

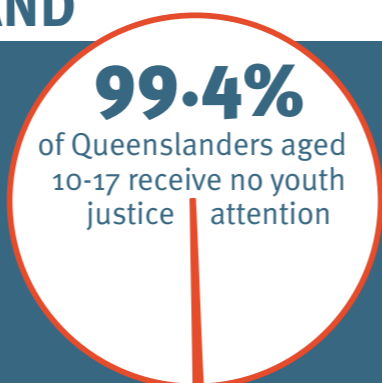
ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES



THE CURRENT SITUATION IN QUEENSLAND

People fear what they do not understand. As a result, removing the source of a crime rather than addressing the underlying causes can be a popular move, but far from ideal.

The costs are growing in monetary and community terms, and the evidence suggests the current approach is exacerbating the “youth crime” issues rather than promoting improvements.



THE FACTS

The rate of young Qld offenders has been decreasing since 2008



306
Qld children in detention per night on average (quarter 2, 2023)

...with **70%** identifying as First Nations

4,542
Qlders under youth justice supervision (2022-23)

72.9% under supervision have had interactions with child safety

Budget for youth justice **\$481.5M** (2024-25)

...an increase of **16%** from previous year

Community-based **Service expenditure** DOWN
Detention-based

Detention costs **\$1,833** per child per day (2022-23)

Queensland had the **2ND HIGHEST** returns to detention (2020-21)

...at **91.26%**

MORE CRIMINALS OVER 60 than under 13 years

QUEENSLAND

INCARCERATES MORE CHILDREN

SPENDS MORE ON YOUTH JUSTICE

than any other jurisdiction

The evidence shows that **CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE MULTIPLE DETENTION PERIODS ARE NOT DETERRED BY DETENTION.**

QUEENSLAND CHILDREN WHO COMMIT OFFENCES

VAST MAJORITY HAVE **AT LEAST 1** severe neurodevelopmental or mental health disorder

25% have at least 1 parent who spent time in adult custody

Low socio-economic areas **7 x MORE** likely to be under youth justice supervision

53% Impacted by or experienced domestic and family violence

THE ROOT CAUSES

Disadvantage as a driver for children who commit offences

Children in custody are more likely to have a different neurodevelopmental and mental health profile than the broader population of children including Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, intellectual disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, trauma, anxiety and learning difficulties. They are also likely to have previous involvement with child safety services.

In 2022, from 1,605 children who offended:

48% disengaged from education, training or employment

44% had a disability (assessed or suspected)

30% living in unstable and /or unsuitable accommodation

The impact of early life experiences

Children under youth justice supervision are more likely to have a history of child abuse and neglect. Early life experiences can impact on a child’s ability to make pro-social choices potentially resulting in poor emotional and mental health, social difficulties, cognitive dysfunction and behavioural problems including aggression. Individuals who experience emotional dysregulation may find it challenging to control the intensity, duration and expression of emotions in appropriate ways leading to emotional or trauma responses stemming from:

- brain regions functioning differently
- mood and personality disorders
- high levels of stress
- exposure to chronic adversity
- lack of supportive environments.

“ I’ve moved from house to house so many times, sometimes not a proper house, like every three months. So that’s why I started stealing cars... to sleep in... I’ve been livin’ on the streets. I’ve been in the system since I was little... cause like the whole time, they couldn’t catch me... I was everywhere... They just make you... not feel welcome. I feel like a burden, everywhere.

~ Queensland young person

VALUING HOPE

In 2011, Scotland implemented the *Early and Effective Intervention* program – a shift toward treating youth justice issues as health and social concerns rather than criminal issues. This has resulted in a 75% reduction in reoffending rates, demonstrating the effectiveness of trauma-informed, supportive approaches in youth justice.



ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

People fear what they do not understand. As a result, removing the source of a crime rather than addressing the underlying causes can be a popular move, but far from ideal. The costs are growing in monetary and community terms and the evidence suggests the current approach is exacerbating the “youth crime” issues rather than promoting improvements.

1 CHILDREN EXIST IN FAMILIES

It is important to remember that children are part of families and it is where we need to start in seeking effective solutions. All of the evidence points to a strong correlation between children having involvement in the youth justice system and family dysfunction. This dysfunction can include domestic and family violence, substance addiction, under-employment and other health issues.

2 COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES

The community needs to be effectively engaged in addressing the causes and the solutions for this social issue. Only then will there be an adequate understanding of this complex ecosystem and the pathways created for safer communities into the future. We know from the research that successful community justice programs are; evidence-based; relationship-based; individualised to meet specific needs; focus on living arrangements and family circumstances; and, extend beyond punitive responses.

3 PRO-SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN

Research shows that Queensland does not become safer through harsher treatment of children. The only way we will fundamentally improve the youth justice system is by: reducing the individual, family and community factors that contribute to young offending; and, supporting specialised reintegration services for children who commit most of the crimes, with particular emphasis on comprehensive support plans over a 12-month period that involve their families.

4 CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON “YOUTH CRIME”

“Youth crime” has become a strong catch phrase and daily focus of public and media discourse. This has escalated the issue on the political agenda. The focus has typically been on the concept of a “youth crime crisis” despite evidence that offences committed by children is declining. In this highly charged environment, it is difficult to have an impassive discussion about youth justice and the narrative can be hijacked by short-term appeasement rather than addressing the long-term challenges underpinning the problem. The community relies on strong leaders – political and community – to display the bravery required to provide a narrative on this issue that reflects the reality and the evidence.

5 CREATING BETTER OUTCOMES

The youth justice system in Queensland is fragmented across multiple ministerial portfolios, departments, organisations, community groups, as well as police operations and the court system. To make real improvements to our youth justice system will require us to ensure all interactions with children are integrated including: policing and detention; mental health support; youth homelessness; education; disability; health; and, employment systems.

6 REFORM DETENTION TO REHABILITATE

While improvements to youth justice will require policy reform outside of policing and detention, we should not neglect the importance of an effective response for genuine rehabilitation clearly focused on:

- educating children to take responsibility for their actions and lives, and making better decisions, and for the youth justice response to enable and support this
- providing access to education, healthcare, mental health support and to have regular contact with family
- clear referral pathways to dedicated services to help address behavioural issues relevant to individuals
- an individualised case management approach providing access to services that will provide the best chance of rehabilitation
- clear responsibilities attributed to service providers, families and carers within a statutory framework.

A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE

Where hope is valued.

Based on everything we know about youth justice, the following points provide a blueprint for effective, valuable change.

1 UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES TO DRIVE YOUTH JUSTICE REFORM

The youth justice system needs strategic design with clear outcomes and accountability. Transparency, timely accountability for children, and evidence-based investment are essential. Families and communities should be involved in service delivery, and detention centers must focus on rehabilitation. The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must be addressed. Responses should consider children’s developmental and cognitive needs, ensuring children feel valued, respected, and connected to their communities.

2 A COORDINATED YOUTH JUSTICE ECOSYSTEM

The youth justice system should adopt a more integrated approach, similar to child protection, with stronger case management and a central coordinating body to align services. This “whole of system” strategy would involve education, health, mental health, housing, and child safety portfolios working together to improve outcomes for young offenders. Multi-Agency Collaborative Panels (MACPs) should be embedded in the system, ensuring coordinated support and addressing the complex needs of each young person.

3 ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES

The youth justice system should be more inclusive of families, with programs emphasising parental responsibility and capacity. Police and courts should consider home situations when making decisions, and detention centers should engage families to support rehabilitation. Investment is needed in crime prevention programs targeting risk factors like family dysfunction and education disengagement. Early warning systems, using data and emerging technologies, should identify at-risk children to prevent crime before it escalates, fostering proactive solutions.

4 A MORE EFFECTIVE DETENTION SYSTEM

Queensland should develop a youth justice model focused on rehabilitation, drawing on successful frameworks in other regions. Key features include family-focused interventions, clear service standards, and ensuring services continue after detention. Detention should prioritise positive behaviour support, cultural connections, and skill-building for children. A 12-month post-detention transition program with family engagement and education is essential. Detention centers should not resemble adult prisons but foster accountability and hope for youth rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

5 COMMITMENT TO AN ACCURATE NARRATIVE

The community is harmed by a youth justice narrative focused on crisis, which can lead to misguided policies. Leaders should emphasise ongoing improvements in youth offending rates and push back against hysteria. A performance framework for youth justice should be developed to publish regular data across agencies, improving transparency and accountability. Independent evaluation of the system’s effectiveness is necessary to deter repeat offending and guide future improvements.

6 A PRO-SOCIAL APPROACH

Queensland must prioritise child services and pro-social engagement to improve the behaviour of children, particularly through community programs. While punishment can deter undesirable actions, over-reliance on detention is ineffective. A balanced approach, including reflective learning, is key to helping children make better choices. Special attention is needed for First Nations people, who are over-represented in the youth justice system, with more investment in local, community-led solutions to address their unique needs.