

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

**Submission No:** 205  
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**Submitter Comments:**

Darumbal Community Youth Services Inc (DCYSI), is a Not-for-profit community based organisation in Rockhampton, Central Queensland. DCYSI's mission statement is 'We will uphold the rights of young people'. In our service we provide support primarily to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and their families experiencing vulnerability. DCYSI consists of Early Intervention Programs – providing generalist and holistic Case Management, Dardherri (Drug and Alcohol) program, Budaroo House (Youth Homelessness Shelter) and Youth Justice Programs. DCYSI supports youth through Case Management (including intensive Case Management), Mentoring, targeted Program Delivery and Community-based events.

The over-representation of First Nations young people in the Youth Justice system is prevalent in our small (regional) town of Rockhampton as it is nation-wide. There are many contributing factors to the over-representation and recidivism rates that stem from colonisation and intergenerational trauma, having profound impacts on the young people and families that we support.

It is our submission that there needs to be a comprehensive analysis and reform of the current Youth Justice system on all levels, from grassroots processes through to top level policy making, legislation and procurement processes.

One example of the change needed at a government level is the lack of funding provided to services such as DCYSI that are in many cases, best placed to be delivering the culturally and trauma informed specific supports to our young people to address criminogenic and wellbeing risk and need areas of our young people and subsequently, their offending behaviours. One recent example is that DCYSI had applied for funding around a program that was centred around Men's Business, embedded in culture and with a strong focus on building connections and holistic wellbeing for young men, particularly for those currently in the Youth Justice system. The program was based specific to the needs of our young men entrenched in both Child Safety and Youth Justice systems and would have had profound impacts on the life trajectories of our young people, with great potential of enabling young men to desist from crime on a long term basis. The funding was given to another organisation who had made their intent clear in their application to deliver their program in a specific discreet Aboriginal community. The Procurement process failed to assess their submission in a comprehensive way and once the organisation had received the funding, it was found that the discreet Aboriginal community that they had stated in their submission had not been consulted and did not provide permission for this organisation to enter their community. Since this time and the refusal of the discreet Aboriginal community for their involvement in community matters, the same organisation approached DCYSI for potential partnership – this did not progress as said organisation's programs were not written in respect to the current needs of our young people and to date there has been nil contribution from the organisation allocated to the funding in terms of addressing recidivism in a meaningful way. There needs to be comprehensive assessment of suitability, inclusive of consultation with Community Elders and respected leaders. State and Nation wide we are aware that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are grossly over-represented in the Justice system; however without being provided sufficient funding, these organisations, such as DCYSI are limited in their capacity to create meaningful change for our young people.

Another example of change needed at a government level is enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have a voice at a Parliamentary level. It is acknowledged that the recent Referendum has denied this right, however it is our submission that a process is put in place to ensure that genuine and meaningful consultation occurs with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, Elders and respected leaders. It is further our submission that input provided

by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is actioned and implemented. Without direct and genuine consultation with First Nations community Elders and respected leaders, incentives to address youth offending are largely unsuccessful as they fail to meet the key contributing factors and needs of the young people that are offending. Without direct and genuine consultation, the voice of our youth is unheard and consequently no intervention without this consultation has potential of being successful in addressing recidivism.

At a grassroots level, there needs to be a shift in the model of conventional Case Management that is often provided as a 'solution' in linking a young person in with support. The Case Management model has historically been adopted from public health systems which are again, not embedded in or relevant to cultural needs. This conventional Case Management model that is largely used by Government (and other) agencies repeatedly fails to consider the holistic wellbeing of our young people; the Department of Youth Justice and Child Safety, for example practice Case Management with young people who offend but again, this is a process that is often meaningless to young people who offend, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. For Case Management to effectively work and really target offending behaviours and wellbeing needs; the process needs to be embedded in cultural processes and protocols with the primary goal being healing. People do not offend when they are healed, people offend when they are impacted by trauma that has not been adequately addressed, this is pertinent to our youth. The current model of Case Management used by the Department of Youth Justice has aims to reduce offending but generally consists of referrals to other support agencies, case plans that the young people are not involved in developing and 'interventions' that fail to consider the deep-seated needs of young people contributing to repeated offending. One of the primary 'interventions' delivered by the Department of Youth Justice is a program called 'C.H.A.R.T' consisting of worksheets with questions pertaining to the young persons offending. While this program is evidence based in being built on principles of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, it has nil considerations to cultural responsivity needs and is delivered in a way that is not culturally appropriate for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth and because of this, has no genuinely positive impact on a young person's likelihood to offend.

Additionally, The Department of Youth Justice implement unnecessary barriers in terms of information sharing, stating that they are bound by client confidentiality – this has meant that oftentimes key information pertaining to the young person is not provided to organisations such as DCYSI which provides an unnecessary limitation on support agencies being able to target the problematic behaviour and effectively address the young persons needs. An example of confidentiality parameters incurring further barriers is that it is a regular occurrence that our young people are sent to juvenile detention and we are not informed until an enquiry is made by us and as such, the young person is placed in a significant place of vulnerability with their supports unaware of their whereabouts and therefore unable to provide meaningful support. It is our submission that upon intake with Department of Youth Justice, the young person is explicitly asked if they provide their consent for their support agencies to be privy to the information that the Department of Youth Justice collects or becomes aware of, in relation to their circumstances and matters.

In preparation for this submission, DCYSI have consulted young people that we have been working intensively with around their offending, wellbeing needs and the effectivity of Government interventions, initiatives and supports. The young people spoke about repeated experiences of being in systems that 'don't care', that 'speak in words we don't understand' and that 'are all about paper and not about listening to us'. Another comment that was stated by a 17 year old Aboriginal female was to the effect of 'maybe we wouldn't get to this stage if people listened to our pain when it happened. If people did something to help. Child Safety don't help. No one wants to listen. You get

workers and workers and workers who are meant to be your support, but none of them ever really cared enough to hear my pain and the abuse I have been through. We carry the pain and nothing changes. That's why we turn to crime.' In conversations with young people around crime, substance use and Domestic and Family Violence – the young people shared that their life trajectories are that of crime, suffering and institutionalisation as this was the experience for many of their parents. If we are going to break the cycle, we need to do something different as the current systems in place are not and never have worked for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and as a result, intergenerational trauma continues to cycle.

In conclusion, the reform that needs to happen needs to be a whole of systems reform; addressing top level processes and systems, addressing grass-roots processes and all systems in between. For true and meaningful reform to happen, organisations that are genuinely culturally informed and lead by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to be honoured in their cultural knowledge and be provided adequate funding – under the premise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a voice in contributing to how the funding will be used and what is most effective for our young people. At a grassroots level, the supports offered must be embedded in culture and delivered in a culturally safe way that empowers youth and comes from a place of meaningful connection, priority needs to be placed on the experience of the young person and on the voice of the young person. There needs to be a platform built for the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be heard and genuinely listened to; for it is our people that are experiencing the over-representation in all systems and horrific gaps in wellbeing outcomes and equity and it is our people that have the solutions.