

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

Submission No: 187
Submitted by: Cairns Regional Council
Publication: Making the submission and your name public
Attachments: See attachment
Submitter Comments:

29 February 2024

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

Via email: youthjustice@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Submission to the Queensland Youth Justice Reform Select Committee

Cairns Regional Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the above inquiry, conducted by the Queensland Parliament's Youth Justice Reform Select Committee.

Local Government is a key player in community safety, through a focus on safety, wellbeing, and connectedness. As a public space manager, the role of Local Government spans from community-based crime prevention, including providing monitoring and intelligence, city-wide and site-specific safety planning and place-making, to setting protocols for behaviours and building social capital. Consequently, *Council has a significant interest in ensuring the justice system effectively meets its remit to protect the interests of the broader community while simultaneously responding to the needs of those most vulnerable within its institutions.*

Cairns Regional Council City Safe data indicates that persons under the age of 17 years account for a significant proportion of incidences of antisocial behaviour in the Cairns CBD and fringes, including offences of a more serious nature such as assault (CRC, 2022). Council's Community Safety Plan (2022-2026) highlights that approximately 40 young people under the age of 17 in the Cairns region are identified as high risk repeat offenders. This group are well known to both Youth Justice and Child Safety and Council acknowledges the complex health and social inequities experienced by this cohort. However, Council also stands by its position that everyone in the community has the right to feel safe.

In 2023, Cairns Regional Council engaged with counterparts in Townsville and Mount Isa to raise awareness of the range of anti-social behaviours and their significant impacts on constituents. Collectively this group raised concerns related to youth crime and called for immediate state government intervention to address the issue. Council also made calls for a total system overhaul that would curb the current trends as highlighted by a recent productivity commission report into government services (PC, 2023).

In the 2023 report, the Commission noted:

- Queensland recorded the highest daily average of young people in youth detention.
- More than half of youth offenders released from supervision were re-sentenced for new offences within 12 months of their release.



- Two thirds of nights in custody were spent by Indigenous children.
- Detention is considered the most expensive and least effective way to address youth offending - Queenslanders spend \$162 million every year on youth detention; that's more than \$1,800 per child every day (APC, 2023).
- Programs that have a rehabilitation, education and training focus are most successful in reforming behaviours (Cairns Safer Streets, 2023).

Recognising that many young offenders come from vulnerable backgrounds underpinned by dysfunction and entrenched disadvantage, overwhelming evidence suggests that current judicial policies further exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and criminality among young offenders. Increasingly research indicates that Queensland's youth justice sentencing model, in particular sentencing frameworks and the lack of access to sustained health-based and culturally appropriate rehabilitative programming and supports, has created a counterproductive system that perpetuates crime (Atkinson, 2022; APC, 2023). This has contributed to Queensland having the highest number of youth offenders in custody and the highest rates of reoffending in the country (APC, 2023). The need for an alternative approach is clear.

Cairns Regional Council supports the submission and recommendations provided by the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) to the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee. Additionally, Council advocates for youth justice reform that maintains a focus on public safety, but also places emphasis on rehabilitation and sentencing options that aim to address the underlying causes of criminality. We urge the Queensland Government to consider investment and policy reform related to:

- Expansion of place-based early intervention and prevention programs that encourage pro-social and protective behaviours and reduce the instances and severity of antisocial behaviour in young people.
- Long-term, mandatory health-based rehabilitative sentencing for serious repeat offenders, with high consideration of alternative custodial models.
- Greater connectivity and alignment between the policing, youth justice and judicial systems and sentencing principles to ensure sentences that allow a meaningful rehabilitative outcome.
- Service coordination and integration that provides consistent, evidence-based, therapeutic wrap around supports for young offenders that span sentencing, incarceration, and reintegration.
- Increased focus family and community wellbeing to improve reunification and reintegration outcomes.

In summary, Council urges the Commission to:

Advance holistic, culturally appropriate programs that apply a public-health lens in lieu of/or in addition to punitive focussed sentencing frameworks and spans all stages of a young persons contact with the youth justice system.

We thank you for your consideration of the recommendations above and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss the matters outlined in more detail. Should you have any further enquiries or require additional information, please contact Destry Puia, Director Lifestyle and Community, on the phone number above.

Yours sincerely



Mica Martin
Chief Executive Officer