




Speech By  
**Stephen Bennett**

**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

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### **STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY SAFETY BILL**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.09 pm): Many aspects of youth justice and youth crime are some of the most difficult and divisive issues we need to address—and that has been acknowledged in contributions in this House today—particularly when we focus on the youth involved, the families and the communities where we have seen youth crime escalate since 2015. There are substantial costs associated with crime in our communities. We know of the tangible costs associated with administering justice, such as operating police, courts and corrective/detention centres, and sadly of the intangible costs of harm experienced by victims of crime.

We have lost nearly a decade in reforms and, sadly, more is still required. We have again seen the media play a role in these legislative reforms being brought forward after a tragic Christmas of youth crime including hooning, carjacking, smash-and-grab robberies, violent assaults and, unfortunately, murder. It has forced the government to acknowledge that this difficult and complex area of reform is necessary, and our communities expect and deserve this parliament to work together to make sure our communities are safe. As we have heard time and time again as we travel around the state—and it has been mentioned previously—there is debate about where people now leave their car keys in their house. Do they hide them away so criminals have to ransack their home and risk violence against themselves, or do they leave them out in plain view so that those criminals can steal their car and hopefully leave them safe?

I have expressed before in this place my disbelief of some of the submissions to the committee that tried to advocate against youth justice reforms or blame other factors that somehow justify these offenders being treated differently. It is bad enough that we have seen this issue floundering for nearly a decade let alone seen certain groups advocating for some type of utopia in dealing with these dangerous youth offenders. It amazes me that with an investment of over \$1.1 billion since 2015 we still have no tangible improvements in our community's safety in dealing with these youth criminals. We have waited so long for the government to even begin to acknowledge that we have inadequate, soft-on-crime youth justice laws. I have sympathy for the families who have lost loved ones to crimes committed by repeat juvenile offenders, that could—and should—have been prevented. We desperately need solutions and we need to stop defaulting to what it looks like politically as opposed to the facts that relate to the youth crime crisis.

Although difficult—it is also politically difficult—to explain to a fed-up community, it is important that we invest more in those early intervention programs that may take time to influence a new generation of children. Despite many promises, the government has failed to implement appropriate early intervention programs and strategies including failing to improve the unfortunate school attendance rates. I reference comments made recently by Professor William Wood, who in acknowledging we have a significant problem, stated the issues have no hope of improving if we continue the 'tough on crime' trajectory in isolation. Professor Wood asks, 'How can we get a positive outcome for the community if we are tough on children who, in many cases, carry deep, traumatic scars from physical and sexual abuse, neglect, drug and alcohol dependency, financial insecurity or

impoverishment?' Usually it is a combination of these issues. When we consider early intervention, we need to also consider the time before a child is even born and issues such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, abuse against family members and their mothers and insufficient prenatal nutrition. Social disadvantage, cognitive and emotional development, education and health substandard service delivery do contribute to poor educational performance and early behavioural problems emerging.

Queensland needs to fast-track construction of custom designed, purpose-built remand centres for young offenders to deal with young people on remand. We desperately need suitable safe accommodation for them upon release. This issue should be a priority in terms of young people being housed in police watch houses, another youth justice failure we should be very unhappy to see continuing. When we again reflect on the \$1.1 billion being spent on youth justice reforms since 2015, I suggest the process should be undertaken in addition to the proposed Queensland Audit Office audit, 'Diverting young offenders from crime', which is expected later this year or next. It is a deep dive, a review, into government agencies, funded stakeholders—all who supposedly have a role to play in youth crime prevention etc. A blowtorch should be applied to the key performance indicators and the youth crime crisis failures. These departments need to be held to account.

Unfortunately, there is evidence of the need to refocus on outcomes of those who have a responsibility and who are funded, and I remind the parliament of the failures of those who have a responsibility to respond. I will give a couple of examples for the House. Report No. 14 of the committee I serve on, chaired by the member for Mansfield, was titled *Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland*. The committee travelled around the state and saw a lot of similar issues. A lot of issues will continue and will not be resolved until we acknowledge the problems. Then there is report No. 23, titled *Towards a healthier, safer, more just and compassionate Queensland: decriminalising the offences affecting those most vulnerable*. Unfortunately, there was similar evidence from submissions and witnesses that many responsible agencies et cetera have failed to deal with the underlying problems such as homelessness and entrenched disenfranchisement. I raised my concerns in a statement of reservation to that report about the performance of those who have a significant role to play in not meeting society's expectations. It is serious when, again in youth justice, we see program evaluation activity fragmented at best and many of the program's activities lacking accountability and transparency.

I welcome the changes being made in the bill, particularly the amendments to the Bail Act 1980 and the Youth Justice Act 1992 as well as the amendments to the Criminal Code, breach of bail as an offence for children, electronic monitoring, police powers to arrest for contravention of bail conditions, strengthening the youth justice sentencing framework, expanding the scope of 'prescribed indictable offence', transfer of persons turning or who have turned 18 years from youth detention centres, and the multiagency collaborative panels.

I want to go on the record in support of the shadow minister's proposed amendments to remove detention as a last resort as a sentencing principle from the Youth Justice Act 1992. I would have thought when we were considering these issues, and we do have a lot of bipartisanship, this could have at least been debated and given the respect it deserved. With all we do, we need to remember what ordinary Queensland taxpayers who fund the justice system have a right to expect, and that is that young repeat offenders be taken off the street and kept in secure premises well removed from the community while their rehabilitation and their sentencing becomes a priority.

In closing, I want to acknowledge all those crime watch groups, whether it is the Burnett Heads Neighbourhood Watch, the Moore Park Beach community or Facebook groups right across Queensland who have been powerful advocates for some of these issues that continue to be reported. Some of these groups have 20,000 to 30,000 members reporting every day on the tragedy, the crisis and the issues that confront the youth crisis in crime. Of course, we have to show respect and acknowledge the work they have done. Many of them up and down the coast have worked tirelessly to try to convince the government that their issues need to be resolved.

I give a shout-out to all those groups. I say congratulations on being determined and dogged in making sure these reforms come forward. Please do not give up highlighting the need for future reforms because, clearly, what we have before us tonight will not completely solve the problem of youth justice. We have to be bold, we have to be courageous and we have to get on with making sure that reforms are meaningful and tangible but, more importantly, that our communities are kept safe.