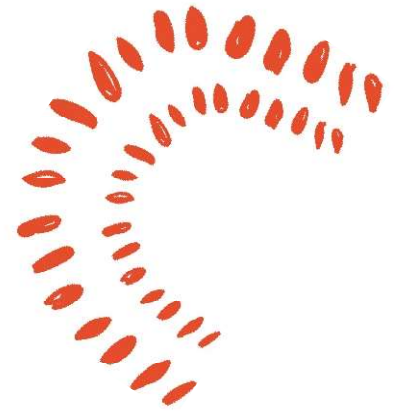




Yarning for Change: Interim Report

August 2022



The Queensland Family and Child Commission acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands, seas and skies where we walk, live and work.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures across Queensland and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge the important role played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and recognise their right to self-determination and the need for community-led approaches to support healing and strengthen resilience.

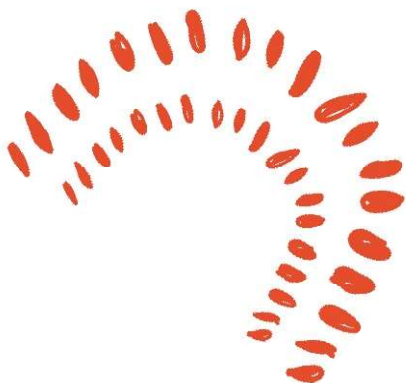




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Introduction

“Give us all the same life. If we all had the same life, I guess we’d all be the same.”

Male participant, 14 years



Over the last six months, the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) has been yarning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people about their experiences of the Queensland youth justice system.

Children and young people have a right to have a say in the decisions about their lives and their futures. They also want to make things better for other children and young people who may encounter Queensland’s youth justice system.

The QFCC seeks to influence change that improves the safety and wellbeing of Queensland’s children. We achieve this with a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families and advancing the rights of all children and young people in Queensland.

Under the *Queensland Family and Child Commission Act 2014*, the QFCC has the function to promote and advocate the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, particularly children in need of protection or in the youth justice system.

Yarning for Change is a qualitative study being led by the QFCC to investigate the lived experiences of children and young people aged 8 to 25 years who are in contact with the Queensland youth justice system. The aims of the study are to:

- assess the impact of current youth justice reforms on the wellbeing and rights of children and young people and to consider the efficacy of existing responses in addressing the causes of recidivism; and
- ensure the voices of children, their families, communities and those who support them are heard and considered when informing and evaluating changes to the youth justice system in Queensland.

In response to a Queensland Government 2020 election commitment, the first round of yarns has focussed on having culturally appropriate community conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children about their interactions with the justice system.

In November 2021, the QFCC received an ethics approval, by way of Children’s Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service, to commence the study. Once this approval was received, the QFCC began engaging with community, key stakeholders, children and young people in Redcliffe, Logan,



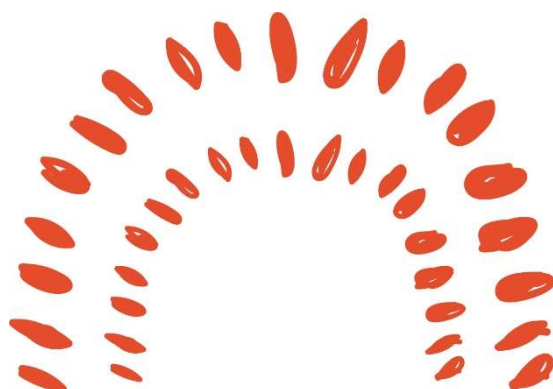
Caboolture, Ipswich, Inala and in regional areas of Townsville, Cairns, Mackay, and Mt Isa, as well as all three youth detention centres.

A variety of methods have been used to engage with the children, young people, their families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and frontline workers in youth justice. These engagement methods include recorded one-on-one interviews and yarns, recorded focus groups and yarning circles.

With a focus on the voices of children and young people, *Yarning for Change* is underpinned by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (the Convention). The Convention proclaims not only a child's right to appropriate health (Article 24) and education (Article 28) but also their rights when they break the law (Article 40) and are held in detention (Article 37), as well the right to be involved in decisions affecting them and to have their opinions considered (Article 12). This includes during judicial or administrative proceedings (Articles 12 and 13). Under the principles of the Convention, governments have a duty to act in the best interest of children, ensuring practices and policies are not discriminatory.

This interim report focuses on the experiences of young people within the three youth detention centres in Queensland – Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, Cleveland Youth Detention Centre and West Moreton Youth Detention Centre. The report provides a snapshot of the stories and voices of young people in youth detention and the factors that impact their wellbeing.

A final report will be delivered to the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Minister for Women and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence in September 2022.



Demographics

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare¹, 236 young people are detained in detention centres across Queensland on any given day. We interviewed 31 young people across the three youth detention centres between February and April 2022.

- 24 young people in the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre
- 1 young person in West Moreton Youth Detention Centre
- 6 young people in Cleveland Youth Detention Centre



Gender

Yarns were held with more males than females across the youth detention centres. This is a similar characteristic across youth justice systems in Australia.² The low number of female young people interviewed was also influenced by staffing shortages and section lockdowns.



3 female young people



28 male young people



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage

Of the young people who participated in yarns, **84 per cent** identified as First Nations.

- 22 young people identified as Aboriginal
- 4 young people identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- 3 young people identified as Australian
- 1 young person identified as a New Zealander
- 1 young person identified as African



Age

The majority of young people who participated in yarns were aged 15 to 17 years.

- 4 young people were between 10 and 14 years of age
- 24 young people were between 15 and 17 years of age
- 3 young people were 18 years of age

¹ Youth detention population in Australia 2020, Summary - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au)

² Youth justice in Australia 2020-21 (aihw.gov.au) reports on the average day in 2020-21, 81% of young people under supervision were male.

Themes and key messages

These initial findings provide insight to and a first-hand view of young people's experiences within Queensland's youth justice system. The following section unpacks these themes and examines them through the young people's voices.

“Nah, they just asked us, because we were walking around, and they were like, 'Oh, we need to do a street check because there are people walking around doing crime and stuff'.”

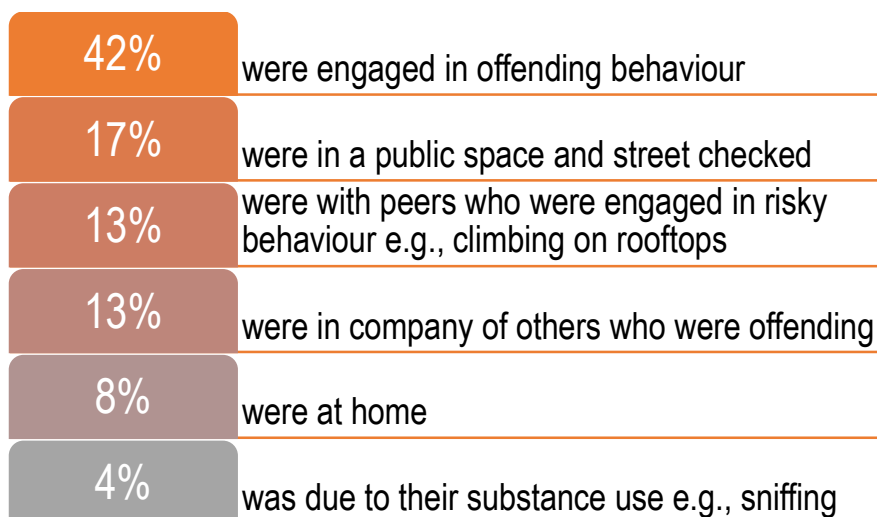


Male participant, 17 years (first contact with police around 10 years)

Initial contact with youth justice

Most young people, 71 per cent, identified they were aged between 8 and 13 years when they first had contact with police, and 29 per cent were between the ages of 14 and 16 years.

This initial contact with police varied from engaging in offending behaviour, being street checked or even just being at home.



“Probably 10. With friends, walking around, yeah. They just pull up on us. Do street checks.”

Male participant, 17 years



Influences

There are many different facets of a young person's life that influence their health and social outcomes, including offending behaviour. Research suggests that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are prevalent in youth justice populations and that those with a higher number of ACEs are the most likely to engage in serious, violent, and chronic offending³. During yarns, young people were able to identify several factors that influenced their experiences while in community, both positive and negative.

Young people were asked what made them feel good about life. Being strong in community and culture was continuously mentioned as the highest contributor to their wellbeing. This means knowing their mob, their country and having community connections. Other positive factors young people mentioned included:

- Young people acknowledged their *family connections* and *community connections* made them feel good about life. This ranged from relationships with community members to being involved in community sports or programs.
- *Country connections* or their communities of origin were important to young people. They may not have grown up or lived on their country, but they knew their communities of origin.
- *Mob connections* and knowing who they were and having opportunities to *actively express their culture* was important.
- Young people identified that having *local role models* to look up to contributed to their wellbeing. Not a celebrity, but a family member or friend who was accessible and available.
- *Accessing programs* in community was helpful, such as community sports and on-country programs.
- *Maintaining connection with their siblings* in care was a factor that kept young people strong.

“And they didn’t give my mum a chance. They just stole me...I reckon if I stayed, if I wasn’t in child safety, I would’ve got to know my culture...I was learning a bit of language when I was younger with all my family, my Dad’s brother and now, I hardly know any of my culture. I could’ve known.”



Male participant, 17 years

Young people were also asked about the negative influences they experienced while in community and how these contributed to their offending behaviour. Many young people identified that they struggled in community when their basic needs were not met and when they had no access to immediate family members, especially their siblings in care. A lack of cultural connection and having opportunities to express their culture also had a negative impact on young people while in community.

³ [Adverse childhood experiences and trauma among young people in the youth justice system \(aic.gov.au\)](https://aic.gov.au)

Education

Young people shared their experiences with education and attending school. The following is a snapshot of what young people thought was good about their schooling experience:

- The *routine* of attending school was a major contributor to young people's education experience.
- The *mode of learning* (how they learnt) encouraged young people to either attend or not attend school.
- Young people identified that they *enjoyed learning*, and this was a motivator for attending school.

"... they'd put me on a high level, and they just wouldn't help me, like, they just give me hard work and say, 'Do this,' and it was like, 'Well, can't youse help me?' I'm not there. I do have sort of brain problems."

Male participant, 17 years



Young people disengaged from school during high school at a slightly higher rate (52 per cent) than disengaging during primary school (48 per cent). Transiency and having multiple school enrolments (greater than three) influenced their education. Five young people attributed their exclusions from school to engaging in violent or aggressive behaviour.

"Like, I want to keep myself, like, you know, occupied. Like, I only stopped goin' to school because, like, my mum and siblings and stuff... Like, I didn't really muck up. I just, I had to support my siblings and, like, it was better than going to school, like, I had to, like, parent my mum for a bit as well."



Female participant, 17 years

Youth detention centre

Since this report focuses on the stories and voices of young people within the three Queensland youth detention centres, the following information provides a snapshot of the reflections and insights regarding young people's experiences in youth detention.

The following is a breakdown of the responses young people provided:

- Young people mentioned that *transition activities* and *future planning* was important and kept them strong while in detention. Alternatively, young people advised that being *unsure about their future goals and activities* had a negative influence on their time in detention and did not keep them strong.
- Young people mentioned that attending programs helped keep them strong while in detention; however, they said that they did not always have access to programs.

“They have programs sort of much easier and better. But this side doesn't have programs, whereas that side, they go to school, get programs and what not.”

Female participant, 16 years



- Positive *relationships* were a protective factor for young people. These relationships ranged from being onsite in detention with other young people, family members who were also in detention or detention centre staff. Relationships with partners, family and support workers in community were important to young people.
- Young people advised that maintaining *family connections* and *community connections* influenced their detention centre experience in a positive way. One young person spoke about their connections with community-controlled organisations and receiving regular visits from them while in detention was good.
- Young people identified that being in certain sections while in detention influenced their wellbeing, for example, staying in the same section with peers or family kept them strong.
- Young people mentioned that their *youth justice and/or support workers* helped them understand and navigate their orders and court matters, particularly around transitioning back into community.

“I've told child safety and everyone not to leave it a week. Like, I want all my support straight away before I get distracted and go do some dumb shit. What happened, they say, ‘Oh, we can't see you today. We have to see you next week.’ Look what happened. I had nothin' else to do so I went on the drugs straight away.”



Male participant, 17 years

- Young people also spoke about their time in detention as a negative experience. Not having basic freedom to move around, not allowed to be outside when they wanted, and being locked in their rooms impacted their experience and had a negative impact on their wellbeing.

“Ah, it’s not that good. Just stay in your room, bra. Don’t...it just makes you think about family.”

Male participant, 15 years



- Young people identified that they felt isolated during their time in detention when they were forced to remain in their rooms for long periods of time. The reasons for them to remain in their rooms were due to either behavioural issues (of self or other young people) or staffing shortages.
- Young people advised that *peer dynamics within youth detention* sometimes impacted their wellbeing in a negative manner due to conflict and personality clashes.
- Being isolated from *family* contributed to a negative detention centre experience for some young people. These were instances where young people were wanting and attempting to connect with family, but family were not responsive.
- Young people identified their relationships with detention centre staff as a contributing factor to both staying strong while in detention, but they could also have a negative effect, for example, staff who looked out for and demonstrated care for young people as opposed to staff whom young people did not feel were suited for the roles that they were in.

“I dunno, about...plenty...I kept track of the number of times I’ve been here, but I don’t worry about it now.”



Male participant, 15 years

Most young people we spoke to had been admitted to a detention centre three or more times (68 per cent), with a third of these young people revealing that that these admissions ranged between eight to 28 times. The remaining young people advised that they were on their first or second admission (32 per cent).

Watchhouse

Four young people spoke about their time in watchhouses and that they had been in the watchhouse for a at least one week or more. These young people identified that while in the watchhouse they were visited by community organisations.

“It was horrid. The most...yeah, it’s so bad in there...captivity at its best. No sunlight. The radio - broken...no yard time. Hygiene very bad, you can’t brush your teeth. You get a shower if you’re lucky.”

Male participant, 18 years



Conclusion

The *Yarning for Change* project is focused on ensuring the voices of children, their families, communities, and those who support them are heard and considered when informing and evaluating changes to the youth justice system in Queensland.

It is evident from the yarns we had across the three Queensland youth detention centres that young people are willing and able to share their experiences and to contribute to improving the youth justice system for other children, young people, and their families. Young people want to be heard and want to be part of the decision-making around their lives and futures.

Yarning for Change will continue to champion the rights of young people in a culturally safe manner, while enabling the voices of those most impacted by youth justice to be heard. The QFCC is excited to share further insights from children and young people as this project progresses.

Moving forward, a final report is being prepared and will comprise of a culmination of all the yarns we have had with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people across Queensland.

This report will be presented to the Attorney-General in September 2022, meeting the election commitment, before being released publicly.



Want to know more?

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