

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

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QUEENSLAND Progressives

Youth Justice Committee submission

We would like to make a submission to the Queensland Parliament committee on youth justice reform. It has been galling watching the state of media literacy and political talking points on youth justice, in particular from the conservative elements of both. Going in the opposite direction to all of the evidence for what will actually reduce rates of juvenile offending and protect members of the community from traumatic events is not only bad politics, it is unconscionable. As Queensland Progressives moves to become a force for positive politics in the state, we will seek to put ethical and evidence based policy at the heart of what we stand for. Youth justice will be one of the areas we will focus on in an effort to bring nuance and balance to the conversation. We have a comprehensive plan that will cover all seven areas of concern that this committee is looking at.

To address point one, a 10 year strategy for youth justice in Queensland that engages all government agencies and community organisations is only going to be achieved by breaking down the current practice of creating silos for different policy outcomes. We have issues where people are unable to be treated for homelessness and drug dependency at the same time as an example, because two different departments have different selection criteria for what services they fund and what people are eligible. This is especially true with youth justice, where access to certain services are often age restricted. Youth receiving support through the foster system for example lose those supports the minute they reach a certain age, regardless of whether they are ready to be independent or not. What Queensland Progressives will seek to do is to create local community hubs, where different community groups and government agencies can work together to come up with holistic approaches to situations people face. It is only by including the community, especially in regional areas, that we will see true self-determination and improvement in behaviour and community spirit. Youth drop in centres acting with wrap-around services, and changing funding models to be service lead and community driven, will improve outcomes for the entire community. These hubs will also work to address the second point, instigating earlier assessment, intervention, and prevention strategies. By collating services in hubs that are community driven, you prevent the siloing of services that allows for people to slip through the cracks.

Accommodation services and youth infrastructure are part of a greater conversation on how service provision models are too transactional currently. The plan by Queensland Labor to fund and support 8 Youth Foyers across the state is a great plan, and a model we fully support. The longer term access to wraparound services is a great way to break the cycle, and we hope to see further support for initiatives like this. Another model that we support is the “rainbow room”, where 24 hour accessible emergency accommodation rooms are available for youth to get away from certain situations and have access to wraparound services in the morning. When youth are needing to be remanded or detained, we know that current service models need to be completely overhauled. The punitive nature of the current system is leading to far worse outcomes for youth. When the Queensland government is being reprimanded by the United Nations for breaking international protocols on torture due to our practices of putting kids in solitary confinement due to staffing shortages then we need to acknowledge the system is irreparably broken and in need of complete reformation. Queensland Progressives advocate for the model of youth justice that Hawaii works with. More information on this model and the history of Hawaiian youth justice is found at <https://www.cjcj.org/history-education/juvenile-corrections-reform-in-hawaii> for reference.

According to Justice Reform Initiative, Queensland youth detention centres are at 98% capacity, with about 60-70% of children in the system kept there on remand. This overcrowding is not being replicated in other states, which means it is time to acknowledge that the “tough on crime” rhetoric has well and truly failed. We don’t need to be tough on crime, we need to be smart on crime. By employing significant early intervention strategies that are community lead, ideally through the hubs, we will see a vast improvement in lower rates of recidivism. The key to effective and positive programs that reintegrate youth into society is that they are lead by the community to which the child belongs. This means that we acknowledge what works for one community may not be the best for another, and the government gives self-determination to communities to invest in the programs that are relevant. You wouldn’t have a rodeo training program in Brisbane, but it worked well in Mount Isa when it was in place there. The role of government in this area is to provide oversight and support, not to control in the way it too often does currently.

When it comes to sentencing principles, Queensland Progressives stand in staunch opposition to the current rhetoric of punitive incarceration. You do not teach a child responsibility and consequences by placing them in a system that only traumatises them further. The fact children are being put in adult watch houses currently because there is no space in youth facilities means that children are being exposed to dangerous and traumatic situations and abuses. We need to increase the community based supports and work to stop the current carceral system, because at the moment we are only turning out broken people that are becoming more violent as a result. In short, the current system is making our communities more dangerous, not more safe. This is also deteriorating public confidence in the youth justice system, which feeds into a vicious cycle. By reframing the conversation to allow nuance in our media conversations about youth justice, we can start to break the cycle. Instead of fear mongering by media and politicians, we need to work towards educating the public on what the underlying factors are. This will all be easier achieved through the community hubs, as they will become focal points for educational opportunities with the public.

We know that at the root of many of the issues in youth justice there is often some sort of trauma. This trauma in youth is not addressed, and people in the community then suffer further trauma as a result. The trauma suffered by victims of crime is often unaddressed, and currently there is no dedicated support service or pathway to healing for victims of crime. Community support is the key to healing this trauma just as much as it is the key to healing the trauma in youth. Queensland Progressives believe there should be a government funded support program for victims of crime, and better procedures for community outreach put in place by police and relevant institutions. Victims of crime all too often feel unheard and unsupported, and we seek to change this. We would like to see programs for individual or group counselling and better education on the grieving process and the healing process for victims, as currently there is ostensibly nothing.

The issues in the youth justice sector in Queensland are great, but not insurmountable. By focussing on community and rejecting the conservative rhetoric of violent systems as a form of punishment, we can work towards healing. It is through community that we find our greatest strengths and supports, and that is what Queensland Progressives will look to in helping address this crisis. We hope to see support for community hubs and the end of department siloing by government; the future of our youth and our society as a whole will depend on it.