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POWERING **kids**helpline

# Inquiry into Australia's youth justice and incarceration system

A submission to the Senate Legal  
and Constitutional Affairs References  
Committee

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## Introduction

**yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's youth justice and incarceration system. With over sixty years of experience working in communities throughout Australia, **yourtown** is a trusted provider of evidence-informed, family-centred services for children, young people, and families. Our work spans mental health and wellbeing, early intervention, education and employment, accommodation, and social enterprise, delivered both face-to-face and virtually to meet diverse community needs.

Our programs include:

- Kids Helpline @ School – early intervention and prevention in schools through counselling, skill-building, and emotional support.
- Kids Helpline – Australia's only free, confidential 24/7 counselling service for children and young people aged 5–25, responding to over nine million contacts over 35 years.
- Employment services – supporting disengaged young people to engage with employment, education and further training through Transition to Work, Get Back in the Game and Skilling Queenslanders for Work.
- Social enterprises – paid work opportunities for young people at risk of long-term unemployment, helping them gain experience and transition to open employment.
- Accommodation supports – crisis and transitional housing, therapeutic support, and safe accommodation for vulnerable young people and families.
- Targeted early intervention and family support programs – including CARE Plus, Starfish, Deception Bay Communities for Children, and young parents programs, focused on child development, emotional wellbeing, and parenting skills.

Through these initiatives, **yourtown** demonstrates a strong commitment to supporting young people's wellbeing, building skills and confidence, and creating pathways to positive futures.

## Focus of this submission

This submission addresses two core objectives in the additional Terms of Reference:

- Engaging and co-designing with young people who have lived experience in the youth justice system.
- Presenting evidence on effective alternatives to incarceration, including diversionary, therapeutic, and community-based programs.

It outlines practical, evidence-informed strategies to reform Australia's youth justice system, reduce reliance on incarceration and improve early intervention strategies. The key priorities are:

- Embed co-design and human-centred design as national standards.
- Make sustained engagement in education and training a national priority.
- Expand investment in skill-building and employment pathways.
- Embed family-centred interventions to address root causes of youth offending.
- Prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions as the foundation of reform.
- Ensure access to stable and safe accommodation as a core protective factor.

Together, these strategies provide a roadmap for a youth justice system that is inclusive, culturally responsive, and focused on prevention, rehabilitation, and long-term social outcomes.

**yourtown** is well positioned to provide feedback to the Inquiry because of our extensive experience supporting children and young people who are highly exposed to the social drivers behind youth offending and our solution focussed engagement with young people. This frontline perspective gives us unique insight into complex factors such as family instability, disengagement from education, unemployment, housing insecurity, trauma, and systemic

disadvantage. As a result, we offer practical and evidence-informed recommendations for reform.

## Evidence and recommendations for youth justice reform

### Engaging young people with lived experience

Australia's youth justice system has historically excluded young people with lived experience from meaningful participation in policy and program design. This omission perpetuates ineffective, punitive approaches that fail to address root causes of offending and often exacerbate disadvantage.

**yourtown's** Your Voice<sup>1</sup> project captures and amplifies the perspectives of young people, giving them an opportunity to share their experiences, concerns, and ideas on issues that affect their lives and communities. Your Voice (over 4,000 participants nationally) confirms that young people want systems designed with them, not for them, and that their insights are critical to creating safe, inclusive communities. Young people in Your Voice highlighted deep structural issues driving crime, such as poverty, homelessness, mental wellbeing and the lack of regional support, combined with a negative view of young people. They call for a preventative approach that deals with the root cause of offending behaviours rather than relying on punitive, reactionary measures. Young people highlighted the need for support that manages family instability, housing insecurity, community attitudes, and cost of living, while also ensuring that mental health, addiction and diversion programs are readily available. Underpinning these concerns is a clear frustration with government inaction and the absence of meaningful consultation with affected communities, reinforcing the need for policies shaped by those most impacted.

The Senate Inquiry plays a critical role in shaping national standards and driving reform across youth justice systems. By setting clear expectations, influencing federal funding priorities, and providing strong public and political leadership, the committee can accelerate consistent, evidence-based approaches nationwide.

To achieve this, the Inquiry should recommend embedding co-design and human-centred design principles as core national standards for youth justice policy and programs. These principles ensure that policies are shaped by those most affected and designed around their real needs:

- Co-design: A collaborative process where those affected by a system actively participate in shaping solutions. It goes beyond consultation to shared decision-making, ensuring programs reflect lived realities and cultural contexts.
- Human-centred design: An iterative approach that prioritises the needs, experiences, and aspirations of end-users, in this case young people, through empathy, ideation, and testing.

**yourtown** has embedded co-design and human-centred design across services and advocacy, creating award-winning models the Inquiry can cite as national exemplars. Our Good Design Award Gold for *Reimagining Kids Helpline – Imaginarium* and the Youth Participation Award for the *Youth Engagement Strategy 2024–2026* showcase how young people are integrated into governance, service design, and decision-making. Through structured co-creation, specialist human-centred design partnerships, and youth associate

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<sup>1</sup> Your Voice is **yourtown's** national, youth-led consultation and codesign initiative that gathers the lived experiences and priorities of young people to inform evidence-based service design and policy recommendations for earlier, more accessible, and integrated supports.

**yourtown.** (2025). *Your Voice report: Elevating the voices of young people.* **yourtown.** <https://yourtown.com.au/your-voice>

designers, we have re-engineered mental health and support services to reflect lived experience. These practices demonstrate how participation can be hard-wired into governance, delivery, and evaluation, thereby making reforms credible to young people and accountable to the community.

Altogether, these approaches are proven to increase engagement, trust, and effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Framing them as national benchmarks linked to federal funding and legislative guidance will help deliver systemic change across all jurisdictions.

**Recommendation: Make co-design and human-centred design a national standard for youth justice reform.**

Governments should adopt coordinated strategies to ensure young people with lived experience are central to policy and program development. This requires:

- Establishing youth advisory panels at national and state levels, with representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and other marginalised groups.
- Linking federal funding agreements to demonstrated use of co-design and human-centred design in youth justice initiatives.
- Publishing best-practice guidelines for trauma-informed, culturally safe engagement and co-design processes.
- Investing in capacity-building for agencies and community organisations to implement participatory design effectively.
- Mandating transparent reporting on youth participation and outcomes as part of national performance frameworks.

Evidence shows that co-design and human-centred design increase engagement, trust, and effectiveness, making them essential for creating a youth justice system that is rights-based, inclusive, and outcome-focused.

**Evidence of effective alternatives to incarceration, including diversionary programs**

Incarceration is not an effective response for most young people in contact with the justice system.<sup>3</sup> It compounds trauma, disrupts education, and increases the likelihood of re-offending. **yourtown** advocates for a shift towards therapeutic, trauma-informed, and community-based alternatives that address the root causes of offending. Early intervention and prevention programs, tailored to the needs of vulnerable cohorts, are essential.

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*Youth crime can only be properly addressed where issues such as family, housing insecurity and well-being are properly addressed, rather than introducing children into the criminal justice system. Your Voice participant, 18-25, Qld*

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<sup>2</sup> Adam, M. B., Minyenya-Njuguna, J., Kamiru, W. K., Mbugua, S., Makobu, N. W., & Donelson, A. J. (2020). Implementation research and human-centred design: How theory-driven human-centred design can sustain trust in complex health systems, support measurement and drive sustained community health volunteer engagement. *Health Policy and Planning*, 35(Supplement 2), ii150–ii162.

<sup>3</sup> Day, A., Malvaso, C., Boyd, C., Hawkins, K., & Pilkington, R. (2023). The effectiveness of trauma-informed youth justice: A discussion and review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1157695.

Research shows that early contact with the justice system increases the likelihood of poor future outcomes, interrupted education, and long-term mental health impacts. Early intervention and diversion are more cost-effective and lead to better social outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

### Supporting engagement in education

Disengagement from education, training, and employment is a major risk factor for youth offending in Australia. National data shows that young people not enrolled in school or work are disproportionately represented in youth justice supervision and detention.<sup>5</sup> In 2022–23, police took formal action against 182 out of every 10,000 young people aged 10–17, and while national data does not specify education status, state-level evidence indicates the link is significant. For example, Queensland Youth Justice Census data shows that 45% of young offenders were not enrolled in school or any educational program, nor engaged in training or employment.<sup>7</sup> This highlights a critical policy gap: disengagement from education strongly correlates with justice involvement.

Educational disengagement drives social exclusion, low self-worth, and vulnerability to offending. Contributing factors include inconsistent identification of at-risk students, limited flexible learning options, and poor data sharing between schools and agencies.<sup>8</sup> Keeping young people engaged in education is a proven alternative to incarceration. Early identification, targeted family support, and investment in diverse, culturally responsive education pathways are essential, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other minority groups.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, research confirms a strong link between low academic achievement and youth offending. Disengagement is cumulative and requires tailored interventions and teacher development to sustain engagement.<sup>10</sup> Maintaining participation in education and training reduces offending risk and promotes positive life outcomes.

Alongside traditional disengagement, Australia faces a growing national issue of school refusal, where students experience severe anxiety or distress that prevents attendance despite parental support and school engagement efforts. Without targeted strategies to address school refusal, this trend will continue to present long-term challenges for youth justice and social inclusion. School refusal is often linked to mental health concerns, bullying, and unmet learning needs, and can escalate into chronic absence and complete withdrawal from education.<sup>11</sup> Addressing this requires coordinated responses that integrate mental health support, family counselling, and flexible learning environments. Strategies must include early identification, trauma-informed practices, and collaboration between schools, health services, and community organisations to re-engage students in safe and supportive ways. Failure to act risks entrenching disadvantage and increasing vulnerability to offending behaviours.

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<sup>4</sup> Malvaso, C. G., Delfabbro, P. H., & Day, A. (2022). The relationship between early contact with the youth justice system and later outcomes: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 137, 106493.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). Youth Justice in Australia 2023–24. Canberra: AIHW. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-justice-in-australia-2023-24>

<sup>6</sup> Productivity Commission. (2024). Report on Government Services. Canberra: Productivity Commission. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services>

<sup>7</sup> Queensland Government, Department of Youth Justice. (2023). *Youth Justice Census summary report 2022*. Brisbane: State of Queensland. Retrieved from <https://www.qld.gov.au/youthjustice>

<sup>8</sup> Arnez, J., & Condry, R. (2021). Criminological perspectives on school exclusion and youth offending. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2021.1905233>

<sup>9</sup> Lankester, M., Coles, C., Trotter, A., Scott, S., Downs, J., Dickson, H., & Wickersham, A. (2025). The association between academic achievement and subsequent youth offending: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*, 10, 477–500.

<sup>10</sup> Gossner, M., Dittman, C., Lole, L., & Miller-Lewis, L. (2025). Community insights into school disengagement: Perspectives from a regional-rural Australian context. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 35(2), 1–18.

<sup>11</sup> Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. A. (2014). A response to intervention model to promote school attendance and decrease school absenteeism. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 43(1), 1–25.

In addition, suspension and expulsion from schools (sometimes starting at very young ages) compound disengagement and disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and those with disability or complex needs. Exclusionary practices often remove students from protective environments and increase exposure to risk factors such as unsupervised time, peer influence, and community disconnection. Evidence shows that punitive responses do not address underlying behavioural or wellbeing issues and can accelerate pathways into the youth justice system. Alternatives to suspension and expulsion, such as restorative practices, positive behaviour support, and wraparound services, are essential to keep children engaged and learning.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendation: Strengthen engagement in education and training as a core youth justice prevention strategy.**

Governments should prioritise policies and programs that keep young people connected to education, vocational training, and employment pathways. This includes:

- Early identification and support for students at risk of disengagement, with coordinated family and community interventions.
- Investment in flexible, culturally responsive learning options that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other minority groups.
- Improved data sharing and collaboration between schools, justice agencies, and social services to ensure timely intervention.
- Targeted teacher development and tailored interventions to sustain engagement and address low academic achievement.
- Specific strategies to address school refusal, including integrated mental health support, trauma-informed practices, and flexible learning options to re-engage students safely and effectively.
- Reducing suspension and expulsion through restorative and inclusive practices, ensuring behavioural issues are addressed without removing students from protective learning environments.

Maintaining participation in education and training reduces the risk of offending, promotes social inclusion, and delivers positive life outcomes. Engagement in education must be recognised as a proven alternative to incarceration and embedded as a national priority across justice and education systems.

### School-based and after-school initiatives

School-based activities and after-school initiatives together offer highly effective alternatives to incarceration for young people. Programs such as Kids Helpline @ School, which operate during school hours, provide students with structured opportunities for counselling, skill-building, and emotional support within the classroom environment. These interventions help young people to develop resilience, improve social skills, and address challenges before they escalate. Importantly, these initiatives can play a critical role in addressing school refusal, a growing national issue where students experience severe anxiety or distress that prevents regular attendance. By embedding mental health support, flexible engagement options, and trauma-informed practices within school-based programs, schools can re-engage students who might otherwise withdraw completely from education. After-school initiatives complement these efforts by creating safe spaces during high-risk periods outside regular school hours, offering mentoring, recreational activities, and positive engagement with trusted adults.

<sup>12</sup> Avery-Overduin, B. L., & Poed, S. (2023). Breaking the culture of school suspension: Alternatives to external suspension and exclusion for P–6 students. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 28(4), 249–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2023.2276023>

By keeping young people connected to supportive environments and role models both during and after school, these programs reduce the likelihood of offending and re-offending. Evidence shows that early intervention through school-based and community activities leads to better social outcomes and is more cost-effective than punitive approaches, underscoring the importance of investing in these strategies for youth justice reform.<sup>4</sup>

**Recommendation: Make sustained engagement in education and training a national priority to prevent youth offending.**

Governments should adopt coordinated strategies to keep young people connected to school, vocational training, and employment pathways. This requires:

- Early identification and intervention for students at risk of disengagement, supported by targeted family and community services.
- Investment in diverse, flexible, and culturally responsive education pathways, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other minority groups.
- Improved data sharing and collaboration between schools, justice agencies, and social services to ensure timely support.
- Tailored interventions and teacher development to address low academic achievement and sustain long-term engagement.

Evidence shows that disengagement from education is a major risk factor for youth offending, while sustained participation reduces offending risk, promotes social inclusion, and delivers positive life outcomes. Education engagement must be recognised as a proven alternative to incarceration and embedded as a core element of youth justice reform.

### Skill-building and employment pathways

Skill-building and employment pathway programs that link young people to vocational training, apprenticeships, and job readiness initiatives are highly effective alternatives to incarceration. Many young people who come into contact with the justice system face barriers such as disengagement from education, long-term unemployment, a lack of practical skills and reduced economic opportunities. By providing structured opportunities for skill development and pathways to meaningful employment, these programs address the root causes of offending and promote positive life trajectories which then significantly reduces the likelihood of re-offending and improves social integration for justice-involved youth.<sup>13</sup>

**yourtown's** social enterprises offer paid work in areas such as construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance, helping young people gain real-world experience, build confidence, and transition to open employment. Over 25 years, more than 4,000 young people participated in **yourtown's** social enterprises and training and employment programs, with 84% transitioning to further employment and training. The social enterprises provide a \$3.80 social return on investment for every dollar invested. **yourtown's** programs show that young people who engage in skill-building and employment pathways are more likely to secure sustainable jobs, develop essential life skills, and avoid further contact with the justice system. These outcomes highlight the importance of investing in vocational and employment-focused interventions as part of a comprehensive approach to youth justice reform.

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<sup>13</sup> Verbruggen, J. (2015). Effects of unemployment, conviction and incarceration on employment: A longitudinal study on the employment prospects of disadvantaged youths. *Oxford University Press on behalf of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies*.

**yourtown's** Get Set for Work (GSFW) program delivers intensive, youth-specific support that bridges gaps left by mainstream employment services. GSFW targets young people aged 15–19 who have left school or are at risk of disengagement, including those referred after contact with police. The program combines nationally recognised training (Certificate II), employability skills, and wraparound support such as mental health screening and case management. **yourtown's** GSFW program is designed to help young people build resilience, confidence, and practical skills that support their transition into education or employment. Program data and participant feedback indicate that these supports contribute to sustained engagement and improved life outcomes. GSFW is the only youth-specialist, employer-led program in Queensland, and its success demonstrates the value of locally tailored interventions in reducing long-term unemployment and justice involvement. These results align with national evidence that skill-building and employment pathways reduce recidivism, foster social inclusion, and deliver significant economic returns.<sup>14</sup> Programs that integrate practical training with psychosocial support are particularly effective for young people at risk of, or currently engaged with, the justice system.

**Recommendation: Expand investment in skill-building and employment pathways as a cornerstone of youth justice reform.**

Governments should commit to sustained funding and national coordination of programs that connect young people at risk of, or in contact with, the justice system to vocational training, apprenticeships, and job readiness initiatives. This includes:

- Scaling proven social enterprise models that provide paid work experience and transition support into open employment.
- Embedding skill-building programs within justice and education systems to address barriers such as disengagement from school, long-term unemployment, and lack of practical skills.
- Prioritising culturally responsive and locally tailored pathways to ensure equitable access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and other disadvantaged groups.
- Ensuring that youth specific community and employment programs are funded to meet the distinct needs of young people.
- Measuring outcomes through social return on investment frameworks to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and long-term community benefits.

Evidence shows that structured skill-building and employment pathways reduce re-offending, foster social integration, and deliver significant economic returns. These interventions must be recognised as essential alternatives to incarceration and embedded in national youth justice strategies.

### Family-centred interventions

Many young people who come into contact with youth justice have experienced significant family instability, trauma, and disadvantage. Supporting families as a whole, rather than focusing solely on the individual young person, leads to better outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Family-centred programs, such as therapeutic support for parents and children, wrap-around case management, and assistance with housing, education, and employment, address the root causes of offending and strengthen protective factors within the home environment. These

<sup>14</sup> Lindeman, K., Howard, M., & de Almeida Neto, A. (2017). *Evaluation of vocational training in custody: Relationships between training, post-release employment and recidivism* (Research Publication No. 57). Corrective Services NSW. Retrieved from <https://correctiveservices.dci.nsw.gov.au/documents/research-and-statistics/057-evaluation-vocational-training-post-release-employment-and-recidivism.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Armstrong, G., & Weber, Z. (2023). Family-focused approaches in youth justice: Evidence and practice in Australia. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 44(1), 45–59.

interventions help families rebuild relationships, improve communication, and create stable, nurturing environments that reduce the likelihood of re-offending. Family-centred approaches not only prevent youth offending but also promote long-term wellbeing and social inclusion.<sup>415</sup>

**Recommendation: Embed family-centred interventions as a core component of youth justice reform.**

Governments should invest in programs that strengthen families and address the root causes of youth offending by:

- Providing therapeutic support for parents, children and siblings to heal trauma and improve relationships.
- Delivering wrap-around case management that integrates housing, education, health, and employment assistance.
- Building protective factors within the home environment to create stability, nurture resilience, and reduce re-offending.
- Ensuring culturally responsive and inclusive approaches that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and other disadvantaged groups.

Evidence shows that family-centred interventions not only prevent youth offending but also promote long-term wellbeing, social inclusion, and stronger communities. Embedding these approaches within national youth justice strategies will deliver sustainable outcomes across generations.

### Prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led solutions

Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people remain significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system.<sup>16</sup> This systemic issue reflects deep-rooted social and economic disadvantage, intergenerational trauma, and a lack of culturally safe responses. Current approaches continue to rely heavily on incarceration, which fails to address these underlying causes and perpetuates cycles of disadvantage.

National youth justice reform must prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions as an effective alternative to incarceration. These solutions should empower communities to lead the design and delivery of early intervention programs, diversion strategies, and culturally grounded justice models. Community-controlled organisations must be funded through long-term contracts to ensure stability and trust, and their programs should integrate education, health, and social supports to tackle the drivers of offending behaviour.

Evidence shows that programs delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations achieve better outcomes in reducing offending and improving wellbeing.<sup>17</sup> These approaches overcome barriers of mistrust that young people experience with mainstream services. National data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Closing the Gap reports confirm that culturally safe, community-led early intervention strategies are essential to meeting targets to reduce youth detention by 30% by 2031.<sup>18</sup> Successful diversion

<sup>16</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Closing the Gap targets: key findings and implications – Youth Justice*. AIHW. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/closing-the-gap-targets-key-findings-implications/contents/youth-justice>

<sup>17</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2023). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on what works in social and emotional wellbeing programs*. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-perspectives-what-works>

<sup>18</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). *Closing the Gap targets: key findings and implications – Youth Justice*. Canberra: AIHW, 2025.

for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people must be grounded in nine key principles that reflect cultural authority and evidence-based practice:<sup>19</sup>

- Community-led design
- Cultural safety and trauma-informed practice
- Holistic, strengths-based support
- Early intervention
- Flexible, individualised responses
- Involvement of Elders
- Integration with education and employment
- Connection to family and community
- Strong accountability through evaluation

These principles provide culturally responsive approaches that address over-imprisonment, strengthen Indigenous self-determination, and deliver evidence-based alternatives to incarceration.

The success of Murri Courts in Queensland demonstrates the effectiveness of culturally grounded justice responses. Evaluations by the Australian Institute of Criminology<sup>20</sup> and Ipsos<sup>21</sup> show that Murri Courts achieve key objectives: reducing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in detention, improving court appearance rates, and lowering reoffending. These courts work because they embed community ownership, involve Elders and respected persons in sentencing, and adopt a therapeutic approach aligned with cultural values. Key components include comprehensive assessment of a young person's circumstances, active participation of family and Elders, and linking individuals to tailored support services managed by a Murri Court coordinator. Evidence confirms that these features strengthen trust, promote rehabilitation, and deliver more sustainable outcomes than mainstream courts.

While Murri Courts operate in only 15 locations compared to 131 Magistrates Courts across Queensland, many other courts provide Community Justice Group programs in 52 locations. For example, Beenleigh Court does not have Murri Court support services but does provide a Community Justice Group service. These groups, generally led by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and respected persons, play a vital role in supporting culturally appropriate justice processes, including assisting Murri Courts where they exist. Community Justice Groups provide advice to courts, support defendants, and strengthen community engagement, ensuring cultural perspectives are embedded even where Murri Courts are not available.

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<sup>19</sup> Cunneen, C., Russell, S., & Schwartz, M. (2021). Principles in diversion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 33(1), 1–18.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC). *Evaluation of Murri Courts in Queensland*. Canberra: AIC, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Ipsos Public Affairs. *Murri Court Evaluation Report*. Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney-General, 2021.

**Recommendation: Prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions as the foundation of national youth justice reform.**

Governments must commit to long-term investment in community-controlled organisations and culturally grounded justice models that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead the design and delivery of early intervention, diversion, and rehabilitation programs. This requires:

- Sustained funding through long-term contracts to ensure stability, trust, and continuity of services.
- Embedding the nine principles of effective diversion, including community-led design, cultural safety, trauma-informed practice, holistic support, early intervention, flexible responses, involvement of Elders, integration with education and employment, and strong accountability through evaluation.
- Expanding Indigenous sentencing courts nationally, building on the proven success of Murri Courts in Queensland, which reduce detention rates, improve court compliance, and lower reoffending.
- Strengthening and resourcing Community Justice Groups, which operate in dozens of locations and provide culturally grounded support where Murri Courts are not available.
- Integrating education, health, and social supports within justice responses to address the drivers of offending behaviour and promote long-term wellbeing.

Evidence confirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led programs achieve better outcomes by overcoming mistrust of mainstream services, reducing overrepresentation in detention, and strengthening community resilience. National reform must embed Indigenous self-determination and culturally responsive solutions as essential alternatives to incarceration.

### Stable and safe accommodation

Stable housing serves as a critical protective factor for young people vulnerable to involvement in the justice system. It provides a safe and supportive environment that helps address underlying issues such as homelessness, cost of living pressures, family instability, and exposure to violence, all of which are known contributors to youth offending. When young people have access to stable housing, they are better able to engage with education, employment, and therapeutic support. This promotes positive development and reduces the likelihood of re-offending. Research consistently highlights the importance of stable housing in improving outcomes for at-risk youth and preventing further involvement with the justice system.<sup>4</sup>

The current rise in cost-of-living pressures is exacerbating housing insecurity for young people and families. Escalating rental costs and financial stress are forcing families to make trade-offs between essential needs such as food, utilities, and housing stability. Research shows that these economic pressures increase the likelihood of housing stress and homelessness, which in turn disrupts access to education and health services and heightens mental health challenges.<sup>22</sup> For young people already at risk, these conditions can lead to disengagement from school and reduced participation in employment or training, thereby creating pathways into the justice system. Addressing these challenges requires integrated responses that combine housing support with financial counselling, family assistance, and access to employment opportunities.

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<sup>22</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). *Housing assistance in Australia 2023*. AIHW. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2023>

**Recommendation: Ensure access to stable and safe accommodation as a core protective factor in youth justice reform.**

Governments should invest in housing initiatives that provide young people at risk of justice involvement with secure, supportive, and culturally appropriate accommodation. This requires:

- Expanding crisis, transitional, and long-term housing options tailored to the needs of vulnerable youth.
- Integrating housing support with education, employment, and therapeutic services to promote stability and positive development.
- Addressing systemic drivers of homelessness and family instability, including poverty, violence, and intergenerational disadvantage.
- Partnering with community-controlled organisations to deliver culturally safe housing solutions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Evidence demonstrates that stable housing reduces re-offending, strengthens engagement in education and employment, and improves long-term wellbeing. Housing must be recognised as a foundational element of youth justice reform and embedded in national strategies to break cycles of disadvantage.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our experiences as part of ongoing consultations. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Tracy Adams, CEO of **yourtown** via email at [advocacy@yourtown.com.au](mailto:advocacy@yourtown.com.au).

## Appendix 1

### Outcomes and impacts of youth incarceration across jurisdictions in Australia

Australia's youth justice system continues to produce poor outcomes for children and young people. Incarceration is still frequently used as a first response, despite mounting evidence that it exacerbates trauma, disrupts education, and entrenches disadvantage. Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that, contrary to political rhetoric, youth offending rates have declined nationally over the past decade, with overall rates down 28% since 2013–14.<sup>23</sup> However, children in detention remain disproportionately affected by poverty, homelessness, disability, and disengagement from education. Over half of young people under supervision have had prior contact with child protection systems,<sup>24</sup> and a significant proportion come from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> These findings demonstrate that punitive approaches do not address the root causes of offending. The system should prioritise therapeutic, trauma-informed, and community-based interventions, including diversion programs, safe accommodation, and pathways to education and employment. Such reforms would support positive development and reduce re-offending.<sup>26</sup>

### Compliance and non-compliance by prisons/detention centres with the human rights of children and young people

Current practices in youth justice facilities frequently breach the human rights of children and young people. The use of isolation, lockdowns, and detention in adult-designed watchhouses, combined with inadequate access to basic facilities and reports of racism and abuse, are inconsistent with Australia's legal obligations.<sup>27,28</sup> In 2024–2025, several states have introduced or reinstated punitive measures, such as the use of spit hoods in the Northern Territory and tougher bail and sentencing laws in Victoria and New South Wales. Queensland continues to override its own Human Rights Act for youth justice. **yourtown** calls for rights-respecting, trauma-informed care in all custodial settings, a ban on harmful practices, and improved workforce training.<sup>29</sup> Rehabilitation and accountability must be achieved without compromising the rights and wellbeing of children.

### The Commonwealth's international obligations regarding youth justice

Australia's youth justice system remains largely punitive and does not fully comply with international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The National Youth Justice Scorecard (2025) found that five of eight states and territories have

<sup>23</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025, March 6). *Recorded crime – offenders, 2023–24 financial year*. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-offenders/latest-release>

<sup>24</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *Young people under youth justice supervision and their interaction with the child protection system 2022–23*. Canberra: AIHW. <https://doi.org/10.25816/g60-xv16>

<sup>25</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025, March 28). *Youth justice in Australia 2023–24: Socioeconomic area*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-justice-in-australia-2023-24/contents/characteristics-of-young-people-under-supervision/socioeconomic-area>

<sup>26</sup> Day, A., Malvaso, C. G., Boyd, C. M., Hawkins, K., & Pilkington, R. (2023). The effectiveness of trauma-informed youth justice: A discussion and review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1157695. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1157695>

<sup>27</sup> Foulds, J., Shalev, S., Monasterio, E., Campbell, A., Shuttleworth, R. R., & Kinner, S. A. (2025). Public reporting on solitary confinement in Australian and New Zealand prisons and youth detention facilities. *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 27(1), 19–26. Retrieved from <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2025/06/13/public-reporting-on-solitary-confinement-in-australian-and-new-zealand-prisons-and-youth-detention-facilities/>

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Law Centre. (2024, February 12). *Abuse thrives behind youth prison walls*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrlc.org.au/updates/abuse-thrives-behind-youth-prison-walls/>

<sup>29</sup> Parliament of Australia. (2025). *Chapter 4 – Human rights compliance in the youth justice and detention system*. In *Australia's youth justice and incarceration system: Interim report*. Retrieved from [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal\\_and\\_Constitutional\\_Affairs/Incarceration47/Interim\\_Report/Chapter\\_4\\_-\\_Human\\_rights\\_compliance\\_in\\_the\\_youth\\_justice\\_and\\_detention\\_system](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Incarceration47/Interim_Report/Chapter_4_-_Human_rights_compliance_in_the_youth_justice_and_detention_system)

systematically denied children's rights under "tough on crime" policies.<sup>30</sup> **yourtown** advocates for a national child-rights approach, including the incorporation of the Convention into Australian law and the alignment of youth justice practices with child-rights principles. It also stresses the importance of systematically including children's voices in the design and decision-making processes, drawing on participatory models such as those used in the National Children's Commissioner's consultations.<sup>31</sup>

## The benefits and need for enforceable national minimum standards for youth justice

Fragmentation between states and territories, shifting policies, and funding cuts have hindered progress towards coherent reform and accountability.<sup>30</sup> **yourtown** recommends establishing enforceable national minimum standards for youth justice, consistent with international obligations. This would require a national architecture, including a National Taskforce, a Cabinet-level Minister for Children, a Ministerial Council for Child Wellbeing, and a National Children's Act. Such measures would ensure consistent standards and improved outcomes across all jurisdictions.<sup>32</sup>

## Raise the age of criminal responsibility and invest in early intervention

Criminalising children as young as 10 years old entrenches disadvantage and increases the likelihood of re-offending.<sup>33</sup> In 2023, the ACT and Northern Territory raised the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years, but the NT has since announced it will revert to age 10. Victoria and Tasmania have committed to raising the age in coming years, while other states have introduced harsher bail and sentencing laws targeting children. **yourtown** strongly supports raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 for all offences, alongside national minimum standards for detention age and investment in early intervention and holistic, community-based responses for under-14s.<sup>34</sup> Transitions from custody must be supported by funded, wrap-around services, including family engagement, case management, and pathways to education, training, and employment.<sup>35</sup> **yourtown** also advocates for continuous evaluation and evidence-building to guide future reforms.

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<sup>30</sup> Save the Children Australia & 54 Reasons. (2025, December 3). National Youth Justice Scorecard: Federal Government must act to end backsliding on child rights. Retrieved from <https://www.54reasons.org.au/post/yj-scorecard-launch>

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2019). General comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in juvenile justice. Retrieved from <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g19/316/49/pdf/g1931649.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission. (2024). *Help way earlier!: How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing*. Sydney: AHRC. Retrieved from <https://humanrights.gov.au>

<sup>33</sup> Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. (2025, March 11). *Report on Australia's youth justice and incarceration system*. Retrieved from <https://cfecfw.org.au/report-on-australias-youth-justice-and-incarceration-system/>

<sup>34</sup> Baidawi, S., Ball, R., Sheehan, R., & Papalia, N. (2024). *Children aged 10 to 13 in the justice system: Characteristics, alleged offending and legal outcomes*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/crg77185>

<sup>35</sup> Walsh, T., Fitzgerald, R., Cornwell, L., & Scarpato, C. (2021). Raise the age – and then what? Exploring the alternatives of criminalising children under 14 years of age. *James Cook University Law Review*, 27(1), 1–30. Retrieved from <https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/JCULawRw/2021/3.pdf>

**yourtown** is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

### Our services

- Domestic and family violence refuge, transitional housing, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Early intervention mental health services for children aged 0-18 years old and their families
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments.
- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support 24x7 to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991
- Kids Helpline @ School delivering early intervention and prevention programs to primary and secondary schools nationally
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills, and
- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to support young people at risk of long-term unemployment to re-engage with education and/or employment.

### Face-to-face Programs for Children and Families

**yourtown** provides accommodation and intensive individualised support to vulnerable at-risk young parents and their children through our San Miguel service. For over 40 years, San Miguel has provided a place to call home for vulnerable and at-risk families. In 2024-25, San Miguel supported 33 parents and 41 infants and young children.

**yourtown's** CARE Plus program in Port Pirie is an early intervention and family support service that aims to improve the development and wellbeing of children. We support students to continue to engage meaningfully in their education. On average, CARE Plus supported 25 children and young people each month in the last financial year.

**yourtown's** Starfish program supports children and young people aged up to 18 years to improve their emotional health and wellbeing. We provide outreach early intervention and prevention support in the Moreton Bay and Logan communities. The program supported 270 families in the last financial year.

**yourtown** is the Facilitating Partner for Deception Bay Communities for Children services. These community-based prevention and early intervention strategies support the development and wellbeing of children up to 12 years of age. In 2024-25, Coordinated Advocacy and Referral for Early Intervention assisted 114 families, Wolbai (a culturally safe, appropriate, and socially inclusive program that supports children and families) assisted 110 families, and Connected Families (which aims to strengthen parenting, wellbeing, and community connections for families) supported 182 families.

**yourtown's** Penrose Young Parents Program in Port Pirie South Australia and Glugor Young Parents Program in Deception Bay Queensland provide practical parenting support to help with child development, life skills, and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments. In 2024-25, Penrose supported 45 parents and 42 children and Glugor supported 31 parents and 42 children.

### Family and Domestic Violence Refuge and Transitional Housing

**yourtown's** Family and Domestic Violence Refuge provides safe, supported accommodation for women and children for up to 12 weeks, or longer depending on individual needs. The refuge is staffed by a specialised, trauma-informed team where families can begin to rebuild their lives. The service is designed to

foster empowerment, restore self-agency, and support women and children to reconnect with their strengths, aspirations, and sense of control.

Families exiting the refuge may transition into **yourtown's** Transitional Housing Program, which offers continued safety and stability for up to 12 months. This program is a critical bridge to long-term, independent living and includes wrap-around support tailored to each family's goals. This includes assistance with legal and financial matters, employment pathways, education access, therapeutic support, and helping children settle into school and community life.

The refuge also offers an Outreach Program at exit, enabling families to maintain connection with the refuge and receive ongoing support after their stay. This continuity of care ensures women and children remain supported as they navigate their next steps for as long as they need. In 2024-25, **yourtown** supported: 29 parents and 48 children through refuge accommodation and 21 parents and 38 children through transitional housing.

### **Kids Helpline**

**yourtown's** Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for those aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances. Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 9 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 34 years since our service was first established, while also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels. In 2024, our Kids Helpline counsellors responded to 133,386 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 4,632 crisis responses for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

### **Parentline**

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable. In 2024-25, there were more than 6,000 counselling contacts with parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

### **Employment Services**

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, and Get Back in the Game provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment. During 2024-25 almost 5,000 young people were supported in our employment services and programs in South Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales.

### **Social Enterprises**

**yourtown** has worked with young people and employers to break down barriers to sustainable employment for 25 years. As a leader in work-based enterprises we provide young people at risk of long-term unemployment paid jobs in the following areas: construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance to help their transition to open employment. In 2024-25, almost 300 young people were employed in our social enterprises across South Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales.