child is refusing to go to school; often it is the case that they've had multiple enrolment applications knocked back. Even with a support service like ICYS advocating on their behalf, we've had students being refused positions at alternative schools. The rationale for the refusal varies, but I've had students refused before due to having “insufficient trauma,” as well as a student being refused for their parent's lack of parental capacity” ~ ICYS frontline worker

Our Bridging to Education program was sometimes the only educational lifeline young people had on exiting detention and/or after years of disengagement from school. **A right to education is a human right, and the opportunity exists to explore alternative options for young people who are not yet ready for flexi or mainstream schooling, who may be awaiting enrolment in a flexi or mainstream school, and who require literacy and numeracy upskilling.**

⁴ Education program for Queensland young offenders 'ends shame' of literacy and numeracy struggles <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-04/qld-ipswich-young-offenders-youth-crime-justice-system/102792358>

⁵ Calls to consider new ways to stop youth crime in Qld <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/am/calls-to-consider-new-ways-to-stop-youth-crime-in-qld/102809690>

Implement state-wide support and training models for sector workers

“It is often the case that young people with complex needs are unable to access other services because their complexities are considered “exclusionary”, which then further entrenches their engagement with antisocial behaviours, e.g. I have had multiple young people ineligible for housing placements because of violent offences or substance use but that means they have to keep residing in unsafe/unstable accommodation options in the interim...and that’s a really big risk factor in terms of recidivism” ~ ICYS frontline worker

Queensland’s community service sector forms part of the largest employer group in Queensland, and is a trusted partner of the Queensland government in delivering support services within our communities. Increasingly, community sector workers are seeing the impact of cost of living pressures on the communities they support. Children and young people are presenting with far more complexity than ever before. It is essential that structures and systems are put in place to enhance the sector’s ability to address the growing needs of their service users, especially when it comes to children and young people being diverted from tertiary interventions such as police, courts and youth justice.

For the most part, the sector is not resourced or supported to manage the growing complexity. Over the years, professional development budgets have deteriorated and professional supervision is something most community sector workers have never utilised. Dwindling professional development budgets have been a result of increased operating costs including skyrocketing insurance costs for delivery of community services, increased fuel costs, prioritising expenditure on children and young people etc. There needs to be a return to government contracts that provide appropriate expenditure allowance for professional development, or government increasing funding to peak bodies to deliver specialist training.

More specifically, state-wide communities of practice and whole-of-program professional development must be prioritised. Services funded to work with complexity must be regularly upskilled to ensure best practice not only within their organisation, but also to ensure consistent support is provided across the state. The result – a service sector that is well-equipped to manage “exclusionary” or “too high risk” complexities, and a supported and healthy sector.

The opportunity exists to strengthen the sector’s capacity to support and divert children and young people from tertiary intervention.