

**Submission  
No 197**

## **COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES**

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Good afternoon, and thank you for considering my perspective on Youth crime in regional areas.

My name is Kylie and I work at the Bellingen Youth hub as a Youth and Programs Worker.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the victims of juvenile crime who've shared their stories with us. Their experiences and the pain they've endured make it clear that we need real change in how we address youth crime in our communities.

As someone who has been a victim of crime, I understand the anxiety and PTSD that follow. Speaking on this subject is not easy, but it's essential to me, not only as a youth worker but also as a mother of four; my eldest is 29, and my youngest is 15; and as someone who has lived and worked in Bellingen for the past 14 years.

I remember too well, what it's like to feel isolated from the community as a young person, and I see those same struggles in many of today's youth. The systems that should help them often fail to do so, leaving them disconnected, unsupported, and at risk. This isn't just frustrating, it's dangerous.

My parents were active in social justice during the '80s and '90s, and it's disheartening to see how little has changed since then. We know that harm minimisation and restorative justice work, yet we're still relying too much on punishment, which doesn't get to the heart of the issues these young people are dealing with.

In regional areas like Bellingen, we often see funding decisions that backfire; locking up public spaces, closing toilets, and removing well-lit areas that could provide a sense of safety for youth.

Then, when young people act out, they're labelled as "bad," and even more is taken away from them. Many of them already feel that they've had everything taken away, and these measures only drive them further from the support they need.

I've seen firsthand how many young offenders come from backgrounds affected by intergenerational trauma, substance abuse, and broken support systems circumstances that I, too, experienced as a young person.

I understand how isolating and challenging it can be to grow up in these environments. Punishment alone won't change those circumstances; what's needed are supportive and restorative solutions that address the root causes and provide genuine pathways for change.

What these young people need are targeted interventions; rehabilitation for drug offenses, anger management for violent behaviour, and community service for theft.

Restorative justice helps them understand the impact of their actions and provides the support needed to change course, addressing root causes rather than just symptoms of crime.

None of this will work without a serious commitment to long-term investment in community programs. Grassroots, trauma-informed initiatives that focus on prevention, mentorship, and

safe, inclusive spaces for young people are key. These programs offer practical skills, hope, and a sense of belonging; things punitive measures alone can never provide.

Young people are telling me they feel constantly labelled as “bad,” and they see services intended to help them being taken away. This breaks their trust, pushing them further into isolation and making them even more vulnerable.

By continuing to defund these programs, we aren't just failing young people, we're eroding their trust in a system meant to support them. This lack of support leaves them feeling abandoned, desperate, and more likely to act out or engage in harmful and dangerous behaviours.

It's evident that vulnerable young people are often co-opted by older individuals who exploit their circumstances through drugs, alcohol, and even sexual coercion. These dynamics put young people at serious risk and reinforce cycles of harm.

To make meaningful change, we must recognise these exploitation tactics as critical points of intervention, raising awareness and building safeguards to protect and empower vulnerable youth before they are drawn further into these destructive influences.

Supporting our youth through harm minimisation, early intervention, and restorative justice doesn't just help the young people involved. It makes our communities safer. By addressing the root causes of youth crime and creating pathways to a brighter future, we reduce the harm they may otherwise cause to themselves and to others.

I urge the committee to make a long-term commitment to funding community-based solutions in regional areas like Bellingham. These investments will give us the tools to offer meaningful support, help prevent reoffending, and create opportunities for young people to thrive.

To close, we need to strike a balance between enforcement and proactive, community-based engagement. Addressing the causes, and not just the consequences of juvenile crime will help break cycles of trauma and build stronger, safer communities together.

Thank you for considering my perspective, and I look forward to supporting this conversation however I can.