

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

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Youth Justice Reform Select Committee

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This submission is written following the public hearing in Mount Isa on the 8th of Feb where I was invited to speak.

Mount Isa is suffering from the statewide scourge of crime committed by recidivist young offenders. Locally, businesses are broken into and their buildings damaged. Vehicles are stolen and taken for dangerous joy rides around town until they are often crashed or abandoned. Peoples homes and private vehicles are also broken into and stolen. Graffiti is a frequent occurrence and shoplifting is occurring daily. Even in the shopping centre that employs security staff, shop lifting, fights and damage occurs regularly despite the best efforts of the security guards. All of this has led to significant costs to local businesses.

Firstly there are the repairs that need to be undertaken at short notice if their premises is broken into or windows broken etc. Unfortunately for some businesses who have suffered from repeated attacks, they have had to resort to more expensive measures such as replacing windows with aluminium panels, installing roller doors and shutters, security cameras and even security services. More worrying though is insurance. Insurance premiums are going up and up and it is harder and harder to secure adequate insurance at an affordable rate. In many instances it is simply not worth putting in a claim, instead businesses choose to foot the bill themselves.

Reporting of crimes is also well below the actual rate of crimes committed. The police link process is not easy to navigate and the lack of personal connection with the police service leads victims to feel as though they are not being heard. Those that do take the time to report a crime are often not followed up with in a timely manner which only adds to the feelings of not being heard. It simply doesn't feel like it is worth reporting a crime.

The justice system is failing us. I believe that on the whole the police are doing the best they can with the resources they have available. However it is what happens to these kids once they are caught that is not working. The current deterrents are not working. I don't believe locking more of them up more often or for longer periods will have any long term effect. Instead, as was said time and time again at the hearing, a lot of work needs to be done with the families of these young offenders with a view to healing the family units and reducing the disfunction that is leading young people to crime. With that in mind I suggest that greater cohesion is developed between all the government agencies and NGO's.

Millions of dollars of assistance flows though the Mount Isa community with little apparent effect. Disadvantaged families having to travel all over town for appointments with various offices for different types of assistance is not easy in a town with no public transport. Instead, I would suggest that a large building be acquired by the government that is located in Pioneer as close as possible to the largest population of people needing assistance. Move all the NGO's, Centerlink, Dept of child safety, Dept of Youth Justice, Dept of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders etc all into the one building. The same building would have shared meeting rooms and spaces where various agencies can meet with their clients and where families could potentially meet with more than one department at once. It also makes sense that there be a concierge type service offered, perhaps even

case workers allocated to entire families so that they can assist the families to receive the wrap around care that they need. This should, in theory, help streamline the entire process and potentially save the government money. Too many organisations are funded for a narrow group of people and so people are cared for as individuals rather than families being cared for as a collective unit of people made up of different ages with different challenges. Having a case worker assigned to a family as a whole will assist the family in receiving the different layers of care that they need.

I am aware that some work is being done to map the services currently on offer which I applaud. However I think a lot more could be done to ensure that the government's money for assistance of these at risk families and youth is better spent. I firmly believe that housing all of the services in one easy to access building or campus will help both the clients and the service providers. Having them spread out across town, with no public transport is not conducive for a family, already suffering all sorts of disadvantages, seek the help they need.

To echo another discussion that was had at the hearing on Thursday, I am also in favour of exploring different sentencing models such as on country models, or by locating detention centres in remote locations. There are several of these type of programs located across the country and they seem to have a better result when it comes to rehabilitation of young people. Many of these young offenders are of first nation decent and these programs instil a sense of pride in their culture instead of repeated patterns of unemployment and disfunction that they live with every day. Young offenders not of first nations decent can also benefit from being exposed to the outback in this way. It can offer a grounding and a means to break the cycle of crime that they are all caught in. The current detention model is not achieving this and should be discontinued.

It is very clear to me that the youth crime crisis is state wide meaning that the issues are systemic rather than localised. Certainly each location experiences their own set of challenges that are unique to them, but this situation we find ourselves in is felt across the state. Our justice system is failing our kids. Our social services are failing our families. Our police can not keep up with demand. Our insurances are inadequate and often unobtainable. Our businesses are left to bear the cost of damages, theft and loss of productivity with no recourse and no relief. No sooner have they recovered from one attack, then they are attacked again and again. Our homes are not safe despite security measures and dogs in yards. There are no easy fixes, but one thing is clear – what we have is not working and I would suggest that we look to alternatives rather than trying to fix what is broken. At some point there comes a time when repairs wont work, and we need an entirely new product.

I wish the committee all the very best in your deliberations. I sincerely hope that you are open to new ideas and new ways of doing things as soon as possible.

With regards,

Emma Harman.