



*"Young people want to do well, it just comes down to the support we get."*

Youth Action submission to the Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities | May 2024

# Acknowledgment of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We understand that sovereignty was never ceded and recognise their continuing connection to lands, languages, waters, and cultures.

Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people. We recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



## About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We work towards a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and have their rights realised. We represent over 150 Member organisations and regularly engage with young people and youth workers from all over the state, as we have for over 30 years.

We give a particular focus to young people who are regional, First Nations, LGBTIQA+, with disability, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees, and doing it tough. We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches, and are informed by data and evidence. We are an ally to the self-determination of First Nations communities, are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector, and work to be a trust-worthy partner and collaborator.

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Cover photo by Leticia Quince.

## Artist Statement

Regional Artwork: 'Yanhanha Dayangun (Moving Forward)' by Leticia Quince This artwork reflects the journey of young people and the road they take to follow their aspirations. It's understanding that no matter how long and hard the road looks from a distance, you can achieve what you set your heart and mind on if you keep moving forward. The cultural significance of using the kangaroo silhouette within the sign and their tracks represents resilience. Kangaroos are one of two native Australian animals that can't move backwards. The reflection of the gum trees represents growth and overcoming adversity.

## About the Artist - Leticia Quince

Leticia is a proud Wiradjuri Torres Strait Islander yinaa 'woman' and Wiradjuri Artist. Leticia established her creative business, Leticia Anne Designs in March 2020 at the age of 23. Embracing the growth of her business and team, she launched Yirra Miya in February 2023 as her second business under her company Burralgang Enterprise Pty Ltd. Leticia uses her resilience and leadership qualities, reflecting from her lived experience growing up in the child protection system, to role model to other young entrepreneurs and youth. She represents the power of creating your own path, self-empowerment and following your aspirations. Leticia was a youth worker for six years and was awarded the Indigenous Achievement Award for 7 News Young Achievers in 2022 and a finalist for their Creative Award and Small Business Award for Leticia Anne Designs in 2023. Leticia is also the Deputy Chairperson of Youth Actions' Board of Directors.

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# Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on Law and Safety's Inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities. This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of young people from regional and rural NSW, as well as the youth sector that supports them who we have heard from throughout our advocacy work.

In preparation for this submission, we held an open online consultation with a total of 50 young people and representatives from the youth sector.

Representatives from the sector working in diversionary and wraparound services told us about how they support young people in regional and rural areas across the state. Regional and rural young people gave their feedback on what works to ensure safety in their local communities.

We have also heard a great deal of feedback on the issue of community safety and youth justice over the past 3 years from both young people and the youth sector as part of our Youth Justice Throughcare Initiative. This Initiative is the key initiative of our [Youth Action 2021-2024 Strategic Plan](#) and is overseen by a Steering Committee of youth sector representatives, many of whom are in regional areas. It is co-chaired by Miyay Birray, an Aboriginal community owned youth service in Moree. The Initiative looks to improve support and services for young people in conflict with the law by preventing them from going into detention in the first place and getting them back on track. As part of the Initiative we have conducted three forums with the youth sector which informed three roundtables with government and youth sector representatives. The topics

for these were: information sharing between Government and NGO's, education, and community programs. We also conducted specific consultations throughout 2023 and 2024 to gather information about young people's lived experiences of the law and justice systems. We spoke to young people and youth services across NSW, and in regional and rural NSW in areas such as Cowra, Broken Hill, Wilcannia and Moree. These consultations informed a collaboration project with the Australian Theatre for Young People which involved the development of *Saplings*, a play about young people's stories of the justice system. The play was performed as part of the 2024 Sydney Festival.

We recently launched our [Fair Go for Young People Campaign](#) which aims to raise awareness of how to reduce young people's contact with law and justice systems through greater investment in services and programs that support young people to thrive.

We have heard from over 250 young people and youth sector professionals throughout the Throughcare Initiative. In addition, we have drawn from our advocacy work in 2023 and what we have heard in our ongoing consultations with 2727 young people and 2478 youth sector representatives.

The recommendations in this report are drawn from two important pieces of research and consultation undertaken by Youth Action: our [Youth Justice Report](#) released in April 2024 as part of our Fair Go for Young People Campaign as well as findings from a report that will shortly be released, Key Tenet's of Successful Programs Working with Young People. We also look forward to hearing the outcomes of the Armidale Young People Doing It Tough Conference being held in late May 2024.



This submission responds to the following terms of reference:

- a) the drivers of youth crime across regional and rural NSW, particularly since the COVID pandemic;
- b) how a whole of government approach can reduce the drivers and root causes of youth crime in regional and rural NSW; and
- c) the wraparound and diversionary services available for youth and families in the regions and rural areas and how they can be better matched to individuals, measured, improved and integrated into a coordinated approach to divert youth from crime, having regard to the NSW Government's commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal people.

It is important for future solutions to be informed by the lived experiences of young people in conflict with law and justice systems and that solutions are co-designed with these young people. Suggested solutions that we have heard from young people who have engaged with us stem from the need for a greater investment in services and supports for young people ranging from improving access to services in rural, remote and very remote communities, expanded mental health support and early-intervention through to measures to improve community cohesion. The need for greater investment in young people is the key message of Youth Action's Fair Go for Young People Campaign.

# Key Recommendations

1. The Department of Communities and Justice consider a \$52 million increase, with \$20 million earmarked for regional NSW, for ongoing funding to expand youth service delivery in early intervention, youth development programs, disaster resilience and preparedness, and services aimed at increasing engagement, confidence and the participation of young people.
2. The Department of Communities and Justice in partnership with NSW Health, Local Councils, and non-government youth services invest in the establishment of 5 new youth hubs, with 2 new hubs in regional NSW and give further support to an additional 10 existing youth hubs, with 4 of those current hubs being in regional areas. These hubs should focus on providing a one stop shop for young people to access support services and programs. Resourcing for hubs should include a component for transport to assist young people from outside regional centres to access the hub as well as to provide outreach services to towns outside the regional centres.
3. Services targeted to Aboriginal children and young people in NSW should be designed and delivered by Aboriginal Community Owned and Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Aboriginal owned and controlled solutions must be a matter of first principle in working with Aboriginal young people and any increase in investment must prioritise Aboriginal young people and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
4. Invest in capacity of regional youth services through \$15 million funding increase to provide nonclinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs in 75 sites across NSW including at least 30 in

regional areas. This funding would increase the provision of additional staff to meet increased demand as well as provision of a diverse range of early intervention programs that can act as soft-entry points for accessing mental health support including outreach, drop-in, peer support, arts and recreation, and youth development models.

5. The Department of Communities and Justice fund the establishment of a state-wide interdepartmental and NGO working group on young people and the justice system in NSW. The working group should also represent young people with lived experience of being in contact with the justice system, young people who have experienced poverty, the Out of Home Care system and homelessness. This taskforce should have accountability for monitoring and tracking the implementation of recommendations from previous reports relating to youth justice, child protection, and community safety in addition to ensuring regular reporting to public and relevant stakeholders.
6. Greater investment in drug and alcohol support options for young people, with a focus on services being provided in regional areas across NSW so young people do not have to travel far from their communities and support networks to receive treatment. These options should include intensive residential rehabilitation and inpatient programs, counselling, therapeutic groups, health education and information provision.
7. Increased provision of after-hours and weekend programs to engage children and young people in meaningful activities in regional, remote and very remote areas. Activities should be free of cost, conveniently located, accessible to all children and young people and linked with opportunities to learn about and access support services.

8. School disciplinary procedures should be reformed and alternatives to long suspension should be introduced, including the expansion of suspension centres which link behaviour management strategies with the provision of learning support and expansion of programs. These alternatives to suspensions should be made available to young people in regional and remote areas.
9. Development of targeted employment support programs in regional NSW with expertise in working with young people tackling complex issues to assist them to transition into the workforce through opportunities to obtain work experience, apprenticeships and traineeships, certifications, and training in life skills.
10. Raise the age of criminal responsibility for young people in NSW from 10 years to 14 years.

## Full Summary of Recommendations

### Drivers of youth crime

#### Support for First Nations children and young people

1. Services targeted to Aboriginal children and young people in NSW should be designed and delivered by Aboriginal Community Owned and Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Aboriginal owned and controlled solutions must be a matter of first principle in working with Aboriginal young people and any

increase in investment must prioritise Aboriginal young people and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

2. NSW Health invest in Aboriginal Owned and Controlled Healing Centre and ensure a representative proportion of beds are allocated for young people from regional areas.
3. The Department of Communities and Justice provide funding to ACCOs to deliver a range of cultural support initiatives and programs that improve positive connections to culture for Aboriginal children and young people.
4. Expand the Aboriginal-specific bail accommodation trial in Moree to further regional sites to prevent adolescents from entering and staying in detention due to experiencing homelessness.

## Cost of living

5. Allocate an additional \$12 million to expand community-based learner driver programs in 40 additional sites, with at least 15 of those sites in regional NSW to support young people in NSW to obtain their learner and provisional licences.
6. Release the Review of Food Relief Provision commissioned by the former state government in 2021. Explore the establishment of a taskforce of NGO experts, including those working with young people, to advise on system improvements in relation to food security in the context of the cost-of-living crisis ([NCOSS](#), 2023).
7. Explore the feasibility of introducing a Youth Job Guarantee as identified to ensure that eligible young people are offered a job, paid internship or

training opportunity when they register as unemployed. Ensure special attention is paid to the challenges of finding paid employment for young people in regional and rural areas.

8. The NSW Government collect data on how young people on low incomes experience cost of living pressure from increasing energy prices and explore options to extend energy bill relief to young people living in shared accommodation who might not hold an energy account in their name.
9. The NSW Government collects data on young people's reliance on Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) loans to pay for necessities like groceries and energy. This data is used to build a reform agenda around young people's financial literacy regarding BNPL products and targeted measures that will limit the impact of BNPL on exacerbating existing hardship.

## Housing and homelessness

10. The NSW Government should bring Youth Justice, Child Protection, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) providers, relevant non-Government Organisations (NGOs), and peak bodies together to:
  - a. create an overarching policy for supporting homeless adolescents in sentenced and unsentenced detention, which delegates responsibilities based on accurate assessments of the capacity of each sector
  - b. train relevant staff across all sectors in the new inter-agency policy ([YFoundations](#), 2021).

## Legal reform

11. Raise the age of criminal responsibility for young people in NSW from 10 years to 14 years.
  12. Implement a waiver system for outstanding COVID fines on young people under 25 years.
  13. Amend the Bail Act to prohibit the refusal of bail due to a young person experiencing homelessness to prevent young people from being incarcerated as a result of not having secure housing.
  14. The NSW Government should enhance bail support by:
    - a. expanding the Bail Assistance Line to become an all-hours service that assists NSW Police and Youth Justice caseworkers.
    - b. increasing the number of fee-for-service contracts with Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) providers, particularly in rural and regional NSW.
    - c. funding Aboriginal-specific bail accommodation ([YFoundations](#), 2021).
- This Committee review the recent recommendations made by the Portfolio Committee No. 2 - Health's final report on Equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in New South Wales as a matter of priority. This should be done with a view to increasing mental health support across regional and rural communities in order to reduce young people's contact with the justice system unnecessarily and promote community safety.

## Health and wellbeing

15. This Committee review the recent recommendations made by the [Portfolio Committee No. 2 - Health's final report on Equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in New South Wales](#) as a matter of priority. This should be done with a view to increasing mental health support across regional and rural communities in order to reduce young people's contact with the justice system unnecessarily and promote community safety.
16. Invest in the capacity of regional youth services through \$15 million funding increase to provide nonclinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs in 75 sites across NSW including 30 in regional areas. This funding would increase the provision of additional staff to meet increased demand as well as provision of a diverse range of early intervention programs that can act as soft-entry points for accessing mental health support including outreach, drop-in, peer support, arts and recreation, and youth development models.
17. Increased investment of \$5 million to increase the capacity of the Youth Arts Sector to provide services and programs to improve the wellbeing of young people in NSW. Ensure \$1.6 million of this is for regional projects.
18. Investment of \$5 million in the capacity of the youth sector and others working with young people such as police, teachers, sports coaches, young people, or other community members to respond to young people tackling mental health challenges through the rollout of skills based, early intervention training such as mental health first aid or accidental counsellor training. Ensure \$1.6 million is provided to youth services in regional NSW.



19. Greater investment in drug and alcohol support options for young people, with a focus on services being provided in regional areas across NSW so young people do not have to travel far from their communities and support networks to receive treatment. These options should include intensive residential rehabilitation and inpatient programs, counselling, therapeutic groups, health education and information provision.
20. Support the federal government to explore options for increasing the provision of bulk-billed appointments under Medicare for all young people up to the age of 24, in particular those with no income or on a low income.
21. All children and young people should be screened for disability and health issues from early childhood and routinely thereafter in health, educational and justice settings and connected with appropriate support to address their needs and potential risk factors for coming into conflict with the law. Address the gaps in service delivery for diagnostic processes and early health screening in regional and rural areas.
22. Significant investment in existing youth mental health crisis support services so that those services can meet demand. Young people must be able to access timely support in emergency situations so as not to be put at risk.
23. Increase investment in free clinical mental health services and supports both face to face and online, beyond the 10 sessions currently subsidised through Medicare for young people in regional NSW to provide more accessibility through in person and telehealth options.
24. Increase awareness of the mental supports available to young people through schools, youth centres, outreach programs and any other

programs in contact with young people. Make information widely available and accessible to young people from all socially excluded groups and accessible to those in regional and rural areas.

## Education

25. School disciplinary procedures should be reformed and alternatives to long suspension should be introduced, including the expansion of suspension centres which link behaviour management strategies with the provision of learning support and expansion of programs. These alternatives to suspensions should be made available to young people in regional and remote areas.
26. Greater investment in the use of Small Group Tuition (SGT) in NSW high schools, including regional schools. SGT provides short-term support for students Needing Additional Support (NAS) as identified by the new NAPLAN standards or department and school-based assessments. Ensure that the needs of young people living more remotely, outside regional hubs are able to access tuition support either face to face or online.
27. Regional young people at risk of disengaging from school should be identified earlier and provided with tailored learning support, opportunities to receive counselling, referrals to appropriate support services, information about career pathways and assistance identifying and enrolling in courses and programs relevant to their goals as well as increasing access to and investment in alternative education options to keep young people who have disengaged from mainstream education connected to learning and career pathways.

28. Enhance teacher training in meaningful engagement, cultural competence, and trauma informed practice to improve capacity of teachers to respond to young people displaying challenging behaviours in school environments.

## Employment

29. Develop a comprehensive, whole of government Youth Employment Strategy, including a Steering Committee for oversight and monitoring, with young people's voices and lived experience placed at the centre of the Strategy. Such a strategy should identify a diverse range of education and employment pathways as well as promote secure work and training opportunities for all young people in NSW, with attention given to the particular challenges faced by young people trying to gain employment in regional and rural areas.
30. Development of targeted employment support programs in regional NSW with expertise in working with young people tackling complex issues to assist them to transition into the workforce through opportunities to obtain work experience, apprentice and traineeships, certifications, and training in life skills.
31. Increase resourcing to expand the availability of specialist youth employment programs in regional areas with a particular focus on study-to-work transitions and young people from socially excluded groups and those with limited education and employment experiences.
32. Expand existing number of places in traineeships and graduate programs within the NSW Public Service in regional locations for young people both

with and without tertiary education. Prioritise places for young people from socially excluded groups.

33. Increase the availability of vocational and industry training courses in regional NSW young people who are at risk or have disengaged from education to assist in development of preemployment skills.

## Youth voice and participation

34. Invest in training on how to work better with young people and ensure that all contracts with NSW Government embed youth participation and leadership into the design, implementation and monitoring of all NSW Government funded youth programs and policy development.
35. Invest in rights-based training for young people and the services that support them across NSW.

## Whole of government approach

36. Department of Communities and Justice consider a \$52 million increase, with \$20 million earmarked for regional NSW, for ongoing funding to expand youth service delivery in early intervention, youth development programs, disaster resilience and preparedness, and services aimed at increasing engagement, confidence and participation of young people.
37. Increased provision of after-hours and weekend programs to engage children and young people in meaningful activities across regional, remote and very remote areas. Activities should be free of cost, conveniently located, accessible to all children and young people and linked with opportunities to learn about and access support services.

38. The Department of Communities and Justice fund the establishment of a state-wide interdepartmental and NGO working group on young people and the justice system in NSW. The working group should also represent young people with lived experience of being in contact with the justice system, young people who have experienced poverty, the Out of Home Care system and homelessness. This taskforce should have accountability for monitoring and tracking the implementation of recommendations from previous reports relating to youth justice, child protection, and community safety in addition to ensuring regular reporting to public and relevant stakeholders.
39. The NSW Government map the current funding landscape in NSW in relation to resourcing for community safety and crime prevention programs targeting young people provided by federal, state, and local governments as well as philanthropic and private sector to identify gaps and solutions to address ongoing disruption in support for young people caused by cessation of short-term funding programs that are not replaced.

## Wraparound and diversionary programs

40. The Department of Communities and Justice in partnership with NSW Health, local councils, and non-government youth services invest in the establishment of 5 new youth hubs with at least 2 in regional NSW and give further support to an additional 10 existing hubs, with at least 4 current hubs in regional areas. These hubs should focus on providing a one stop shop for young people to access support services and programs. Resourcing for hubs should include a component for transport to assist

young people from outside regional centres to access the hub as well as to provide outreach services to towns outside the regional centres.

41. Under the NSW Government's commitment to secure jobs and funding certainty, the Department of Communities and Justice introduce provision of 5-year contracts for successful, evidence based programs to address the impact on staff retention in youth services and provision of diversionary and wraparound supports in regional and rural NSW caused by short term contracts and funding uncertainty.
42. The Department of Communities and Justice alongside the NSW Department of Health assess the limitations and barriers faced by young people in rural, remote, and very remote areas in terms of access to diversionary and wraparound services. Explore opportunities to increase options such as outreach or satellite models, transport assistance, or online service delivery to expand access to these services to young people who are currently unable to access them due to geographic barriers.
43. The Department of Communities and Justice, in partnership with local government and non-government youth services create opportunities for young people from regional and rural communities to be consulted and engaged in the creation of local solutions for regional and rural community safety. This should involve an accountability mechanism that reports back to young people on how their advice has been implemented.
44. More life skills programs geared toward children and young people tackling complex challenges should be developed and delivered in schools and through community-based support programs to prepare children and young people for independent living and adulthood.

45. Increase availability of intensive one on one casework support provided through place-based youth services in regional locations targeted towards young people identified as being at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system to assist them to successfully navigate the service system and remain engaged in education.
46. Explore opportunities for mentoring programs for young people tackling complex challenges to be delivered by community members, Elders, and other respected people with similar lived experiences to share knowledge and life experience.
47. Services for children and young people should be centrally located and where possible be co-located, have extended opening hours at times when young people are able to attend, and be linked with transport support, especially for young people in regional and rural communities.
48. Frontline staff in youth and community services in regional NSW be provided with training in child rights approaches, meaningful engagement, cultural competence, and trauma informed practice to enhance the quality of their work with children and young people tackling multiple, complex challenges.

# Drivers of youth crime in regional and rural NSW

## Access to support

### Community and youth services

Both youth workers and young people highlighted a lack of access to supports and programs across regional and rural communities across NSW. This spanned from early intervention, through to housing and employment support, alcohol and other drug support, domestic and family violence, access to mental health services as well as recreational, arts, life skills, and cultural programs. The lack of sufficient services to meet demand, particularly in regional areas, leads to extended wait times or no contact at all, both of which increases the chances of a young person coming into contact with the justice system. Young people from regional areas that we heard from through our Throughcare Initiative said that often the first time they received the support they needed to tackle issues such as mental health, drug and alcohol use, or education was when they came into custody.

### Mental health and wellbeing

Young people stressed the importance of access to good mental health support in ensuring that everyone, including their peers, feel safe within their communities. They identified a link between a lack of support for mental health crises and contact with the law and justice systems as the police were often the only available first responders in regional towns.



*“Young people want to do well, but it comes down to the resources that we are given ... It could be early-intervention programs, it could be providing a safe space for young people. It keeps them off the streets and supports them in a mental health sense.” – Regional young person, online consultation for this submission, 2024*

Young people with access to effective mental health support spoke strongly about its importance in keeping their peers safe so they are less likely to end up in trouble due to a mental health crisis.

*“My school has a wellbeing group. Whenever you feel that stress is getting to you ... we have activities, drumming, music class, walking around the school. In class, whenever someone is crying, they always ask the teacher if they can go for a walk and the teachers always say yes. It’s really good. It shows that they are understanding.”*

*“We also have a wellbeing officer. One of our old rooms has turned into a wellbeing office, there’s games, you can play games or chill with your friends. There is a lot of focus on mental health with young people.”*

*“Ever since the flood, in schools there has been a bigger push for counsellors and more qualified staff to help these issues. This has enhanced youth mental health incredibly.”*

– Regional young people, online consultation for this submission, 2024

Some young people talked about the issue of getting on the right medication in small communities when access to prescribing doctors is very limited. When a

young person enters custody, it was raised that their medication may be changed and then changed again when exiting the justice system. Being unable to access renewed prescriptions and having to wait to see new doctors can lead to periods of time without medication or treatment.

Both young people and youth workers highlighted a severe lack of access to adequate and affordable mental health support, including access to early-intervention and diagnosis.

*“Getting a mental health appointment is really difficult, it can sometimes be a 2-3 month wait. If a young person misses the appointment, it can be 6 months before they get seen.”* – Youth worker, Miyay Birray Moree, Youth Action Throughcare consultations 2022

Youth workers identified the role that youth services play in acting as a soft entry or first point of contact for support and referrals for young people experiencing mental distress. They spoke about how the demand for mental health support has increased significantly since the pandemic and other regional disasters. Services do not have the capacity to meet this demand.

Another key theme that emerged through consultations with youth workers was the inability to access diagnostic processes for conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, other neurodiverse conditions and intellectual disabilities. These young people depend on formal diagnoses as this unlocks access to NDIS supports. Access to diagnostic processes is limited in regional areas due to a number of factors including long waitlists or the high costs associated with private care. For young people outside of regional hubs or in

remote settings, we heard that sometimes there is no access to GPs, psychiatrists or psychologists. This also makes it more difficult to access medications or any ongoing support for mental health concerns. Workers spoke about how the culmination of the lack of appropriate mental health and trauma supports often result in behaviours such as drug and alcohol use, risk taking, or school exclusion that bring young people to the attention of police.

*“On the South Coast, there are only two paediatric psychiatrists in the whole region. One has closed their books while the other has a long waitlist.”*

*“Young people in Tamworth don’t even have access to GP services, let alone mental health professionals.”*

– Youth workers, Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Young people spoke about wanting to be able to talk to more adults in their communities that they could trust, but this was not limited to clinical mental health practitioners. Young people talked about the cumulative impact of the pandemic, COVID-19 lockdowns, and natural disasters on both their broader community and young people specifically. Young people spoke about the difficulty of having to look after their friends and family members experiencing mental health issues. They talked about how many of their peers were struggling and that there was not enough support.

*“It’s hard to sit and watch people who are close to you ... and then there’s no one to help them when they decide they want help”. – Young person, Wilcannia, Youth Action Throughcare consultations 2022*

The stress on existing services and supports also means that in some areas, young people requiring more complex or integrated support have limited support options.

*"Young people with complex issues are often not eligible for these programs, there is a big gap in relation to drug and alcohol services especially rehabs, there is no place for young people with complex needs."*

*"Young people are rejected because they are too violent or have drug and alcohol problems."*

– Youth worker, Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre, Youth Action Youth Justice Throughcare consultations, 2022

## Disengagement from education

Young people from regional and rural areas in our ongoing youth justice Throughcare consultations and our online consultation for this submission raised disengagement from education and training as contributing to young people making contact with the justice system. Many students feel that disengagement has long been a concern in their community and was only exacerbated by the lost learning and disconnection from schooling brought about by the successive lockdowns and transition to online learning. Young people gave examples about how they struggled to keep up with online learning styles and have since not returned to learning or have not yet made up for the learning that was lost.

Young people in contact with the justice system frequently talk about struggling in mainstream schools and can identify exclusion or disengagement from school as

a precursor to getting in trouble with the law. These young people often disengage from education due to unrecognised learning difficulties, mental health issues, or unresolved trauma experiences. Many had experienced multiple suspensions and attended numerous schools before leaving the education system. Those in areas where there are limited high school options available had particular difficulties in staying engaged in some form of learning.

Those who reengaged often did so through programs offering alternate education, vocational, and learning programs. These happened in a variety of settings, some were located in Department Education schools and TAFEs whilst others were run as partnerships with non-government organisations. They identified common positive elements about their educational experiences in these alternate learning environments regardless of the setting. The smaller class sizes, individualised teacher support, and tailored learning help them address the challenges they had in mainstream schools. The focus on vocational learning helped young people to have successful, educational experiences, often receiving certification for courses, something many had not attained in mainstream educational environment. These programs are often accessible in larger regional centres but not in smaller regional or remote areas.

Both young people and the youth sector recognise the important protective factor provided by educational and vocational engagement in reducing young people's contact with the justice system. Young people in our consultations highlighted the important role schools and learning institutions can play as a site to access valuable life skills and connection to supportive adults. They gave many examples about programs that are offered through partnerships between schools and non-

government youth services that they feel could be extended such as stress management, goal setting, financial literacy, employment and career skills, healthy relationships and consent education, and skills for independent living and vocational education such as learn-to-drive programs, barista, first aid, and white card courses. These programs often act as a soft entry point to connect young people to supportive youth services in their communities.

*“We need more living skills programs at school or other programs to stop young people disengaging from education.”* – Young person, JobLink Plus Broken Hill, Youth Action Throughcare consultations 2023

Youth workers observed that young people who struggled with school became bored due to a lack of adequate learning support. This cohort of students became further disengaged during the lockdowns and were unable to return to schooling. Many of these young people were in early high school during the pandemic have fallen further behind or disengaged in the subsequent years of high school. Many youth workers and teachers we have heard from say the negative impacts caused by the pandemic in regard to educational engagement and learning are still very real for young people today.

*“Young people aged 12 to 15 are falling through the gaps ... disengaging from school because they are struggling with their learning and becoming bored.”* – Youth worker, JobLink Plus Broken Hill, Youth Action Throughcare consultations 2023

In this context, school refusal and suspensions further alienate many young people from education and learning, with youth workers raising that keeping

young people connected to education is an important component of community safety.

*“School refusal and suspensions often result in young people becoming involved in crime.”* – Youth worker, Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Further compounding this, young people from areas affected by natural disasters such as flooding, and bushfires spoke about how schools in their regions struggled to support students who disengaged with education in this period. They also pointed out the disparity created when private schools in their area were better equipped to support students in times of disaster. They wanted to see more educational support to keep young people engaged in school in their region.

*“It’s important to create a standard because the dropout rates have increased along with substance use and youth crime [as a result of flooding].”* – Regional young person, online consultation for this submission, 2024

*“Something I want to see is educational opportunities for students in regional and rural areas, like afters school tutoring opportunities and more access to education. Tutors in my area are scarce and high price. It’s not economically feasible.”* – Regional young person, online consultation for this submission, 2024

# Lack of afterhours programs for young people in regional and rural communities

Young people and youth workers spoke about how there are inadequate levels of support and activities after school and on weekends in their communities. Youth workers additionally identified a lack of 24 hours access to safe spaces or staffed hubs to access mental health support in crisis situations. They felt that the lack of mental health, domestic family and sexual violence (DFS) support often results in them coming to the attention of the police as they are frequently the only after hours responders in regional towns. Young people identified that after hours, particularly at night, is when they and their peers are most likely to need support.

*"The times when our friends are down or being hurt, it's 3am and there's no one."*

*"Suicides happened in the early hours when they are by themselves, they had nowhere to go."*

– Young people, Youth Action Throughcare consultations 2022, Wilcannia Central School

They wanted to see more opportunities for young people to engage with other young people and their community outside of school hours. The young people we heard from in various consultations talked about how connection to community, family, peers and culture helps them to feel a sense of belonging which is another protective factor in relation to community safety.

*"I think after school activities and care is a great way for young people to interact with their community. After school ... that's when crimes are committed. But if*



*there are activities like sport, music or other things in the community, that may prevent them from committing crime because it will show them what community can look like.” – Regional young person, online consultation for this submission, 2024*

## Impacts of poverty, disadvantage, and exclusion

Youth workers spoke about seeing an increase in young people committing offences related to poverty such as stealing, and break and enters to gain money or goods to sell. They spoke about how many young people and families in their communities are significantly burdened by the cost-of-living crisis and other living pressures and feel criminal behaviour as a way to gain money is the only option. Youth Action heard from 308 regional and rural young people from across NSW in our 2023 pre-election polling. These young people overwhelmingly identified cost of living as a challenge that would influence their vote, with 81% selecting it as their top concern. Of their top cost of living concerns, regional and rural young people who responded to our survey highlighted food insecurity and housing as two key challenges with 80% choosing the cost of food and groceries and 77% choosing the cost of rent as their two highest cost of living concerns.

Workers felt that a greater focus on alleviating these pressures on families and young people could have a positive impact on young people’s offending behaviour.

*“Offences [by young people] are often about making money due to the impacts of poverty on the whole community.” – Youth worker, Youth Action online*

consultation for this submission, 2024

The other area that youth workers raised as a growing concern was an increase in the number of young people they work with who are engaging in more serious offending behaviour that are either influenced or encouraged by the adults in the community, some of whom were linked to organised criminal activity in the regional areas.

*“Crime emerges from grooming behaviours in smaller communities outside regional centres. This influences and pressures young people to participate in those activities.”*

*“Serious offending [by young people] is linked with grooming or coercive control from adults and organised crime.”*

– Youth workers, Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Youth workers felt young people, especially those who felt excluded from their communities, were susceptible to this grooming behaviour due to their desire to identify with what they perceived as the successful lifestyles of these adults, with money, prestige, and notoriety. Workers suggest the answer to this is to resource the capacity of services and community organisations to provide activities and opportunities that provide a greater sense of identity and purpose for these young people through connection to communities, families, peers and culture rather than connection to criminal elements in the community. They also felt police should target adult offenders who were known to be encouraging young people to commit offences and engage in criminal activity.

Young people likewise stressed that some members in their communities held negative views about them and their peers based on reporting and stereotyping of young people engaging in crime.

*“There is a lack of respect in our older people and police towards our young people. The general respect isn’t there. Young people don’t want to be here because there isn’t enough for them to do.”*

*“A lot of young people in our community do multiple jobs, yet they are still accused of doing crime by the police and the community.”*

– Regional young people, online consultation for this submission, 2024

These young people wanted to have more opportunities to engage with the broader community so people could get a better understanding about the experiences of young people in their regions. They wanted to be able work together with other groups in their communities to develop place-based solutions for whole of community safety initiatives.

## Insecure housing and homelessness

Young people who do not have safe and secure housing were identified by the youth workers we heard from as being more likely to make contact with the justice system due to the precarious nature of their daily survival needs and the underlying factors that may have led to their experiencing homelessness such as mental health or substance use issues, DFSV or trauma experiences. This was particularly concerning for young people exiting detention. Youth workers spoke about young people in custody who had made significant progress in addressing

the various issues that lead to them coming into custody but who were released without a safe or stable housing option.

*“They’re homeless, in insecure housing, domestic and family violence. Young people coming out of detention centres have nowhere to go.” – Youth worker, Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024*

Youth Action supports the findings and recommendations that came out of Yfoundations 2021 report [Young, in trouble and with nowhere to go: Homeless adolescent’s pathways into and out of detention in NSW](#). This report found that young people involved with Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) and the youth justice system share many risk factors such as being far more likely than the average population to come from families suffering from intergenerational stress and disadvantage. This is particularly true for First Nations families, who experience trauma with colonial policies and continuing discrimination. Yfoundations found that young people affected by homelessness are at greater risk of involvement in the youth justice system, and adolescents involved in the youth justice system are equally at greater risk of homelessness.

The report also shows that experiences of homelessness as a young person led to an increase in offending behaviour, such as justice procedure offences including breaches of bail, parole, community-based orders and AVOs.

Most notably, the report details the impact of bail conditions on young people who do not have fixed or secure housing. For young people in the Out of Home Care system or otherwise experiencing homelessness, the offence of breaching bail conditions is easily met. Youth Action supports the recommendations in full

made by [Yfoundations](#).

1. The NSW Government should routinely collect and publish detailed information about:
  - a. the housing status of adolescents entering and leaving detention
  - b. the number of homeless adolescents being detained under Section 28 of the Bail Act and
  - c. the length of time young people were detained under this provision.
2. The NSW Government should amend the Bail Act to remove the offence of breaching a bail condition for juveniles. This will decrease the number of homeless adolescents entering detention because they lack the necessary support to meet bail conditions.
3. The NSW Government should bring Youth Justice, Child Protection, SHS providers, relevant NGOs, and peak bodies together to:
  - a. create an overarching policy for supporting homeless adolescents in sentenced and unsentenced detention, which delegates responsibilities based on accurate assessments of the capacity of each sector
  - b. train relevant staff across all sectors in the new inter-agency policy.
4. The NSW Government should enhance bail support by:
  - a. expanding the Bail Assistance Line to become an all-hours service that assists NSW Police and Youth Justice caseworkers.
  - b. increasing the number of fee-for-service contracts with SHS providers, particularly in rural and regional NSW
  - c. funding Aboriginal-specific bail accommodation.

5. The NSW Government should increase the availability of and eligibility for intensive, evidence-based family interventions, to support homeless adolescents on community orders and those leaving detention.
6. The NSW Government should increase the availability of and eligibility for evidence-based placements for adolescents with complex needs, including:
  - a. therapeutic foster care placements
  - b. therapeutic residential care placements
  - c. drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs
  - d. adapted placements that meet the specific needs of Aboriginal adolescents.

## Policing

Both youth workers and young people emphasised that one consequence of the absence of appropriate support services in regional areas is that there is commonly a law and order response to young people experiencing emotional distress, exhibiting behavioural difficulties, or simply being more visible in public space due to having nowhere to go. Higher police presence and surveillance and lack of referral options often results in young people coming into contact with the justice system. These interactions can be exacerbated if police officers do not have sufficient training in relation to understanding of trauma informed practice with young people, youth engagement, or cultural safety.

*“Often young people in regional communities are experiencing an absence of resources and services which can lead to acts of crime.” – Regional youth worker, online consultation for this submission, 2024*

*“The services just aren’t here.” – Young person, Cowra, online consultation for this submission, 2024*

Young people and youth workers from a number of different regional and rural communities highlighted the poor relationship between young people, particularly First Nations young people and local police.

*“There was a Coronial Inquiry into a tragic death of a young person following a police chase that happened last week. Increased police presence such as the Riot Squad and Mounted Police has made everyone feel on edge. There have been protests but they have all been peaceful.” – Youth worker, Miyay Birray Moree, Youth Action Throughcare consultations, 2022*

Young people felt that issues such as young policing staff and high police turnover in regional communities resulted in a police force that was not always equipped to address the complex issues in their community.

*Young people said they wanted police to talk to them more and understand what was going on for them.*

*“They should talk to us and get to know the kids that get into trouble.”*

*“Moree police are often very young, they use threats to get young people to do things.”*

*– Young people, Miyay Birray Moree, Youth Action Throughcare consultations, 2022*

Youth workers similarly identified that for long term improvement in community

safety, increased police presence needs to be accompanied by increased investment in services available to support young people in trouble. This should be accompanied by greater opportunities for police and community services to work together to support young people.

*“We could all be doing a lot better working together ... we need to close the gaps in early intervention and diversionary programs.” – Youth worker, online consultation for this submission, 2024*

NSW Police Youth Action Meetings (YAMS) were raised in many of our consultations as an example of a NSW Police initiative that aims to support police, government agencies, and the youth sector to work together. Youth workers felt these provide a positive model for how everyone can share information and work collaboratively to support young people in their communities. Workers were hopeful that the rollout of the YAMS meetings across the state and coordination through NSW Police Youth Command will see an improvement for young people and communities in these areas.

## Whole of government approach

Throughout all our consultations relating to youth justice, youth workers have called for an integrated response to addressing the multitude of factors that drive young people to make contact with the justice system. Effective and proven youth engagement rely on a spectrum of programs and interventions including centre based programs, casework, intensive therapeutic support, and outreach or drop-in services.



Representatives from the youth sector spoke about how many young people have ended up in the justice system as the result of multiple systemic failure by areas of government such as child protection, health, justice, and education that leads many young people to go without the support they need.

*“It’s so important to have the whole of government approach because there are so many different contributing factors. A whole range of different things that are needed to address the spectrum of contributing factors that lead young people to engage with the criminal justice system.”*

*“It’s not just one singular thing that is causing this situation. There are multiple systemic failures that are contributing to the position young people find themselves in. It requires a multi-systemic response: community, NGOs, local government, state government (health, education, child protection, youth justice), federal government (income support, mental health, employment).”*

– Youth workers, online consultation for this submission, 2024

## Youth Services as soft-entry points

Throughout our ongoing consultations, young people and the youth sector spoke repeatedly about the strong, protective factors provided by a cohesive community and strong connection to community, family, peers, and culture. These conditions contribute to community safety by helping young people build resilience, feel a sense of identity and purpose, and provide important opportunities for young people to participate actively in their communities and engage with positive role models and youth development programs. The youth sector and young people

agreed that youth services and programs should be seen as an important component for this social capital investment. The deep relational work undertaken by the youth sector in providing opportunities for young people to develop skills to participate in decision making within their lives, have their voices heard, and become active citizens in their communities is a significant asset that can be utilised in addressing community safety.

Workers told us it can be hard to access funding for these innovative, strengths based early intervention and youth development initiatives as the criteria for funding programs frequently frame young people as problems with issues to be solved by external professionals rather than experts in their own lives who can benefit from adults working alongside them.

Trauma or other experiences of being let down by systems or individuals can mean that young people in conflict with the law or justice systems are mistrustful and uncomfortable about opening up about the challenges they are facing. Youth workers highlighted that youth services frequently serve as soft-entry points to these young people by first engaging them in youth development programs or other activities as a first step which can then lead to further connection with intensive individualised support.

Youth hub models have been identified by youth workers as an ideal setting to provide young people with easy access to a wide range of location-based programs and activities. A hub model for young people provides holistic support through the co-location of multiple youth services, programs, activities, and agencies within one central space. For young people dealing with an array of challenges, contact with a youth hub provides the opportunity to access

whichever service is needed in one place, a one stop shop for young people. Resourcing for hubs should include a component for transport to assist young people from outside regional centres to access the hub as well as to provide outreach services to towns outside the regional centres.

Youth workers felt that a whole of government approach to youth justice would benefit from strengthening the capacity of place-based youth services to conduct drop-in, outreach services, and prevention programs and activities to connect young people up with more individualised support.

## Interagency communication

Our Youth Justice Throughcare Initiative found that communication and collaboration between government organisations and non-government agencies is critical to supporting positive outcomes for young people tackling complex challenges and in contact with the justice system.

The youth sector identified several examples of where interdepartmental or interagency collaboration was already working well to share information and strategic planning across different systems.

YAMs meeting led by the NSW Police, as discussed earlier, were identified as an important first step in creating an informed and integrated approach to youth justice. YAMs involve local key government and non-government agencies coming together, in a structured forum, to share information, develop multi-agency action plans and implement tangible strategies with achievable outcomes to support the referred young person. The meetings identify young people who are at risk of

making contact with the justice system or becoming victims of crime. They develop strategies with tangible outcomes to ensure young people are referred to the right services and receive the support they need.

Youth sector representatives said initiatives like YAMs have the potential to create great outcomes as they bring agencies involved in a young person's life together to work collaboratively. They said they could be improved further by including young people more in the process by ensuring they are able to give input into the decisions being made about them.

They also felt that for YAMs meetings to be successful, it was important that all participants have an understanding about youth engagement and trauma informed ways of working with young people to ensure a balance between law and order and youth wellbeing priorities.

*"The YAMs program with Police is a great model but it is dependent on having the right people in the right roles. When this happens, we see great improvement in outcomes for young people."*

*"In our region YAMs has looked different over the years depending on whether the person in charge has a youth work or a law-and-order focus. Ties back to the importance of training for key people about engaging and working with young people."*

– Youth workers, Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

There are also many examples of placed based youth interagency networks, collaborations, working groups, and pilot projects happening in areas across NSW

which could be mapped and whose successes and learnings could be replicated in other areas.

Better partnership between community and youth services, education, health and the criminal justice system recognises that the factors contributing to youth offending are multifaceted and interconnected. Improved communication and collaboration through a whole of government response has the potential to pool resources, expertise and reach to target each of the underlying causes of a young person's contact with the justice system. Youth Action recommends that the committee consider the creation of a state-wide interdepartmental and NGO working group to facilitate more opportunities for whole of government collaboration on youth justice.

Youth workers felt that a state-wide interdepartmental and NGO working group could also assist to prioritise accountability by government departments in addressing recommendations previously made to improve a whole of government response to regional and rural community safety. Youth workers expressed frustration that there is a growing body of reports in NSW that already evaluate the current approach to youth justice in NSW and outline a number of evidence-based recommendations put forward by both government and youth justice advocates designed to improve community safety through support for young people.

*"Where is the follow up and action from all the reports, recommendations and evidence provided by the work of the youth sector that has happened over many years? You need to stop asking and use learning from these."*

*"Government needs to hold itself accountable, feedback to communities about what their changing and what's been done."*

*"Whole of government should mean "accountability " for what has been done about based on previous recommendations and evidence."*

– Youth workers, online consultation for this submission, 2024

They felt that the government should start by reviewing these recommendations with a view to implement them, rather than continuously seek feedback from the sector and communities.

Youth Action would like to draw the Committee's attention to the following recent reports:

- NSW Legislative Assembly Law and Safety Committee [Report on the Adequacy of Youth Diversionary Programs in NSW](#) 2018
- [Family is Culture](#), Independent Review of Aboriginal Children and Young People in OOHC in NSW 2019
- Yfoundations NSW [Young, in trouble and with nowhere to go: Homeless adolescents' pathways into and out of detention in NSW](#) report 2019
- Justice Reform Initiative [Alternatives to Incarceration in NSW](#) report 2024
- Youth Action [Fair Go for Young People](#) report 2024

# Wraparound and Diversionary services

Youth services that run wraparound or diversionary services for the young people in their communities report high levels of success in preventing contact with the justice system. These programs work effectively at every stage of a young person's contact with the justice system from drop-in youth services and outreach, targeted early-intervention programs, diversionary programs, re-engagement support through to intensive therapeutic support and transition back to community post-release from detention. Workers in our consultations highlighted that they frequently operate their services on limited, insecure, and precarious funding, and do not have capacity to meet the increasing demand. They also highlighted that whilst some regional centres may have good coverage, this is not the case in all areas, particularly rural and remote communities. Services that are funded to provide satellite programs where workers visit smaller communities are working well but this resourcing is not available to all regional communities.

Our Throughcare Initiative Steering Committee and our youth sector stakeholders have identified the recent tightening of bail restrictions for young people 14 – 18 years of age as damaging to young people, especially First Nations young people. Any move that increases the incarceration rate for young people is counterproductive, the focus needs to be on diverting young people from custodial options, instead keeping young people within their communities with access to the supports and services to help address their offending behaviour.

## Culturally appropriate support and leadership by ACCOs

First Nations young people have a right to receive support from community at every stage, from access to Aboriginal Community Controlled ('ACCO') early-intervention, through to support in community post-release from detention. This is particularly important given the high rates of First Nations young people in the youth justice and child protection systems. First Nations young people and youth workers spoke to us about how their communities want to be involved in creating place-based solutions, that use local knowledge to respond to local issues.

*"There's a whole lot of local solutions that we have, we just need to get a seat at the table."*

*"We have the people, just need to get them training."*

– Youth workers, Wilcannia, Youth Action Throughcare consultations, 2022

First Nations children and young people have specific needs in relation to their connections to culture, family, peers and community, and require access to reliable and culturally responsive services. Aboriginal owned and controlled organisations working in the youth justice space have the expertise to best respond with culturally appropriate interventions that target cultural identity and connection to community.



# Youth services and wholistic support

Youth services provide a spectrum of programs and interventions including centre-based programs, casework, intensive therapeutic support, and outreach and drop-in programs. Soft entry, or anchored service delivery provides young people a safe space, particularly for those young people who have had negative experience with adults and government agencies. It is predicated on the notion that relationship building is central to youth work and is one of the best ways to begin the journey to provide supports and services that are needed for a young person to thrive.

## Youth Outreach and Drop-in Services

Youth workers widely identified that drop-in and other youth service programs provide an important first step in connecting young people with a system of services and supports for a multitude of challenges. These kinds of soft-entry points can serve as non-coercive gateway for young people at risk of, or already making contact with police to engage in activities as well as receive assistance, guidance and resources before their situation escalates. They are young person-centred interventions as they provide a response based on what a young person identifies rather than what others think the young person needs. This is empowering for a young person who may have felt little agency throughout their life thus far.

One example raised in our consultations is the [Toastie and a Milkshake program](#) run through Shellharbour City Council at local youth and community centres.

Youth workers host 60 to 80 young people and provide an opportunity for them to

build relationships with staff and access support when they are ready.

This kind of soft-entry point can function as early-intervention by connecting young people with youth workers who are best placed to refer the young person to other necessary supports such as mental healthcare, employment support, alcohol and other drug support or support for domestic and family violence.

## Early intervention

Youth workers felt that early-intervention programs, when funded well, were key to diverting young people from making contact with the justice system and instead supporting them to thrive in their communities.

There are many examples of successful early intervention programs funded through the Department of Community and Justice's Targeted Early Intervention Program. These provide models of great placed based, community led practice that can be expanded and replicated elsewhere.

Another example of a specific youth justice early intervention program is the [Youth on Track](#) program which is funded by Youth Justice NSW and delivered across large regional centres such as in the Central West, Coffs Harbour, the Hunter, the Mid North Coast, New England and the Riverina. This is a very successful and effective program that uses a combination of individually tailored engagement strategies, one-on-one case management and evidence-based behavioural and family interventions that aim to reduce the risk of a young person coming into contact with police and law enforcement, improve relationships with family or carers and increase engagement with education, employment and the community. It is available to young people 10 to 17 years of

age who have had at least one formal contact with police and have additional risk factors such as homelessness, or a family history of domestic violence.

## Re-engagement in education, training and employment

Young people identified that disengagement from education and employment is a root driver of crime in their communities. Programs designed to support young people to maintain engagement in education and learning through academic, social and wellbeing support play an important role in youth justice throughcare.

In relation to education, young people talked about having greater access to counsellors in schools and for those counsellors to be better equipped to deal with young people and their issues. Some young people suggested that there should be at least two counsellors and two Student Support Officers (SSO's) in schools, young people thought that adults in these positions were more approachable than teachers. Young people also talked about the fact that teachers needed to be more aware of each student's personal circumstance. They stated that if young people were receiving support, it was often experienced as singling a young person out and was counterproductive. Young people stated that they needed to receive more guidance and support early in school, let young people know about who they can talk to, and not wait until they get into trouble. They thought schools were a good place to introduce the idea of mental health and help adults understand that it is normal. Young people talked about the need to access training to help young people become an adult, life skills training often came up in conversations.

As mentioned earlier in this submission, young people and the youth sector speak

highly of the positive outcomes young people can achieve through alternate education, vocational, and learning programs. Many of these programs are partnerships between youth services and schools or TAFE. Youth workers felt that there are many existing programs already in place and working well to support young people in regional areas who need support to re-engage in education or engage in alternate education programs.

One example raised in our consultations is [Making Tracks](#) based in Broken Hill. Making tracks supports high school students 12 to 17 years of age and takes young people referred from local high schools. They offer a mix of wellbeing support, life skills and driving lessons, education support, employment pathways and job readiness and engagement in skills and hobbies.

Similarly, [LeaderLife in Dubbo Catalyst program](#) is aimed at young men 13 to 18 years of age who are at risk of disengaging from education and who have had emerging contact with the criminal justice system. The program focuses on creating access to a youth support team who support the young person to reconnect with education and training, become work ready, find jobs, heal from psychological trauma and pursue positive life pathways. The success of the program is significant, with 78% of participants making no contact with the police after participating in the program and 83% working, training or back at school.

These types of programs are comprehensive in their approach and are designed to target the unique needs of the young person requiring support. With the goal of re-engaging in education, these kinds of wraparound supports meet the young person where they are at and can be pivotal in reducing contact with the justice system.

## Post custody reintegration

A system that will effectively deliver wraparound and diversionary services aimed at reducing young people's contact with the justice system in regional and rural areas across NSW must also prioritise comprehensive support for young people who have been in custody to transition back to community. This planning needs to begin whilst young people are in juvenile justice centres and continue seamlessly when they return to their community. Youth workers said there needs to be more resourcing for programs that supported young people exiting custody in the areas of health, housing, mental health and AOD support, employment and education re-engagement, support with financial hardship, and connection to services in the area they were returning to.

For example, youth workers working to provide transitional and then ongoing housing to young people exiting detention spoke about the importance of securing housing in enabling a young person to successfully re-enter and participate in the community.

*"Housing first as a cornerstone of supporting young people to thrive." - Youth worker, online consultations for this submission, 2024*

However, many young people still have nowhere to go once they exit detention.

*"We are working with young people coming out of custody who have nowhere to go once they leave, this sets them up to fail." - Youth worker, online consultations for this submission, 2024*

Young people identified progress they made from the structured environment of

being in custody and expressed anxiety about what might happen when they were released. They talked openly about wanting to be connected to supports and services in their communities that could help them thrive and achieve their goals to prevent them from returning to detention.

## Uncertain Funding Climate

Workers from across the youth sector emphasised the importance of resourcing for evidence-based diversionary and wraparound services that support young people within their local communities. However, these youth workers consistently identified the challenges posed by operating within an insecure and precarious funding climate with an increasing demand for services. They said this is further complicated by the complexity of how funding to programs and services for young people in conflict with the law is delivered through federal, state, and local government, philanthropy, local businesses, and the corporate sector. This funding is delivered across various short term, non-recurrent programs and contracts through to long term ongoing funding. Many services do their best to “cobble together” buckets of funding through multiple sources to meet the needs of the young people they serve.

One youth worker based in Tamworth spoke to us about youth services in the region pulling funding in a piecemeal way (from sources such as Regional NSW, Federal Department of Social Services and private funders) to offer a model that is similar to Youth on Track which whilst operating in Tamworth, does not operate in smaller towns such as Narrabri. This funding is both insecure and short-term (18 months) and so the program is always at threat of shutting down. Youth workers

stressed that this kind of piece-meal approach to funding youth services is unsustainable and would like to see long term funding that extends programs like Youth on Track's past regional centres to more remote communities that have young people that would benefit from the program.

Youth workers expressed frustration that evidence-based programs often stopped due to cessation of short term or non-recurrent funding programs, despite their proven effectiveness at improving outcomes for young people and diverting them from getting into contact with the law. Young people in the regions said that these programs had a real impact on their lives but it no longer exists due to the funding finishing.

An example of this was the cessation of the Federal Government's Community Safety program which ceased in April 2024 with no announcement about a replacement program. This left youth services such as Regional Youth Support Service on the Central Coast and Miyay Birray in Moree who were funded under this program with no choice but to wind up a Youth Hub in Gosford and a court support and night outreach project in Moree both of which have been operating very successfully for the past three years.

Youth workers stressed that funding uncertainty also impacted staff retention and their capacity to undertake the deep relational work required to support young people that is underpinned by the creation of trusting relationships with young people and the community over time.

In other consultations, young people and youth workers reiterated the particular challenge for young people living outside regional centres. Youth workers

highlighted that services can be contracted to cover a whole region making it look like the region is well covered with appropriate early-intervention and other diversionary services. However, workers and young people told us that service delivery is still frequently limited to regional centres, with young people living more remotely expected to come into town to access these supports which can be very difficult if transport options are limited. In some areas there is access to satellite programs that visit their community, or local communities. However, it was emphasised that such programs are often insufficient, if an appointment is missed or delayed it can be weeks or in some cases over a month before a young person can make a subsequent appointment.

*“We look like we are well covered by other large service providers but these are only satellite programs ... if you miss them, it could be a fortnight or a month until they come again” – Youth worker, Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre, Youth Action Youth Justice Throughcare consultations, 2022*

## Youth Participation

The young people from regional and rural communities that we heard from for this submission said they wanted to be included in the design of solutions to promote community safety in their areas. They shared many ideas about what could work to make communities safe for everyone, including themselves and their peers. They spoke about the need for improved social cohesion in their local communities. They agreed that wraparound and diversionary services play a very important role. Most importantly however they said efforts to improve the



relationship between young people and their community was paramount to creating safe communities. They felt that the young people making contact with the justice system needed to feel a sense of belonging and connection to community along with access to supports and services within their communities to help them address the underlying reasons for their engagement in the justice system. This was particularly the case for First Nations young people.

*"I come from a small town with a large Indigenous population. We often find that a lot of the negative stereotyping that gets in the way initially will eventually lead to the young person being in the system. They are told that they are going to offend, so they do it anyway." – Regional young person, online consultation for this submission, 2024*

The young people we heard from suggested that getting young people more involved in their community through events was one way to start improving community safety.

*"We have a number of annual events that attract a lot of young people. It brings people together and we don't see a lot of the youth crime spike during those times." – Regional young person, online consultation for this submission, 2024*

Young people also emphasised that the key to improving safety in regional and rural communities was to involve young people in decision making and the design of solutions. One young person spoke to us about being part of a crime prevention committee as part of their local youth council. Not only do young people have a right to be involved in decision making, but the young people we

heard from identified that they were best placed to understand the drivers of youth crime, what supports were missing and what solutions were most likely to be effective.

Youth Action urges the Committee to include young people from regional and rural communities in the development of solutions, especially those young people who are most likely to be impacted by policy decisions, such as those already in contact with the justice system. Platforms to engage young people such as youth councils, advisory groups and community forums are already working well in many areas and can be used as models to engage young people as part of the solution.

## Conclusion

Young people coming into contact with the justice system and the youth sector that supports them emphasised that their local communities are safest when young people are equipped with the supports they need to thrive. They were clear that community safety in regional and rural communities is underpinned by investments in social infrastructure, resources and supports. Effective improvements to the youth justice system require listening to the expertise of those young people with lived experience, incorporating their insights, and inviting them to actively participate in the design, development and implementation of solutions that are pragmatic and effective.

We urge the Committee on Law and Safety to ensure that any response to their inquiry is grounded in the stories of evidence-based practice that already works to promote safety in regional and rural communities across NSW.

Youth Action would be happy to present to the Inquiry with further content that we have heard from through our Youth Justice Initiative over the past 3 years, as well as support the Committee's connection to youth services that are already providing these supports to young people or young people themselves.