REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LAW AND SAFETY

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 24 February 2025

The Committee met at 9:00.

PRESENT

Mr Edmond Atalla (Chair)

Mr Hugh McDermott (Deputy Chair)
Mr Paul Toole
Mr Tri Vo

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Ms Maryanne Stuart

The CHAIR: Before we start, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and also pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are either present here or viewing the proceedings online. Good morning and welcome to the fourth public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety's inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities. My name is Edmond Atalla, Committee Chair, and I'm joined by my colleagues: Dr Hugh McDermott, the member for Prospect and Deputy Chair; Ms Maryanne Stuart, online, the member for Heathcote; Mr Paul Toole, the member for Bathurst; and Mr Tri Vo, the member for Cabramatta. We want to thank the witnesses who are appearing before the Committee today, and the many stakeholders who have made written submissions. We appreciate your input into this inquiry. I now declare the hearing open.

Councillor RUSSELL WEBB, Executive Board Member, Country Mayors Association, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having photos or videos taken. Can you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

RUSSELL WEBB: Yes, I have.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about that?

RUSSELL WEBB: I've read through them and I've prepared myself as best I can on behalf of Country Mayors.

The CHAIR: Would you now like to make a short opening statement?

RUSSELL WEBB: First of all, thank you for giving us the opportunity to come here as a representative of local government across New South Wales. Country Mayors has quite a large membership, and we represent over 80 councils across regional and rural New South Wales. We do have a lot of issues that we want to raise here with this Committee. We have prepared a submission, and that submission has been presented to the Committee, and I dare say that all of you have probably had a look at that and gone through every word that we put in there.

Many of the rural and regional local government areas have seen a rise in crime rates. Those crime rates have risen a lot more than the metropolitan areas. There seems to be, from our point of view, an inequity, in terms of police resources and prevention and intervention programs that we're seeing in regional and rural New South Wales, as opposed to what we see in the city. Your Committee has listed quite a number of questions that we would like to respond to. I see seven in all. I'll go to the first one—the drivers of youth crime in regional and rural New South Wales, particularly since COVID.

Poverty and housing, I think, is one of the big drivers for this. Disengagement with the disadvantaged communities. This has been going on for decades; this has not happened overnight. It is getting worse and worse. The only way we'll ever get to fix these problems is if we start with the grassroots. Talking about preventative measures and more policing and so forth, that is just washing up after the event. We need to go back to the root cause, and we need to start thinking about what can we do that will make generational change to the problem that we're seeing at the moment, and to the problem that is actually growing. If we don't get that generational change now, and into the very near future, the next group of people that sit around this table at a committee will have worse information provided to them. It will be more exponential.

The approach that can reduce the drivers and the root causes of youth crime is a whole-of-government approach, and it's got to start at the bottom. It's got to start when these kids are first starting school, or even before they go to school, where we're seeing these kids, and they're young kids, coming out of dysfunctional families. They've got nowhere to go, nowhere else to go. You can talk to the schoolteachers in our regional and rural areas and they will tell you, within the first six months of those kids coming to school, having in many cases met their parents, they know what kids will be getting into trouble in the future. They know those kids have got no hope because there's no parenting. There's no proper parenting. There's no guidance. Many of those kids come to school, probably, they haven't had clothes washed, they haven't been fed properly. There are no real parenting skills. That's where we need to start.

This isn't going to fix the problem today or tomorrow or the next day, but this is going to fix the problem for the next generation. I can talk about what we need to do now to help us in the shorter term, but I think if we're going to be really serious about trying to fix the problem that is confronting us at the moment, we need to start afresh with some new ideas. I just hope that the government, the whole of government, both state and federal, can actually come together and work with organisations like our own, the Country Mayors, work with local government, and try and come up with some solutions that—none of us will be sitting in this room when these solutions come to fruition and start to work, but we need to start somewhere. I might just finish there for a minute.

The CHAIR: You spoke about generational change. How do you see a start of generational change?

RUSSELL WEBB: To achieve generational change, we've got to have a collaborative and formalised approach to identifying the families and the youths at risk. We should start it as early as, perhaps, birth, in many cases. Health professionals and teachers are identifying struggling families. Health professionals and so forth, they can be of great assistance in this. Police, DOCS, and community services, including the tender organisations that we've got now, they can all work together to come up with some solutions.

There probably needs to be a little bit more research done with some of the schoolteachers in some of these outlying schools. I know many years ago there was a program that identified a number of schools across regional New South Wales where there were some real issues in those communities and, I guess, those lower socio-economic communities. There was a lot of work done there at the time, but that's gone by the wayside, most of that. We've got to go back and start there.

What we're seeing across the board is there are huge numbers of organisations funded to deliver programs to try and help. If you go to Moree, for example, there's well over 50 organisations that are mostly government funded. It's a tender for service. They tender, they get the money from the government, then they try and deliver a service. You've got so many organisations trying to deliver little programs that might help those in need. Is it working? No, it's not. There needs to be a real rethink about how we actually deliver those services. There needs to be a central organisation that manages how this is going to happen and pulls all that together.

What I'm talking about is a central organisation within government that can manage that. That could be through DCJ, or whatever, but it has to be a central point. And there has to be long-term solutions, not two- or three-year contracts that are funded by the government to try and get some solutions in different areas. So out of that 50 or 60 groups that are working—and I'm using Moree as an example—they all do what they can, but they're all focused on making sure they can win the tender next time to get back into the system. But if you put all of those services' outcomes together, and you look at what's actually happening with the crime rates up there, nothing's changed. They're getting worse. So it's not working. It's simply not working.

The CHAIR: Let me just change the focus a little bit. Alcohol and drugs, from all of the previous hearings we've had, play a major part in regional crime, particularly parents that are involved in alcohol and drugs. There are rehab facilities, but do you see that there isn't sufficient rehab facilities to address these issues? Can you make comment in relation to what's been done in that sphere of an issue?

RUSSELL WEBB: I think the drug and alcohol problem is a real issue, and it's a real issue with a lot of parents today. Of course, that creates a situation where kids don't want to be at home. I'll use an example that was quoted to me only a few days ago. It's not where I live, but it is another regional city. An 11-year-old child, quite intelligent, quite articulate—he knows where every police officer in that town lives. He knows where every CCTV is in that city. He knows where he can go and break in to other premises, such as schools and so forth, and get food. Why is he doing that? Because he can't be at home. It's unsafe to be at home, because his parents are affected by drugs and alcohol and there's domestic violence. That's just a small example of what's happening across our state in different locations. There's a lot of these kids.

The CHAIR: Yes. That's the pattern we're seeing from all of the hearings.

RUSSELL WEBB: That's a pattern that's forming. Now, that's growing. That 11-year-old child is quite intelligent. He's got to be intelligent to be able to do what he's doing and know what he knows. What's going to happen to him as he grows older, he will become a criminal into the future, and that's his life. He has no education, as such. He can't read and write properly, but he knows all that stuff, so there's a high level of intelligence there. How many kids are like that out there in our community today? Obviously, he started from a very young age, because he couldn't be at home. It wasn't safe to be at home. That's the sadness of it. That's why I'm talking about that example, where we've got to get involved and, of course, as a government—whether it's local, state and federal—start talking about a program where we can actually try and get to that root cause before that child gets to that point. Which means there's going to be some very hard decisions that have to be made by government. Some really hard decisions. Some people aren't going to like them.

The CHAIR: One of the issues we've seen, exactly what you've mentioned, is kids that don't want to be home because it's not a healthy environment for them. So they go out roaming the streets and there's nothing for them to do. There's no place for them. What do you see, to address this immediate issue, for those kids that haven't yet been engaged in the criminal justice system? They might, because once they roam the streets and get along with other youth, and there's nothing for them to do, then they go and start committing crime. What do you suggest could be a solution to take those kids and prevent them from going into the criminal justice system?

RUSSELL WEBB: I think there's a few solutions, but probably one of the ones that I think will probably get the most benefit will be some diversionary services made available to those youths, and the families, within the regions. I know in the cities that you've got a lot of different challenges, but in the regions, we need funding to actually run those diversionary services. We don't need funding for two years; we need funding for long-term solutions. We need funding to run these services for a long period of time. There is a group of young people in each community that are probably, they're peers, they're the leaders, and some of them are the real crooks now they're getting a bit older. How we deal with them is one thing, but I think how we can deal with the ones that are coming up, and looking towards those leaders of those—I'll call them gangs, they're not gangs, but those groups.

We need to get them, and get them into some diversionary programs. I think if we can do that, and fund them—but they've got to be long-term solutions.

They can't be, "Yes, we'll fund that for two years and then we'll see how it goes." It's got to be long-term solutions. We've got to be able to fund these diversionary services and, of course, try to divert the youth away from crime, giving them some stuff to be interested in. One of the things that most kids love to do—they can become quite emotionally involved with animals. If you can get them into an environment where there are a lot of animals, that helps kids show a bit of empathy. Once they start learning that empathy and that caring, you can actually then take them out and they can become people in the normal stream of the population. They can get jobs. There's the BackTrack program in Armidale, for example, that's just doing that now. The alumni from that are starting to work, even within their own organisation, so that tells you there's something working there.

I know the New South Wales Government has got a commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal people. This isn't just about Aboriginal people; this is about all people from lower socio-economic groups. They seem to be the ones where the home is probably more affected by domestic violence, and I think that's one of the things that we've got to home in on. If you look at domestic violence—probably across the board, but I certainly know in rural and regional New South Wales—a lot of it is for a whole lot of different reasons. It's growing exponentially. We've got to try to do some work in that space as well, and I think that's one of the problems we've got.

As that grows, our problem with youth crime grows. But, really, the plethora of services that people tender for for government funding—they're doing a good job in each of their little areas, but it's not solving the problem. I think that can be seen by the stats at the moment, and the problems that we're seeing, with the rising rates of rural crime with youth. They're simply not hitting the mark, and in general, aren't effective. I don't take away from any of the work that any of them do, but that's the way we see it, as Country Mayors.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Mayor Webb, thank you for being here today, and I also want to acknowledge the Country Mayors Association. I don't think this inquiry would be happening now if it wasn't for the Association. You have a situation where, not only has everyone in this room read the report, but the Premier has read the report as well. It began a momentum which was only there in the media, and I think that has been a credit to the Association, and to you, and others.

We've been to Bourke, we've been to Broken Hill, we've been to Kempsey, and we go to Wagga next week. The things which you say in that report from the Association are just the evidence we're finding. In fact, the evidence you've already given just seems to reconfirm, time and again, throughout rural New South Wales, the same issues and the same problems. The biggest problem, like you say, is that this has to be generational change. I just wanted to try to explore a bit of that further with you. I haven't got too many questions; you've pretty much answered all the questions I had lined up here.

The Chair talked about drugs and alcohol. I'm a Western Sydney MP, so I'm used to drug crime being a driver of nearly everything. What surprised me the most was not seeing that in the country areas. There's alcohol within the parents and some use, but it isn't amongst the kids so much, and it isn't in the wider community. I think that's one of the first shocks I've seen. Can you take me to Tamworth? You're the Mayor of Tamworth. Can you talk to me about the issues you've got there, rather than throughout New South Wales? Are they the same issues as everywhere else? What are you doing as a council, or what are you doing with law enforcement, to try to deal with some of those things?

RUSSELL WEBB: Stepping away from Country Mayors and into Tamworth, I think what we need and what we're seeing is there is a real need for formal education centres outside the mainstream system. If you look at the judicial system, what do they do with a young kid when he's caused so many issues? He goes out, he gets let out of court, and he goes back into the community. Within a couple of weeks he's reoffended. Part of the bail intervention efforts could be if we had a formal education centre outside the mainstream system, where they could go and actually get some education because, without education, they're never going to get anywhere in life. They could lead the life of a criminal into the future, if we don't try to help them there. Education is very important, having housing, making sure they're fed. The formal education outside the mainstream education system could provide some of the things that they need.

I know that at home we're talking about working towards trying to provide an option into the future. We've got to somehow fund this option that we've got. It will be a centre where kids can actually go and become part of a team where they get educated, to a certain degree, they get to do a little bit of work, but they also get fed. But we need to fund that. Local government can't afford to fund these programs. As you know, there is a crisis in sustainability for local government across the board. Going back to my hometown, they're the things that we're looking at trying to implement. We'd love to be able to implement some of that stuff, if we could get some help,

and some funding. We're happy to put our hand in our pocket because we can, but we really need government help to do that.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: This education facility that you've got at the moment, is it there at the moment or is it what you would like?

RUSSELL WEBB: No, we want to create this particular one that I'm talking about. There is a formal education centre outside the mainstream education for people that have, I guess, gone a little bit wayward. But it's chockers. It's full. So we've got to find something else.

The CHAIR: Are you talking about a boarding-style education centre?

RUSSELL WEBB: That would probably be perfect, but I'm not quite sure how the wider community would accept taking those kids and putting them into that facility. I'm not sure.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: He actually jumped in and asked the question I was about to ask. Because we're finding, with the mayors in Bourke and Broken Hill and Kempsey, they have said almost an identical thing to you.

RUSSELL WEBB: I think it's the perfect solution, but I'm not sure how you're going to implement that.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Hard decisions have to be made by government. That was your evidence earlier. When you have Indigenous leaders saying to you, we need to try and break the nexus in the home life, the problems that are coming there, we're seeing children on the streets, because it's safer on the streets than it is to be at home, the question is how you deal with that. We have children who are coming out of juvenile justice begging the police to arrest them to send them back, because they can get their three meals, they can get their education, and they basically feel like they're cared for. The fact is they can't get that in their home life. The question is: how do we change that? The solution that a lot of people are talking about is the same idea about education. Maybe having that boarding facility, something like that.

RUSSELL WEBB: I think they would probably be very well worth having a crack at. Because if you don't take them out of their homes that they don't want to go to anyway, what are they going to do? They're going to stay on the streets. They are going to cause trouble. It's really sad. It breaks your heart to see some of this stuff out there.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Absolutely. It breaks your heart to see the victims, and it breaks your heart to see the kids that are coming through with it. In some of the country areas, there are no social services. In some of the country areas, after six o'clock at night, the only government agency that's working is the police, maybe the fire brigade if they exist. How is it in Tamworth?

RUSSELL WEBB: Probably pretty much the same. I think most of those services are delivered during the working hours, or daylight hours, as I call them. There is a shortage of staff across New South Wales. Workforce issues are not only—we're about 30 per cent short on police at the moment, because they can't fill those positions. It's happening everywhere. It's happening within the education system, it's happening within the health system. I'm not sure how we'd actually expand the services that you're talking about without extra staff, and where do you get those extra staff from?

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You're absolutely right. I think you absolutely do. You need more police. Most police commands are at 60 per cent, and there's no social services in these places because no-one wants to be there, or there just isn't the people to get there.

RUSSELL WEBB: In New South Wales, I think we've got about one police officer for every 500 residents. I think in Queensland it's one—I'm guessing these figures a little bit. I think it's one police officer for about every 350, or whatever it might be. That's fine, but the problem is, in New South Wales, we're about 30 per cent down on those numbers of those substantive positions, so they need to fill them first, and then let's work out where we go from there. This isn't just about policing our way out of this. That's not the answer to this. This is about trying to create a platform where, when kids come out of a dysfunctional home, where there is domestic violence, and they're going to school, and the teachers that I talked about earlier can say, these kids are going to be in trouble, they're going to have a troublesome life—they learn that from when they first go to school, because the teachers can see it in them. That's where we've got to start.

Mr TRI VO: Thank you for attending today. I'm so glad you seem to understand the issues. You come from council. It's not just about footpaths or parks. You understand human nature and the long-term effects, and root cause and preventative ways, and whole-of-government approach. You mentioned service providers are competing against each other for funding, and there is a lack of coordination across services that operate within

the LGA or community. Do you think local government could play a coordination role, or at least an association of councils could play a coordinating role, in terms of selecting or managing or coordinating the funding?

RUSSELL WEBB: There is absolutely no doubt we could. The only fear I would have with that is—and it has happened before over many years—we get involved in some of this stuff, and then government steps away from it, and we get left carrying the can, funding-wise. We simply can't afford to do that. Yes, we're very happy to get involved in that and help, and do the work that we can do, to make this stuff work, but as a local government body, across all of the local government areas of New South Wales, we do not have the funding to be able to fund what you're talking about. But I think if we got involved, and both state and federal governments were helping us, yes, that would work. We would be very happy to become active and provide support, and help both the state and federal governments—in this case, the state government—start trying to help, providing support to some of these dysfunctional families and their children.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you for coming today and for all of your input. Do you meet—and, if you do, how often—all of the stakeholders? Does the council meet with all the stakeholders—for example, Education, Health, NSW Police Force—on a regular basis to talk about the issues that you're all facing, and collective solutions you might want to work on going forward?

RUSSELL WEBB: Country Mayors, as an organisation, do to some degree, but I think we do that more independently in our own local government areas. Yes, we do do that. But we do it, as I say, not as a Country Mayors Association, but each council will do a little bit in their own area. They'll do them somewhat differently, but there will always be the same issues that they're talking about.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: At the end of the day, you've identified that government agencies work in silos. Therefore, from a federal and state perspective, you'd agree that they're not actually talking to one another? There is probably overlap in the programs, the money that's going in is probably—in some areas, it's not about putting more money in, it's about looking at the programs that are being delivered in a more efficient way and actually having outcomes. Is that correct, from a Country Mayors perspective?

RUSSELL WEBB: That is totally correct. I think it's more about getting a better bang for your buck than what we're getting at the moment. There are so many different organisations trying to deliver so many different types of services or levels of service to a community. They're all doing that, but it's not working. We need to actually wind the clock back and say, "Okay, we're going to put X amount of dollars into a community. How can we actually get the best bang for our dollar, the best bang for our investment?" We all know that the three levels of government are struggling a little bit financially. Whatever we spend, we need to make sure that that dollar that we spend, we can get the best outcome for. At the moment, you're certainly not getting the best outcome for the dollar you're spending in this space.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Drug and alcohol was mentioned. But rehabilitation services, would you say that there is a lack of services in the regions? Obviously there are some areas where people would have to travel hundreds of kilometres just to get the service; therefore, they don't go and actually get treated?

RUSSELL WEBB: There is a lack of those services, and then there's a lack of opportunity and motivation for those people that need to go and access the services that might be, as you say, some 100 kilometres away. That's probably a very interesting argument to have. It does affect youth crime, but I think that's a separate piece of work that has to be done to try and make sure that, into the future, if we're going to spend money in that space—which we need to—is how we do that to get the most effective outcomes. There are some organisations out there that can actually help us with that. But yes, there needs to be more work done, and more money spent, but spent carefully and spent wisely.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: The views of Country Mayors—and I noticed it's in the submission—but programs like the Stronger Country Communities Fund, a program that went into community infrastructure, supported councils, built skate parks, playgrounds, ovals for sport. That funding has been cut. The Regional Youth Program has now been cut as well. Where clubhouses used to be, where kids were being picked up off the street and taken to a clubhouse because they were not going to school, are you getting from members that those programs taken away are impacting on council's ability to provide activities for youth?

RUSSELL WEBB: In many cases, that is the case. That absolutely is the case. What we're finding in some areas—I'll use my own city as an example—we've now got service clubs trying to deliver some of those programs, some of those buses to get kids to go to the basketball stadium. They've been doing that. But, yes, that funding out of those programs you're talking about has been cut out, and it has had an impact. Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Webb, for your time and appearing before the Committee today. Your contribution has been very valuable for the Committee.

RUSSELL WEBB: Can I just make one final statement?

The CHAIR: Sure.

RUSSELL WEBB: I'm just going to use a quote, if I may. A quote from John F. Kennedy, where he requoted the sayings of a great French marshal. He once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected. The tree was too slow growing and wouldn't reach maturity for 100 years. The marshal replied, "If that is the case, then we must plant that tree today." Can I say to you that what I'm talking to you about today, we can't continue to talk about it and procrastinate. We need to take action today.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for those comments. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's hearing, should you wish to make any corrections, and the Committee may send you some supplementary questions, should they need to do so. Are you happy to respond to those?

RUSSELL WEBB: I absolutely would. I thank you for the opportunity to be here and put forward a layman's view on what's happening around the state of New South Wales.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much.

(The witness withdrew.)

Dr MINDY SOTIRI, Executive Director, Justice Reform Initiative, affirmed and examined

Mr ROBERT TICKNER, Chair, Justice Reform Initiative, sworn and examined

Ms EMMA WHITNALL, Economic Policy Analyst, Just Reinvest NSW, affirmed and examined

Mr GEOFF SCOTT, Chief Executive Officer, Just Reinvest NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearings. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform the Committee should you object to having photos and videos taken. You've been issued with the Committee's terms of reference. Can you please confirm that you've received those terms of reference? That's yes from all. Do you have any questions, any of you, about these terms of reference? That's no from all. We'll now ask each of you, or on behalf of your organisation, if you wish to make a short opening statement.

MINDY SOTIRI: Firstly, thank you so much to the Committee for the opportunity to speak to this inquiry. Robert Tickner and myself are here on behalf of the Justice Reform Initiative, which is a national organisation working to reduce incarceration around Australia. The focus of our submission, and what we would really like to elevate today, is the evidence about what works to reduce crime committed by children, what works to address the drivers of crime committed by children, and what works to break cycles of justice system involvement. I'd also like to just note from the outset, I really appreciate and support the comments earlier by the Country Mayors Association around the importance of recognising that we cannot police our way out of this problem. We really need to look at what else is happening in the community, in terms of what we need to be doing differently.

What I also want to point out is that, while the Justice Reform Initiative absolutely recognises the legitimate community concerns about crime and about safety that are often behind things like calls to impose harsher sentences, or introduce tougher thresholds for bail, or for locking more people up, what we do want to also point to today, and what our submission points to, is that the evidence is very clear that imprisonment and punitive legislative measures don't actually work to reduce crime or to build safer communities.

We know that contact with the justice system, and especially ongoing contact with imprisonment from a young age, makes it more likely, not less likely, that somebody will go on to reoffend. We know that prison causes harm to children and their communities. We know it doesn't work to rehabilitate. We also know that the threat of harsher penalties does not work to deter children from committing crime. In short, the evidence is exceptionally clear that in order to address crime, we need to address the drivers of crime, and the most effective way to do this is to invest in programs outside of the justice system.

We know that the cost of imprisonment in New South Wales is $223 million a year. That is just the cost of locking children up. That does not include the cost of crime, the cost of policing, the cost of courts. There's about 225 kids locked up on any one night in New South Wales. So it equates to about a million dollars a kid per year. It's an incredibly expensive way to respond to what is a real social problem, but it's incredibly ineffective. The most recent BOCSAR data shows up that there's been a 32 per cent increase in children's incarceration over the last 12 months. I'll finish on this point in terms of our opening, but the numbers that I really want to alert the Committee to, and I think the numbers that we need to be looking at as a community, when we're thinking about what alternatives we might be looking to, is the flow-through population. That's the numbers of children coming into prison, the receptions, and the numbers of children being released.

The most recent BOCSAR data which came out last week showed us that each year, although there's only 225 children imprisoned on any one night, there are 3,546 receptions into youth detention centres. There is a similar number of releases, 3 and a half thousand children coming out of prison each year. When we look at who those children are, not only is it very clear what forms of disadvantage they have, but what is also very clear is 99 per cent of children that are received into youth detention in New South Wales are on remand. That is, they haven't had their day in court. They've been refused bail either by police or by the courts.

What is also really important, I think, for all of us to get our heads around is that of those 3 and a half thousand children that are released each year, the vast majority, close to 90 per cent of those children, are also on bail. That is, when we're looking at imprisonment, we're seeing a large churn of children coming in and out of prisons who have not yet had their day in court, and who are being managed in a prison system, rather than receiving the support and care to reduce crime as required in the community. I'll stop there, but really look forward to talking about what some of those alternatives are, that are based on the evidence.

ROBERT TICKNER: What I'd like to do is set the scene a little bit in a very open and transparent way about the Justice Reform Initiative. I would really ask, if you get a chance, please have a look at our website—justicereforminitiative.org.au—and you'll see that we are very much strictly non-party political. In fact, much more than that. We are honoured to have Sir William Deane and Dame Quentin Bryce as our patrons in chief, and 120 other patrons across Australia, coming from backgrounds of National Party, Liberal Party, Labor, Greens, Independents, people who've been former Police Commissioners, heads of Corrective Services.

Here in New South Wales, we have such a diverse group of patrons ranging from—I just mentioned some of them—Bill Crews; Katrina Hodgkinson, a former National Party Minister; John Dowd, Attorney General from some time ago; Greg Smith from much more recently; and Bob Debus, of course, New South Wales' longest serving Minister for Corrections, among others. We have the support of the Law Council of Australia, the AMA, the Australian Catholic Bishops, the Anglican Church in Australia, and 200-plus other patrons.

The reason we've been formed is because we honestly believe that this is one of the areas of public policy where the public loses out whenever we have partisan political divides or, if you like to use the language of the Parliament, sometimes those "law and order auctions". One of the great things, the really moving things that commanded public attention, the support of newspapers, was the former Premier Perrottet and now Premier Minns, going into that last election campaign without the law and order auctions. We believe that's something precious. You should safeguard it, nourish it, work together across the aisle. This is not about party political pointscoring. Fancy coming in here today with the backgrounds that we have at this table, working on these issues, promoting evidence-based policy. What would actually work to stop crime? That's our mission. That's our work. But how wonderful it is to hear Mayor Webb, in his presentation, say things that we absolutely believe.

The one area where we will persuade you, we hope to slightly diverge, is one of the things that you will see from our thorough and documented reports—they're unprecedented. They're better, to be honest, than most government departments. They've been an absolute eye-opener, because what they show is that, although it costs $7 billion in Australia to fund our prisons, we've now topped another billion for youth detention. When you actually look to the level of resourcing of the community-based programs that the evidence shows will break the cycle, will turn lives around, just like the mayor said, that's where there simply aren't enough current resources.

One of our proposals is that we need to have your imagination, as our political leaders, to think, "How can we start to plant that tree?" But plant it in a way that will be definitive, that will be a turning point in youth justice reform in New South Wales. And that is through the creation in the next budget, or as soon as we can, of a breaking the cycle fund that would be implemented in a way that funding would occur with evaluations very much part of that process, through open and transparent public submissions, and be administered beyond reproach. It's that investment we need, that shift in investment we've been talking about that's so critical. Thanks so much.

EMMA WHITNALL: Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I work as an economic policy analyst at the Just Reinvest NSW supporting body office in Redfern, on Gadigal land. Our organisation supports Aboriginal communities to develop their own solutions for change, with the goal of reducing Aboriginal over-representation in all areas of the criminal justice system. We support place-based, community-led, and data-driven approaches to inform local solutions while bringing together Aboriginal communities, government agencies, and philanthropic and private sector partners to leverage the justice reinvestment approach. We urge the Committee to view breakdowns in community safety as a symptom of more upstream challenges, such as family breakdown, poverty, and housing instability. There are clear service gaps that need to be addressed to tackle these underlying issues, and the current approach is clearly not working.

New South Wales Treasury's latest Indigenous Expenditure Report estimates that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system alone costs the state $1.8 billion per year. Comparatively, combined state and Commonwealth funding for justice reinvestment organisations in New South Wales is only $12.8 million. This demonstrates the scale of the challenge, and the significant investment required to create structural change that will have lasting impact. New youth bail laws introduced in New South Wales have only increased youth incarceration, locking up 22 per cent more young people, despite the crime rate remaining steady over the same period. Interventions on behalf of police and the criminal justice system are too late. Resources must be allocated to prevent crime and improve community safety, rather than increasing punitive responses.

GEOFF SCOTT: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Wiradjuri, and I'd like to pay my respects to the Gadigal people, on whose land we speak today, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you. Community safety is something which everyone should have their attention drawn to. The people who are feeling unsafe in terms of the environment we are in, and the people who are being incarcerated, on both counts, there are real impacts on society. We need to do more about those. Justice Reinvest is really a different way of looking at the issue.

I'm going to reiterate Robert's comments about the previous presentations. Looking at the causes is the essential part. We can't keep treating the symptoms—locking more people up. If we don't treat the symptoms, it's a never-ending drain on society. It's also a never-ending pipeline of people into the justice system, which creates long-term problems, not just for themselves, but for the whole of society. We're trying to actually do that because the costs of incarceration are escalating exponentially. We're trying to stop people going into the system.

We're trying to look at the drivers of incarceration, and they're well-known. We're going through those issues. The approach from Justice Reinvest is being community-led, place-based, and data-driven. That's well and good to say that, but getting data out of government, in terms of issues, is extremely difficult. In fact, it's near impossible. I was in a meeting a few weeks ago where I was told it would be three years before we get ethics approval to get data out of a government agency. I thought it was a joke, but it wasn't. It is what it is.

On these issues, we have 10 locations in New South Wales for justice reinvestment that are now operating. Bourke is one of those. We have Mount Druitt, Kempsey, Moree, Bourke, Grafton, Bathurst, Nowra, Cowra, Toomelah, and Kinchela. We're trying to focus on these issues at the moment. One point I'd like to make on this is there were 90 groups who applied for those funds. The government calls them "non-competitive grant rounds". Just because you say it is, doesn't make it true. They're very competitive. It sets organisations up in competition with each other, and it doesn't promote any working together, or any agency sharing. The same issue in many of the communities, trying to get government agencies together is proving to be a real problem. Councillor Webb actually mentioned those issues.

I'd like to not go on too much about those, but some solutions here. We know full well who the kids are who are under threat. There's a recent report, again from BOCSAR, where they identified 700 kids who were arrested and brought before the courts last year, by the police. Eighty-two per cent had had a child protection report, a ROSH [Risk of Serious Harm] report, done. Twenty-four per cent had been in out-of-home care. Thirty-seven per cent had been in homelessness services. Fifty-six per cent had been a victim of violence. Sixty-six per cent had a parent who appeared in court. Forty per cent had a parent who had been in jail. They're indicators which aren't difficult to find. In fact, you have them all the time. It's easy to identify who the kids at risk are, who the people at risk are.

A case management approach is probably the only way we can address this issue. It has to be done across the board, and it won't take one or two years or three years; it'll take a good between five and 10 to have any impact. Unless government commits itself to that, they're just playing politics. I'm trying to commit myself here. It'll take courage and conviction to get us there. So where you're pushing a case management approach, I think we have to look at policing and parents. I'd like to even advocate bringing the CDP back. There was one program where, in Aboriginal communities, the CDP provided—you talk about having empowerment, or resources on the ground to react and respond to issues on a daily basis. That program did it.

The CHAIR: Sorry, what does CDP stand for?

GEOFF SCOTT: It's the Community Development Program. It's the work for the dole for Aboriginal people. You have work for the dole for everyone else as well. Those programs do put resources in the community. They do put decision-making at the community level, at a place-based process, and not have to run through a government process, which can take months to get a response to anything. We're dealing with kids where urgent responses are vital. If an issue comes up, you need to respond. You need to be able to be nimble. You need to respond with what people on the ground see as the solutions. We try to put in place a number of programs that will do that.

We mentioned how the incarceration rates, not just the issues, but—just to give an example at the moment, for youth at the moment, 56 per cent—this was last year—of all kids who went to court were Aboriginal. Seventy-three per cent of all kids refused bail were Aboriginal. Fifty-one per cent of all kids found guilty were Aboriginal. Eighty-one per cent of sentenced were Aboriginal. Sixty-one per cent of kids in total are Aboriginal. That is not any figures that we can be proud of. What worries me today is that it's become normalised and people that are outraged by it, they're not out there speaking about it. We think it's normal. That's a real failure of, not just society, but our community, and our system. I think Mindy made the point before, those kids are on remand. They haven't even been sentenced. That's some of the issues.

I won't go on too long about those. At the moment, 33 per cent of all adults in custody are Aboriginal and 60 per cent of youth in custody are Aboriginal. We need a focus here. There needs to be that focus. There's been some initiatives from the Premier lately, but I'd just like to cite what happened in Bourke at the start of 2014, in the community out there. The reason Bourke worked is you had a champion. You had Brad Hazzard. I think, a man of real conviction, and a man who knew things. He drove that program out there. He attended every meeting with his secretary. You had Alister Ferguson, a local man on the ground. He's still out there slaving away to do the best for his community. You have Kristy Kennedy, again, that's supporting him. And you had Greg Moore, a

police officer who we should—Lord, we need more Greg Moores around, who know what the issues are, and know what community policing is.

In fact, under the Closing the Gap program, I noticed this year—we're waiting for the revamp of the Closing the Gap implementation plan. I hear the implementation plan is going to move all the targets back two or three years, because they haven't done anything. There's the community policing model in there, which I think would be of great benefit. There's a bail reform project in there. There are justice reforms.

The CHAIR: Mr Scott, I might ask you to wind up.

GEOFF SCOTT: That's all I had to say. I think that'll make the point. I'll take questions.

The CHAIR: We'll now move to questions and you'll have an opportunity during question time to make more contributions. Mr Tickner, you've been a former Indigenous Australians Minister. I know it's several decades ago, but do you feel the issues during your time are similar to the issues we're facing today, or are they different today than when you were the Minister for Indigenous Australians?

ROBERT TICKNER: I am so privileged to have been Australia's Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs between 1996 and—I guess that makes me the longest serving Minister, and incidentally I've worked very closely with Geoff Scott during part of that time. The answer to your question is—and were I not in a public place I might be more deeply moved in my answer—I find it excruciatingly painful for our nation that the issues remain just the same. Just the same. There has been no closing of the gap in most of the significant areas.

But this is a two-edged sword, if I can put it that way. Because the problems have been around for so long, and so long unaddressed, the answers have also been around for so long and so long unaddressed. I can give you just one of, literally, what would be hundreds of examples of what I'm saying. The Justice Reform Initiative is not opposed to the police, on the contrary. On a personal level, when the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody came down, I remember John Avery was the Commissioner here in New South Wales—extraordinary man! He and the other Commissioners right around Australia at that time accepted all the recommendations of the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody royal commission. Can I urge you to have a look at those recommendations through the Committee secretariat? They are beautiful recommendations and they're very much in line with Mayor Webb's comments.

I'll give you two examples of that, and I'll finish. One is that the royal commission very strongly recommended that, when police are trained, that they have a very significant focus in learning about Aboriginal history, culture, and the issues confronting Aboriginal people. I'm sad to say that that doesn't still happen to an adequate degree here in New South Wales. But it's so important. The royal commission also specifically said when police are going to work in Aboriginal communities, this is imperative for those people.

Secondly, another major recommendation was this focus on community policing. It's a beautiful thing. I grew up in a country town: Foster, on the north coast. I remember the local police officer was such an integral part of the community, and that happens in many cases. But the point I make is that the royal commission talked about that policing model, and how important it was for police to engage with Aboriginal community leaderships. Work together. Find ways in which you can divert children from that path of trouble. It's a beautiful thing to watch. To finish my comment, your very question was one of the reasons for the formation of this Justice Reform Initiative, and we work very closely with Aboriginal organisations, and we're very honoured to have people like Pat Turner as one of our national patrons.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: We don't have a huge amount of time. I've only got one question but it's open to everybody. We'll probably start with Dr Sotiri. You've all painted a picture, and I can't say I agree with what you've said—but what we've seen—in evidence. We have evidence that people have been incarcerated, young people. We have a situation in Bourke and Broken Hill and others where children turn up in the early hours of the morning wanting to go back to juvenile justice, wanting to go and do crimes, or doing crimes, ringing the police and asking to be arrested so they can be taken to juvenile justice, because they have three meals, they have schooling. I think a quote was, "I feel like somebody actually cares about me there, because my home life is too dangerous." What's the solution to that?

MINDY SOTIRI: For the first of 20 years of my working life, I worked with people coming out of prisons, so I'm very familiar with those circumstances. And that was with adults, as well. I certainly know about people that are released from prison that would prefer to be back in prison. That doesn't surprise me. It is also is a real testament, unfortunately, to the lack of services and supports that people have in the community, and the lack of supports that families often have wrapped around them, that prison becomes the place that people want to go to. The reason it's a shame, and obviously there are great people working in prisons, in youth detention and in adult prisons, that are trying to do really important work, but what all of the research shows is that that contact,

any contact—it doesn't matter if it's two days, three days—makes it more likely that you are going to go on to reoffend. We know that recidivism rates in New South Wales are close to 85 per cent.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: They're reoffending to get back there again. My question is what do we do? How do we stop that happening?

MINDY SOTIRI: In our submission, and also in our recently published youth justice position paper, we outline over 40 examples that have been evaluated, of the kinds of programs that we should have in place. There are additional things that—I've got notes I'd like to share with the Committee today in terms of those programs. There are bail support programs. We've got a couple of examples in our submission, including one based in Queensland that has seen an 85 per cent reduction in reoffending. There are place-based programs that I will leave Geoff and others to speak to, that have seen significant reductions in particular kinds of crime, but also in rates of school suspension.

There's also a very recent and important study that has come out of Queensland called Pathways to Prevention, which followed kids that were offered a very focused communication program at the age of four, plus family support. That research, which is actually conducted by one of our patrons, Professor Ross Homel and his colleague Professor Jacqueline Allen, followed these kids over 20 years and had a control group, so it was a very robust study, and found a remarkable reduction in the likelihood of contact with the justice system. There was a 100 per cent reduction for those kids that did the program and had that support wrapped around. There are many of these programs that I can talk to in more detail. I know we don't have time, but I am very happy to highlight those.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I look forward to getting the paperwork, and then we can follow up.

MINDY SOTIRI: The final point that I would make is that there are lots of these pockets of programs that are happening around New South Wales, and some of them have remarkable results. When we think about those 3,500 kids that are coming out of prison each year, we need to really think about how many of those kids are actually touching any of those programs, and how much resourcing is actually going into those targeted programs that are there to break that cycle. Although there are important bits and pieces that are happening, and people working incredibly hard, the reality is that most of those services are operating on the smell of an oily rag, particularly when compared to the investment that we make in incarceration. We would say is, and what we've said in our submission, we know what works. It is not operating at a scale that enables it to have a systemic impact on the numbers of kids that are going to prison, or a systemic impact on that cycle of kids going back into prison.

ROBERT TICKNER: My additional comments in relation to the question is first of all to open up a very concrete example of where change is starting to happen around Australia in a different model. Surprisingly to some, not to me, it's coming from the Liberal government in Tasmania. It's very, very interesting. Essentially what they've realised is—as Mindy and others have been saying—you've got a tiny group of people compared to the total number in prison, in youth detention, who have actually been sentenced by a Children's Court magistrate to a period of detention. Absolutely tiny. Australia wide, the total numbers going through the door into youth detention every year, given the numbers of people who are going in once or twice around the system, it's about 3 per cent. But here in New South Wales, we think the figure is—

MINDY SOTIRI: It's less than 1 per cent that are actually sentenced when they are received into custody.

ROBERT TICKNER: So when you look at the corrections Inspector here in New South Wales, on page 7 of her report, the Inspector of Custodial Services, into youth detention centres in New South Wales, she essentially says that what we're running here in New South Wales is a homelessness service for marginalised young children. It's a homelessness service.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: That's a very good analogy.

ROBERT TICKNER: Indeed. And that's the independent Inspector. So when people are on remand, you must not think that, despite the many good people who work within the youth detention system, good people around Australia, they're not devils with horns, they're humans, many compassionate people, but the problem is that they don't have anything like the resources to be able to deal with this remand population. They arrive at youth detention to very different circumstances. They're dislocated from their communities, their school, their sport, their friends but, more damagingly, they're getting caught up in that youth detention culture, which is the railway tracks to more youth detention and adult prisons.

In Tasmania, the government is, one, closing its youth detention centre—just to reassure you, not immediately, but in a staged way to ensure services are in place. Some people are critical that they need to do it faster, but the commitment remains to close that centre because there was a Commission of Inquiry, as there has

been in most other jurisdictions, that found it was an absolute abomination. The second thing they're doing is making a commitment to get those children on remand out of the youth detention centres and into the community. Just to reassure you, they're elected people like you are. They don't have any crazy brave approach to this. They have a considered model of those children going to safe places that will be able to deal with their issues, but outside the youth detention system.

Finally, the Tasmanian government is moving its model from a model pretty much like most other systems, based on incarceration, and locking people up as the primary driver. If you go to a youth detention centre, that's a core business, if you like. But what we have to do is to shift that model to one which is a therapeutic model, that's going to look at these children who've been the most damaged, who've, frankly, committed acts that get them severely into trouble with the criminal justice system. They're the people that need even more intensive support.

Just very quickly, if you look at how things are going in the rest of the world, even in America, the youth detention rate has trended right down. In Scotland, they've moved to a model right outside the criminal justice system for dealing with young people, so there are zero children in the youth detention criminal justice system in Scotland. In England and Wales, a recent parliamentary report, publicly available, shows that the number of children in youth detention in all of England and Wales, with a population of nearly 70 million, on a typical night is a bit over 400. We have, with the population of New South Wales of I think eight or nine million, we have 200. For 68 to 70 million people, they've got a bit over 400 for the whole country. We are incarcerating so many more children.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: We're just going to have to stop you there because we've run out of time but thank you.

GEOFF SCOTT: I have just a quick comment. We already know which kids are at risk, the indicators are there. You know about them, you've spoken to them. The focus on case management of those families and of those kids has to happen now. That is diverting them away from the criminal justice system. You put them into that pipeline, you abuse them now. You institutionalise them, they're criminalised. They pick up skills and abilities to survive in that institutionalised environment, which doesn't bode well when they come outside. We've got to stop them going in it, and they need to be case managed. Resources have to go in at the local level, via local people.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: But I want to thank all of the witnesses for coming, in particular Dr Mindy and Mr Tickner. I love and appreciate and just—thank you so much for coming with solutions, with evidence. Any information that you've got, any programs, any robust—as you put it—studies that have been done over a period of time, whether here in this country or elsewhere, I would be grateful to get copies of those reports that you've got. I thank you for coming to the table today with solutions and ideas.

Recently I've been watching a documentary about fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and the lifelong conditions that that imposes upon people, which they've got no control over, causing physical behaviour and cognitive impairments for the rest of their lives. Looking at programs as young as four years of age, around communication with the child, the family, their community, as you've said, Doctor, looking at health issues as well, and working with communities along these health issues that we know of—it all needs to be done. Mr Tickner, I totally agree with you. There are so many organisations out there that have the best of intentions and a lot of funding but we're just not getting those results. So we need to look at this completely differently and, again, I thank you all for your time today.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Just quickly. Diversionary programs—more investment or less?

GEOFF SCOTT: More.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I'm only asking because I've been to Maranguka as well, and they've turned around and they've said we don't want any more money. The programs are here, and the issue is that state agencies and federal agencies don't talk to one another, and they're fly-ins and they're fly-outs, so therefore the investment is not reaching the people on the ground that it needs to.

GEOFF SCOTT: You're talking about investment in 10 communities in New South Wales. The last application round, 80 communities applied. That's an issue right across the state, not in the 10 that have been lucky enough to get some resources.

ROBERT TICKNER: I agree with Geoff.

MINDY SOTIRI: Absolutely. And the mapping that we've done in terms of the investment, even though there are lots of little programs, a lot of them around the state are running on like $200,000, which is essentially one worker and a car, when you're looking at it. I think that when you start looking at the dollar amounts that are

available to provide the kinds of casework support that—I agree with Geoff—is absolutely essential, really is someone who is physically able to be there, an actual human with that kid, helping them navigate the world and helping the family. That sort of support just doesn't exist in so many different regions.

I also want to note, while we're on the absence of resourcing, the absence of alcohol and other drug services in regional and remote areas. It's a critical issue, especially for children, and was raised as such at the drug summit, and has been raised for the last 20 years, as being absolutely not just a matter of better coordination—although we need that as well—it is actually a resourcing issue.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: You've obviously got police in some communities that are on the ground every day dealing with these situations around youth crime. Some of them are actually calling for tougher laws around dealing with youth crime. You've also got some police officers that are quite experienced. Probably what you said, Geoff, actually indicating that we know who the 14 or 15 families are in the community already. We should be targeting them now. So that probably flows into a little bit what Councillor Webb said previously about identifying them early and having the support there to assist them to actually get back on track.

GEOFF SCOTT: I think what the police officers don't have is those diversionary programs at their hand. All they have is a police response. If you had another response, it would be a different result.

MINDY SOTIRI: Can I just add to that. One of the things that was so successful in Maranguka, and in other places around Australia, has been when there have been co-responder models and alternative police responder models. So it's not just police going out. There's a really great example, it's in our submission as well, which is the Embedded Youth Outreach Project in Victoria, where police and youth workers go out together. Again, they've seen significant reductions in contact with police. I think that it's the way in which police operate, but also making sure that we look at what the most appropriate first responder model is.

ROBERT TICKNER: On page 3 of the evidence given in Kempsey there was evidence given by a senior police officer indicating a lack of knowledge on his part and availability of the programs we're talking about. This is why police have such an important role to play, from Commissioner level to the police on the beat. Very pro reform in this area. It's just going to pay huge dividends for the police force and for the community. To their credit, I saw the submission that came in from the Police Association looking to really sensible reforms. Police are just spending so much time on family violence, so much time on those mental health challenges. World's best practice is different to that. Good on the police for realising that and for encouraging reform.

Mr TRI VO: Thank you to all the witnesses for attending today and bringing to our attention how to address the drivers of crime, and not just treating the symptoms. It looks like we should try to prevent going into the criminal justice system, or the police or incarceration or detention system. A number of stakeholders have told us about the need for more alcohol and other drug counselling services in regional areas as part of the response to youth crime. Could you comment on this? Do you think this is a long-term solution? Is this sowing the seeds or planting a tree for the long term?

MINDY SOTIRI: I would absolutely reiterate that there is a need for alcohol and other drug services in regional and remote areas. There's also the need for housing and homelessness services for children. There's also the need for family support, there's the need for early prevention, and there's the need for early intervention. There's also the need for post-release services for children that do get caught up in the criminal justice system. There's the need also for—we've just been talking about police responder models that are really adequate for responding to what it is that kids need, and alternative court models, so specialist court models for children that are able to, again, address the reasons why they're in contact.

Alcohol and other drug services form one part of the picture. That is the question that the inquiry is looking at. In terms of the need for government to work together, I think that is a really critical one, because all of those things—alcohol and other drugs, homelessness, family support, early intervention, early prevention—are all crime control mechanisms but, at the moment, they are operating in a very piecemeal way around the state.

Mr TRI VO: All those address the drivers of the crime?

MINDY SOTIRI: Absolutely. The research is very clear about the drivers of incarceration. In fact, there was some research that came out, just two years ago, by Professor Eileen Baldry and her colleagues at UNSW, that identified eight drivers of incarceration. They are noted in our submission as well, but alcohol and other drug dependency is absolutely one of those drivers.

ROBERT TICKNER: To add to that, I think Mr Toole raised this question as well, about getting agencies to work together, and it's been an ongoing problem. It's not one of recent creation. But I do have some experience of this, and I truly believe that there are a lot of really good people in this Parliament, on both sides, but at the end of the day it takes Ministers and Premiers with a mongrel determination to change things for the

better, to use the key role of the Premier's Department, getting agencies in this portfolio where there is a significant number of Ministers who are absolutely critical. I think they are trying to work together, but they need the full weight of government behind them to make it happen. It's like being on a supertanker. You turn the wheel and look behind you, and it's quite a while before the rest of the ship comes with you. I think you're right onto something here.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Your contributions have been very valuable and will be taken on board. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings for any corrections, and the Committee may also choose to send you some supplementary questions. We would ask you to return those questions if you get them. Once again, thank you, and we wish you all the best.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr BLAKE CANSDALE, National Director, ANTAR, affirmed and examined

Ms JESSICA JOHNSTON, Research and Policy Officer, ANTAR, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Can you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses? You both received those?

BLAKE CANSDALE: We have.

JESSICA JOHNSTON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about those terms of reference?

BLAKE CANSDALE: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement before we begin the questions?

BLAKE CANSDALE: I must first acknowledge the Gadigal people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and I extend that respect to all First Nations people with us today, either in person or online. Within these walls of Parliament, I affirm that sovereignty was never ceded. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to appear before this inquiry, and to present evidence on behalf of ANTAR. My name is Blake Cansdale. I am a proud Anaiwan man and the National Director of ANTAR. I am joined today by my colleague, Jessica Johnston, ANTAR's policy lead, and a fierce advocate for First Nations peoples. For nearly three decades, ANTAR has been advocating tirelessly for justice, rights, and respect for First Nations peoples.

Mr Chair, we are here today because the New South Wales government, through this inquiry, is seeking to better understand how community safety can be improved in regional and remote communities in New South Wales. We are here today because central to this discussion is the already crisis-level criminalisation and mass incarceration of First Nations children. We are here today because the solutions to both of these issues exist, and they are very much connected.

Before all else, it is crucial that we are immediately clear on one thing: First Nations children are not a threat to community safety. Rather, the so-called justice system is a threat to the safety of First Nations children, and operates in such a way that it leads to worse children's justice, and therefore community safety outcomes. Too many of our children are victims of structural and institutional racism, of social disadvantage, of intergenerational trauma resulting from colonisation, and of government policy which looks for quick fixes over long-term systemic change, values optics over outcomes, and seeks short-term political advantage over long-term justice.

ANTAR urges the New South Wales government to take up a desperately needed paradigm shift away from "children as trouble" towards "children in trouble". Children engaged in anti-social behaviour are not threats to community safety. They are young kids who need understanding, guidance, and support. If we, as a society, cannot love and support our children, particularly those who are hurting and in need of guidance, who will? After all, our children are our future. Thank you.

The CHAIR: In relation to your views, the facility that was proposed in Moree's bail accommodation program as a way to divert young offenders from custody, what's your view on this particular approach? I just want to get your views. Do you believe that this is something you would support? If not, why not? If yes, why?

BLAKE CANSDALE: I have to say, I'm not immediately familiar with the specifics of that program, but given that you've said it's a matter of providing housing for young people to enable them to be bailed from court, I do have some familiarity with that. I was a criminal solicitor with the Children's Legal Services of Legal Aid back in the day, and at ANTAR we're very familiar that housing challenges and housing disadvantage is a significant factor leading to an over-representation of our young people in custody.

If for any reason it's appropriate to have young people, under the age of 14 certainly, in detention in Australia, or indeed anywhere globally, it's certainly not for lack of appropriate housing available to those young people. It is a shame, a very big shame, and morally and legally questionable, that we allow our young people to end up in custody at all, let alone for extended periods, and on remand, when we know that approximately

80 per cent of young people that come before the courts are either found not guilty of offences, or have all of their charges dismissed, ultimately.

So we would unequivocally support a program which helps provide supports to young people to ensure that they remain in community, where they're connected with their family or their broader community, receiving therapeutic supports and culturally responsive supports, and health and social based as well. So treating these issues that we're here today to discuss for what they are. They are absolutely health and social issues. They are not carceral issues. They're not matters that are justice oriented, in the sense of justice in the criminal justice system. It should be flipped, as I said earlier, about children's justice. And if we get that right up-front with appropriate investment through programs like the one, Mr Chair, you've mentioned, we will see a reduction in reoffending, and we will see the gains in community outcomes, as well, that we're searching for, through this inquiry.

The CHAIR: This is our fourth hearing into this particular regional crime issue. One theme that's popping out from all hearings is the issue of kids that can't be in the home environment, because the home environment is toxic—alcohol, drugs—so they go out roaming the streets. One of the suggestions that's coming out, and it's an actual theme, is an educational accommodation facility similar to a boarding facility for those kids that can't be at home but, at the same time, are being given an opportunity to have accommodation, have an education. What would be your views in relation to that?

BLAKE CANSDALE: Again, similar to, Mr Chair, the program that you first mentioned, focusing more on educational needs of young people, those social and emotional needs of young people, is certainly a much better approach than a carceral approach of more punishment and deterrence and isolation as a way to address community expectations around safety or otherwise. The evidence is very clear. Criminalisation does not work. It only fuels the cycles of disadvantage.

In the case of our First Nations communities, that's intergenerational and deeply entrenched disadvantage. We also know that evidence, both domestic and international, is very clear that incarcerating young people only leads to creating a lifetime of incarceration in and out through to adulthood. They're more likely to commit a wider range of offences, these young people, including elevating from perhaps non-violent offending, in the first instance, through to violent offences down the line. And they're more likely to end up in adult incarceration which, again, reinforces that intergenerational nature of what we're looking at in this case.

Educational-oriented programs are critical. They're foundational to ensure our young people have the ability to develop the social and emotional cognitive development that is healthy. So when they're in a position out in community, they can pursue further employment opportunities and reach their full potential as young people, which, again, we know all too well, doesn't happen if we incarcerate young people. In fact, the evidence, again, is very clear on the medical consequences, the detrimental impact on a young person's social and cognitive development, of incarceration.

JESSICA JOHNSTON: Can I just jump in quickly on the back of that? I was just going to say, without being able to comment on the specifics of the accommodation program that you mentioned, from our research, when it comes to First Nations kids, any alternatives have to be grounded in community and culture and country. Those kids need to have access to those things. They're pivotal things in order to encourage rehabilitation guidance. Those programs, I would say, need to be needs based, but also grounded in culture, to ensure that those children have access to those key aspects of their wellbeing. They can't be expected to make better choices and feel supported and uplifted to make good choices without connection to their kin, to their country, to their culture. From that perspective, I would say the design of those programs would need to keep those things top of mind when dealing with First Nations kids.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Don't jump down my throat—I'm playing devil's advocate; I agree with most everything you've said. Your comment about the children, and not just Aboriginal children, but children aren't a threat to the community as they are. When we're looking at all the evidence we're seeing, it's that the dysfunctional home life is creating a lot of it. It isn't the drugs. It is poverty and racism, and all the other things you mentioned. But the kids are on the street and doing crimes for different reasons, sometimes just to get a meal. What do you see as a solution for that home life? Do you know of a solution? It seems as if we've got a generation of Indigenous parents who—it just isn't working, and their kids are then impacted on, and end up in juvenile justice and places like that. Do you have a solution we could perhaps work towards?

BLAKE CANSDALE: Yes, absolutely. It's very a well-known—it's something I feel like a bit of a broken record repeating, and I'm sure the Committee—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Can't hurt to put it in evidence again, mate.

BLAKE CANSDALE: —will hear, and indeed, probably already has heard evidence of this nature and will continue hearing it. First Nations led, community-based social supports, familial supports, drug and alcohol programs to address some of these challenges that young people are facing. Education opportunities, adequate housing, mental health—I should say, for the most part, similar challenges that our young people are facing that end up getting caught up with the criminal justice system, and whilst some of these programs exist around Australia and around New South Wales in various communities, for the most part they are invariably underfunded.

If they do exist at all, they can't operate at scale, or can't operate in the manner in which we know they need to, in order to address these deeply entrenched challenges our young people are facing, in themselves as an individual, but as part of the broader community. These are community wide challenges that really exist. The lack of an adequate, quality service system to meet the needs of that community, which can't just be dropped into all communities around New South Wales. It needs to be localised. It really needs to be built from the ground up, understanding the unique challenges and story of the community—the unique needs. And equally, the aspirations. We need to be really careful to tap into the strength of our culture. It's really, really beautiful.

Our kids are stronger in culture, which is one of the key reasons that they need to stay connected to our families and our communities, because that's where they will grow strong, and they'll develop the resilience that's deep in each one of us, to be able to work through some of those intergenerational disadvantages which are there. I don't think there's any evidence to suggest that within the justice system there is the appropriate interventions to provide that kind of support. The solution, I'm sorry to say, is greater funding in these programs that exist—in justice reinvestment. The model is there, we just need to shift the money and focus on—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I don't disagree with anything you've said. Again, I agree with that. The problem is we saw in Bourke, for example, after six o'clock the only thing that was working at night was the police or the YMCA. There were no social services. There weren't enough counsellors. You go to Broken Hill, the closest place for drug rehabilitation was—where was it? Was it Young? It was miles away.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Dubbo.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Is that the problem? How do we get people out there? How do we get people into these communities?

BLAKE CANSDALE: That is a major challenge, even access and transport for our communities. That's why there is correlating challenges around driving offences, and the base need for our communities and our families to have access to transport, to be able to get long distances to the services they need to get the kind of support to break the cycle. Ultimately, the Australian Productivity Commission's report on government services said it was spending over $1 billion on a carceral system keeping our children in jail.

If even a portion of that shifted across to the kind of services we were just describing, our people aren't going to have to travel 100, 200, or 300 kilometres to get the kind of base services and quality services that they deserve. It's our right to have access to these things. Surely how we hold our ourselves—Australia as a nation of a fair go for all, then that would be something that we would want to provide, generally, to all communities and all people. So many of our communities, unfortunately, don't have that same kind of access, and it is largely because of the cost—$3,000 a day to keep a young person in custody, over $1 million a year. I believe that is where the solution sits, to re-prioritise things.

Again, before I mentioned a paradigm shift away from "children as trouble" to "children in trouble". And really focus on and draw from international human rights standards, that clearly point us towards, as a starting point, we shouldn't be incarcerating any child under the age of 14. The minimum age of criminal responsibility should be lifted to 14, without exception. That's the most common minimum age of criminal responsibility across the globe, so we're very much behind the curve there. And there's myriad of other changes, or reforms, I should say, that should be undertaken to really focus on the underlying drivers of offending of young people, rather than just trying to sweep the problem—build more prisons, which cost a fortune, aren't cost effective or effective at addressing the underlying causes of offending.

It's quite the opposite, actually, because it exacerbates a lot of those challenges and further entrenches that intergenerational cycle. It's really about shifting the frame through which we consider these issues—which is through our submission—rather than referring overly to community safety, recognising the importance of supporting young people to understand the consequences of their actions and to take responsibility. The way to do that is to help through education and quality housing, and helping them address the mental health challenges and the family violence they're experiencing at home. That's where the focus needs to be. Then we'll be able to assist our young people to be able to participate in the beautiful opportunities that are available in the wider economy in Australia.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Thank you for your time today. Just in relation to the Safe Aboriginal Youth patrol program. I'm just interested in you expanding your comments in relation to how that potentially works. What could be done better? There were comments that, with all the guidelines, that it could be doomed. I'm just curious to know how you see that particular program.

BLAKE CANSDALE: Sorry, which program was that?

Mr PAUL TOOLE: The Safe Aboriginal Youth patrol program.

JESSICA JOHNSTON: We might need to take that question on notice. Can I just jump in, just to the previous question about the after dark programs? We've done research—I think we've quoted some of those in our submission—that there is that gap in services. I just wanted to connect those dots that Blake mentioned about the current amount of funding and investment in carceral responses. The money is there, and the gaps are there, and we could develop these programs. There are some great First Nations led community patrols and after dark youth programs that exist in community that desperately need that funding. If we reinvested that funding, those service gaps could be addressed quite effectively and efficiently, I believe. There are models for that around Australia, in terms of community patrols and after dark programs for kids that can't be home, as you mentioned. I just wanted to connect those dots, to say, we know the resources are there. They're just currently being funnelled into carceral responses, and they need to be funnelled into community ones instead.

BLAKE CANSDALE: In terms of the specifics of the program—

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Just your comments on the program. If not, you can take it on notice.

BLAKE CANSDALE: I might have to take that on notice. I apologise, I'm not familiar with the specifics of that program.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: In the interest of time, I don't have any questions, but just want to thank you for being with us today.

Mr TRI VO: Thank you for coming here today. You mentioned about the intergenerational problems and disadvantages, and institutionalised problems or disadvantages. Children are our future. We have heard that support programs and services also need to target parents and carers for young people. Can you comment on this?

BLAKE CANSDALE: Certainly. The intergenerational nature of a lot of these challenges is deeply complex, the issues that we're seeking to address, so isolating the matter to just the young person themself isn't going to address the fact that we need to keep our kids strong at home with their families and in their culture, with their community. That necessitates a broader consideration of the needs of the community at large and, certainly, of the family unit. That's not just a nuclear family of mother and father but, often with our families, there are broader considerations of the familial model that we've adopted. So having an understanding of the needs of the family, of parents. The fact that, often, those parents have themselves come through these systems—the justice systems. And the system has effectively failed them, hasn't provided the appropriate kind of supports that they deserved and needed to address the challenges that have then, unfortunately, led to their own children growing up in environments where perhaps they didn't have access to the kind of social, emotional, and educational opportunities that they're deserving of.

This is a holistic response that's needed, not a piecemeal one. It's not about education alone, it's not about housing alone, it's not about mental health, or drugs and alcohol programs. In isolation, any of these things aren't going to work alone. We need a whole system, and a long-term, sustainable approach. That's why the piecemeal funding model isn't going to work. It's going to take a complete overhaul, a transformative reform, to look at these challenges that our young people are facing, and also the parents, collectively, and think about where we want to position our communities, and the kind of justice outcomes more broadly that we want to achieve for our people in New South Wales over the long term.

That's for the benefit of all, not just First Nations families and communities. I'm going to misquote this thing, but the sign of a good government is how it treats its most vulnerable citizens in society. Surely a sign of how well this government is doing is perhaps how well it's supporting incredibly disadvantaged young people, who often by no virtue or choice of their own have ended up in life circumstances which has led them to being in contact with the criminal justice system. Which is where I, early in my career as a criminal solicitor, felt a pull away from the justice system, where I felt somewhat like a cog in the machine, towards being in a position where I could help shape the system to focus more on the underlying needs of those young people. That's what the juvenile justice officers and Justice Health, some of the yarns that they were having with our young ones—I feel like that's where the support and mentoring, and really helping them to find strength within themselves, and to take up opportunities that are available—that's where the real gains are had.

Mr TRI VO: Do you have any opinions on what legislative amendments to promote diversionary programs should look like? Are there any particular referral pathways they should prefer?

BLAKE CANSDALE: Can you repeat the question, please?

Mr TRI VO: Do you have any opinions on what legislative amendments, changes to laws to promote diversionary programs, should look like?

BLAKE CANSDALE: The emphasis would be on shifting funding across to solutions that we are aware exist, not just anecdotally, but in evidence of the underlying challenges, social and emotional and medical, that we're aware of, that leads to offending behaviour. There are great community programs, and we have many examples of such that are working already. That would be a major factor. In terms of actual legislative reform, to complement a shifting of the prioritisation of budgets across to support these programs to be more connected as a holistic response, and to operate at scale. Over the long term, we would encourage the Committee to call for a raising of the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14, without exception. We would also call for the New South Wales government to end the "post and boast" defence, and to reverse the recent bail law changes to extend the repeat serious offender consequences that removes the discretion from judges to grant bail for young people based on the charges that are appearing before the court.

We would also encourage the Committee to consider expanding and adequately funding First Nations led justice reinvestment initiatives, which goes to the point that we have programs in community that are proving to work. In fact, with Maranguka, I believe PricewaterhouseCoopers did an assessment of the savings, which were around $3.1 million saved from investing in and supporting those young people in community, rather than investing in a carceral response. We also would encourage the Committee to ensure that all First Nations youth in regional and rural New South Wales have access to culturally safe diversionary programs. Also investing in First Nations led, trauma-informed, pre-charge diversion programs, and prioritising wraparound supports that address root causes of offending.

Finally, we would also encourage the Committee to implement or recommend implementing non-police first responders in regional and remote areas. It's ANTAR's firm view that the police do not have the qualifications or expertise to be the default response to youth welfare and, effectively, medical issues that we're facing here. New South Wales must sustainably fund Aboriginal community controlled organisations, night patrols, and other culturally appropriate first responders. That would have a significant impact on not just improving children's justice outcomes, but their community safety outcomes.

Mr TRI VO: It's pretty much—

The CHAIR: Mr Vo, we might take supplementary questions and send them to you in writing.

Mr TRI VO: This is very quick. People are much less reliant on the criminal justice system, but more on diversionary—

The CHAIR: Mr Vo, we're conscious of time. If you have additional questions, we can send them through the secretariat to the organisation to get a response in writing.

JESSICA JOHNSTON: I just wanted to jump in to say, our fifth recommendation in our submission, if you did want a reference, does address that question about amending legislation to pre-charge referral programs to on country diversionary models, of which there are some fantastic—Larissa Behrendt, Chris Cunneen—there are some excellent research papers on the proven, positive impacts of on country diversionary models. We would we would definitely be in favour of legislative changes to support all First Nations kids having access to those diversionary programs. They're currently not given access, not granted access in the same proportion as non-Indigenous kids.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for your contribution today and giving evidence. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings. Should you wish to make any corrections, advise the secretariat of those. If you have taken some questions on notice, the Committee staff will email those questions back to you. Any supplementary questions that the Committee might have, they will email those to you as well. Once again, thank you so much for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr JONATHAN HALL SPENCE, Principal Solicitor, Justice and Equity Centre, affirmed and examined

Ms ALANNAH DALY, Policy Officer, Justice and Equity Centre, affirmed and examined

Mr NICHOLAS COWDERY, Committee Member, NSW Council for Civil Liberties, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos or videos taken. Can I please start by asking you to confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference. You have. Do you have any questions in relation to those? No, okay. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

NICHOLAS COWDERY: I'm a member of the Committee of the Council, and a former president. The Council has made a written submission to the Committee dated 31 May 2024. I adhere to and support that written submission. I don't wish to take a lot of time now, but I would like to highlight four aspects of that submission, and four aspects of the matters that the Committee is presently considering. The first is that, overall, with some exceptions, crime levels are actually falling in New South Wales, and have been in a steady decline—not dramatic, but a steady decline—for about the last two decades. I think we need to put to one side any idea that we are in the midst of a crime wave, or some kind of emergency situation that needs to be addressed.

The second thing that I would like to mention is that the First Nations representation in criminal justice is outrageously high, disgracefully in fact. Many attempts have been made to try to reduce it over time, but so far without real success. The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research published its latest quarterly figures—custody statistics—a week or two ago. This is for the quarter ending 31 December 2024. In those figures, I'll just mention a couple of figures. In the adult custody profile, the Aboriginal male figure is 32 per cent. So 32 per cent of men in custody on 31 December were First Nations or Aboriginal men. The Aboriginal female percentage is 42 per cent—10 per cent higher. Now that is just, alarming, I think, is the only word that can be put to it, or one of many words I suppose. So far as juveniles are concerned, the Aboriginal male juvenile percentage was 58 per cent and the Aboriginal female percentage was 53 per cent. Again, I think that shows that we are in the midst of a problem that really does need to be addressed in a serious way.

The third matter I'd like to mention is the position of juveniles, and I've just given the statistics for First Nations people. There are three aspects of that. First is the age of criminal responsibility. It needs, in my submission, and the Council's submission, to be raised to 14 across the country, to bring it in line with the internationally accepted minimum age for criminal responsibility: the age that the United Nations endorses. Secondly, we have to be aware of the criminogenic nature of incarceration. When juveniles go into incarceration, they are starting on a path of reincarceration, re-criminal offending. It's a downhill path from thereon. We need to be doing what we can to keep young people out of custody.

The third aspect of that is that we need diversions that will address the factors that create juvenile criminal offending. We've included a number of those in our submission, at paragraph 1.2 (c). This is the facts on the criminogenic effect of incarceration:

> … a history of parental incarceration, being of a lower socioeconomic background or otherwise lacking resources, experiencing child abuse or neglect, witnessing domestic violence, having a history of drug or alcohol abuse either personally or in the home—

and fetal alcohol syndrome—

> … having lower levels of education and having some form of disability.

Those are the factors that contribute to criminal offending by juveniles. Those are the sorts of factors, the social drivers, which we would submit need to be addressed.

The fourth point that I wish to make overall is that many of us collectively know what the problems are. We have a pretty good idea of how they can be addressed. What is required now is government commitment, resources, and action to address those factors which create crime, particularly in regional and rural communities, and for more work to be done in that particular area. The late Tony Vinson wrote many years ago about postcode justice. I think it's worth remembering that, inadvertently, we are leading to a form of postcode justice, particularly in relation to regional and rural communities. Thank you for the introduction.

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee this morning. We would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. Sovereignty was never ceded, and I pay my respect to Elders past and present. We are appearing on behalf of the Justice and Equity Centre, formerly known as the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, or PIAC. We are a

social justice law and policy organisation that works with people and communities who are marginalised or facing disadvantage. We recognise at the outset that the terms of reference for this inquiry are broad. Our written submission focused on how to address the drivers and causes of youth crime in regional and rural New South Wales, and our organisation also coordinates the New South Wales Raise the Age campaign. We endorse the recommendations made by the campaign in their separate written submission.

We would like to recognise the individuals who have been victims of crime, who took the time to contribute their stories and experiences to this inquiry. We all want safer communities and we all want fewer victims of crime. The New South Wales government's current approach, however, focuses too heavily on law and order responses and it is simply not working. What is being done now creates crime, lifetimes of crime. If we do want fewer victims of crime, safer communities, and New South Wales children who are thriving, we must move towards evidence-based prevention, early intervention, and diversion measures which address those underlying drivers of crime.

Our response must include better resourcing for Aboriginal community controlled organisations to support First Nations young people and their families, who are disproportionally caught up in our state's criminal legal system; raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to at least 14, a reform that has been recognised by Treasury as one which would deliver significant social and economic benefits to New South Wales; investment in targeted services and interventions to support young people to address the particular causes of offending for themselves; and investment in the foundational services such as housing, health, and education, which support young people, their families, and community to be strong and healthy and support each other to avoid involvement in the criminal legal system. We welcome any questions the Committee might have this morning. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Cowdery, a number of stakeholders have advised us that there is a need for more alcohol and drug counselling services in regional areas as part of the response to youth crime. Can you comment on this?

NICHOLAS COWDERY: Yes, we would certainly support an extension of the facilities and resources provided to them. As I've mentioned, one of the contributing factors, particularly to juvenile crime, is the consumption of alcohol and drugs. I've mentioned specifically fetal alcohol syndrome, which has received—just recently, I think, I've been reading about it in the public media, where there has been some new research into the area. I don't have the details in front of me at the moment, but it is a very significant factor. The pregnant mother is consuming excessive alcohol, which leads to fetal damage, which then translates through into behavioural issues as the child develops and grows. So, yes, drug and alcohol counselling and services and programs in regional and remote areas would be very helpful.

The CHAIR: We've heard from some stakeholders that young people just don't trust the police, yet we've heard from others that when kids are roaming the streets, they end up at the police station seeking food and seeking a place to stay the night because they don't want to go back home. What's your experience with that? Is it that some of them do and some of them don't?

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: It's certainly our experience that young people who have had many interactions in their young lives with police have distrust and scepticism towards police, and it's one of the reasons that police-led programs have very low rates of success. I think the last evaluation BOCSAR did of PCYC programs showed they had no impact on whether a young person would reoffend or not. Our view, and it's a view shared by many, is that when you're thinking about these young people in these communities, they need to be supported by people they know. That's likely to get the best outcome. Not police, but community organisations, family members, those in a position to understand them and support them, because those are the people that they do trust. The role for government is supporting those people—the families, communities, community organisations—to better support those young people.

NICHOLAS COWDERY: I suppose it is a matter of trust, and trust can be bestowed unevenly depending on the circumstances in which the juvenile finds him or herself. The police, overall, I think, do work very hard to try to build proper relationships with youths who may be at risk. But, again, probably unevenly across the state. I can point to things like the Maranguka project in Bourke, which has enjoyed enormous success over the years, and the police have been a driving force in that success. They've contributed from the beginning. It's a project which, until recently, received very little government support. It ran for years on philanthropy, run by Just Reinvest NSW. They've now expanded to Moree, Mount Druitt, and Kempsey. It's interesting to see how those programs are developing. But there, the police have become very much involved in leading the programs, and in developing trust with the local tribal council or other Aboriginal group in that town. It's a question of building trust, of trying to do that uniformly, of establishing the police as helpers rather than persecutors in society.

Mr TRI VO: I have two questions. One to either Mr Spence or Ms Daly. The question is you have recommended that early intervention programs operate separately to police in the justice system. How would you like to see these programs coordinated by the government?

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: Yes, it's a great question. We'd like to see the government identifying local community organisations that already have strong relationships with young people and their families, and providing them the funding they need to design and deliver the services required by their communities. For us that is the role for the government: supporting that local-level intervention and support.

Mr TRI VO: I have another question for Mr Cowdery. I know you have extensive experience in the legal field. Do you know what has prevented the establishment of alternative court solutions in regional New South Wales? How do you think these issues could be addressed?

NICHOLAS COWDERY: It's not as if we don't know what sorts of alternatives there are and which ones work. We do know from the experience of other jurisdictions, and most recently the Australian Capital Territory has taken some very significant steps in relation to this. But there are other programs that have operated in other countries, in Spain and the Scandinavian countries, and even in some of the United States of America, not all states but in some states. We have examples that we can turn to, of programs that will work. Nothing's perfect, of course, but will work better than what we are doing at the moment.

I gather from what I have read and heard over the years that the problem with raising the age of criminal responsibility is that some of the Attorneys-General, at least, have grappled with the question of, if we don't criminalise these people and deal with them through the criminal justice process, what do we do with them? We can't just send them home. We can't just let them go. They've done something very bad. What do we do to deal with them? And the argument seems to have stopped there. They haven't taken the next step, which is to look at what does work around the world, and in our own backyard, and seek to implement those solutions. That, of course, requires planning, it requires resources, it requires taking a slightly new direction.

It probably would expose politicians who do that to claims of being soft on crime, which is just ridiculous. The idea is to be smart on crime. Not to be tough on crime, to be smart on crime. Crime is always going to be there, at both juvenile and adult levels, so we need to deal with it in a smarter way which makes the community safer, overall, and in the long term. So I would urge people who are responsible for formulating policy in this area to look around and take examples, see what can be made to work for us, and give it a go.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: First of all, thank you so much for your time today and for your insight. We know what the issues are. As the Chair said before, this is our fourth hearing. A lot of folks that have come along to previous hearings, or to this hearing today, have made remarks about having to constantly repeat themselves, and I hear their frustration. I just want to acknowledge that frustration. The issues are health, education, community services for after hours, family violence at home, and cultural and heritage education and awareness, which is essential.

Looking at things like skills-based training, we heard today working with animals would be great. I know about looking at skills-based training for young people, to give them not only a skill, but also to give them an opportunity for employment further down the line. Looking at arts and culture. One of the things that we have heard is that when our young people are put into a detention centre, if I can use that term, they do start to undertake education. From what I've heard, they thrive at that. As both of you gentlemen would know, our job is to look at not only the findings, but to make recommendations going forward. Do you think that there is something we could look at, in the way of an education type of accommodation encompassing all of those services that we know need to be addressed?

I guess that's my question—what can we look at as a solution, going forward? There are a number of well-intentioned organisations out there that are getting funding year after year, or every three years, et cetera. But is there a place that we can help these young people, these families, in their communities, with their Elders and wraparound services to ensure they get the education? What we do know is education gives us knowledge and opportunities, and so I'm just wondering, if school is not the place for them, is there something else that we can look at? It's a big question; I apologise for that. I'm just looking for your insight, please.

NICHOLAS COWDERY: It's a very interesting question, one that I haven't heard asked before. So, well done. I think it definitely deserves consideration. I think what you're suggesting is something that would take some of the features of the Spanish program. I'm sorry, I've totally forgotten the name of it. It's just one of those names that doesn't stick in my head. But it's a well-known Spanish program, where juveniles are actually detained, but there is a very strong emphasis on education, on family engagement, and on skills education, and so forth.

We know that kids don't wander off the track if they are occupied, doing something that they engage with. It might be education, it might be playing sport, it might be a hobby. Whatever it is that appeals to them and

keeps them engaged. And if they stay engaged, they will avoid crime. Don Weatherburn wrote about this many years ago in an excellent book—again, I've lost the title of that. Don has written so many books. He looked at studies in this country and in other countries, and came to the conclusion that there is rock-solid evidence that just keeping kids engaged in something that is seen to be of benefit to them, that they appreciate has been a benefit to them, will keep them away from committing crime.

So the idea of having, if I get the question correctly, some kind of an institution which focuses on education and the building of skills, and maybe incorporates some kind of familial engagement, that could well be worth looking at. Our present juvenile detention facilities are pretty much holding pens with some education put in, but the education seems, from what I read from time to time, to be a bit haphazard. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But if you had an institution that was focused specifically on that, and for which entry criteria were clearly established, I think it would be an idea worth considering, yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Mr Spence, if you want to answer that, of course that's fine. Ms Daly, my apologies, I didn't recognise you in the lead-up to that question before.

ALANNAH DALY: That's okay.

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: We're not teachers or educational professionals, obviously, but we do recognise that education is one of those really core foundational services that we need to invest in, to support communities. In terms of the sort of educational facility, I guess the only note I'd add to Mr Cowdery's comments is we really need to be careful of solutions which isolate children, or which place sort of an individualised burden on them to address what's going on for them. We know that the solutions that work best are the community-oriented solutions, where we rally the people that young kids might have in their lives already, who they look up to or care about, to be that support network. If being in an educational facility, like a boarding school or something, takes you away from those support networks, it's probably not going to be an effective solution. Whereas, if it's an educational facility that's deeply rooted in community knowledge and community networks, then you'll see a lot greater likelihood of success, I think, with an idea like that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: The school system, if I can say it like that, of nine until three, sometimes doesn't fit every child. So if we can look at something to address that, I think it would be helpful. Because of the organisations that you're from, I just wanted to take the opportunity to ask you what your thoughts were, so I do appreciate that. Ms Daly, I'm not sure if you wanted to make a comment.

ALANNAH DALY: Yes, if I might just add briefly, it may also be worthwhile looking into measures around providing more homelessness accommodation supports for young people who might be struggling with the educational system. So that would provide them with additional social service support, casework, to help them through that school system, especially if they're having difficulties in their home life. That can be a preventative measure, before a criminal justice response and the educational facilities in prisons.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: You made a comment that in many cases a lot of young people don't have positive interactions, necessarily, with the police. You also indicated the outcomes may not be great as well, from organisations like PCYC. My question then is, if you're going to have community-led organisations running programs in the local area, who are you targeting? Who is going to be running them? Because a lot of them, as you know, and I think it's been said, finish at five o'clock in the afternoon. Who's going to be running the community-led organisations? Have you got some examples that you can share that work well in that regards?

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: Definitely. It's a great point. We can't have services that end at five o'clock, because families don't end at five o'clock. Part of that is the funding equation. There needs to be more funding for these local organisations that are trying to work with these kids and the families that they come from. In terms of examples, there's certainly some in our written submissions and there's certainly, in the work of Just Reinvest, some great examples of things that are working, in terms of locally designed and delivered solutions. But you're right; we need to resource those organisations so that they can do this work at all hours, and they can be there to be the first responders, because when police are first responders, we don't always get the best results for the people involved.

NICHOLAS COWDERY: I think it needs to be recognised that there's no one size fits all; I think it's pretty clear from the discussion. Even for Just Reinvest, when it started in Bourke many years ago, there were issues that needed to be addressed there, in the context of the Bourke society, the Bourke community. When they went to expand the programs, the next one on the list was Moree, where they discovered a whole different set of social circumstances that needed to be addressed. Different attitudes. Different structures. Different organisations that needed to be brought on board. That's been done, but it meant that there had to be a new plan developed to fit the new circumstances. I think we need to be aware of that and, as has been said, these things don't start at nine

and finish at five. These are things that need to be adapted in the particular situation to best address the needs of that society.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: What would you say to my next question, then? I know this could be a longer discussion today, but you're talking about the age of criminality going and being raised potentially to 14. What about people who do say that a child who is 12 years of age does know right from wrong? And there's a lot of victims out there in communities that have actually had 10-year-olds, 11-year-olds, 12-year-olds that have actually caused significant harm to individuals.

NICHOLAS COWDERY: That's undoubtedly true, but the criminal justice process is not best designed to deal with those situations, even if a 12-year-old has caused significant harm. Bear in mind that our human brains keep developing, sometimes, until about the age of 25. An adolescent, a teenager, is in a state of constant intellectual development, where what was understood by that child at the age of 12, or at the age of 13, or 14, becomes something different. I think the point I would make, in answer to the question, is that the criminal justice process and the criminal justice institutions are not the best way of dealing with those sorts of issues that are created by young offenders. Some of the other kinds of systems that are in place in the ACT, where they are still experimenting, really, trying things out, and in other jurisdictions, work better by engaging the child in programs and instruction that will lead to the child getting off the criminal track and becoming a worthwhile member of society.

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: I should make clear that we're not arguing for one moment that actions shouldn't have consequences. It's just that when we're responding with criminal justice processes like police and detention, as Mr Cowdery said, we're not getting the best outcomes for the young person or the community. The consequences should be through engagement and restorative justice processes, by working with the young person to understand the harm that they caused through their actions, and working with them to take some individual responsibility, and taking that forward and seeing what that means for them, going forward. It's not about actions not having consequences. It's just about those consequences being based in community and support, rather than in police and the legal process.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: This question goes on to what Ms Stuart said in the Committee, and also Mr Toole. At the moment, we have a situation where we have a lot of youths, juveniles, 10 years old, committing crimes. They get bailed, they go out and do it again. They don't want to be in their home, because the home is completely dysfunctional, and usually it is unsafe for them to be there. So they're on the street. We have some juveniles going to the police asking to be put back into juvenile justice so they can at least be cared for, and that's the reality today. If you don't incarcerate them now, then they just go back onto the street and go back to a dysfunctional home.

I agree with you that the prison system, the correctional services system, isn't the way forward for children. It isn't. But there is nothing else at the moment. If you put that child on bail and they go and they do their services, nine to five, or 10 to six, they still have to go home. And that's where the problem is. So what I am asking is, is there a model at the moment that you're aware of, in this country or overseas—you mentioned Spain, but that's incarceration again—where there is a solution to this?

Because we have had it said to us—and I'll say this, because it's in evidence—by Indigenous leaders that we should take their children. I was in horror, when that was said to me by Indigenous leaders, and more than once. So we are grappling with a situation that every solution that has been put up hasn't worked. Millions and millions of dollars have failed in places like Moree and others. So the question I put you is, do you have an idea of a model, or do you know of a model, that might actually help us, and actually help to achieve what we're trying to do here?

NICHOLAS COWDERY: I'm not in a position to point to an actual model at the moment, but have a look at the ACT and what they're doing there. This is an issue that has arisen there. It's been discussed. Plans have been put in place. I think programs are underway now. In our submission, the state should be in a position to offer an alternative that does not involve sending a child back into a situation of risk—that is, back into a dysfunctional family, or an abusive family. Putting them in jail, which is supposed to be a punishment, is not the answer. But there needs to be an institution, or a set of institutions, or a process in place to provide them with safety, until the issues can be more comprehensively dealt with in the longer term. There needs to be some sort of an interim safe place for them to go.

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: I'd echo the comments of Councillor Webb this morning that this is not a problem we're going to be able to police our way out of. These problems are about, as he identified, poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, which are all massive problems in regional and rural areas. Those are the things that we need to invest in and to try and turn around. Again, Councillor Webb put it better than anyone. We need long-term injection of funding to support these communities to address those things, by building more houses,

and by having better services for supporting families who have issues with domestic and family violence to provide safe places. One of the reasons that we can't point to a model is because it's going to be different for every location. Every community is going to have different people, different needs, different organisations that already exist there with different strengths. For us it's just about identifying, what are the strengths of the organisations and communities that are out there, and then providing the funding they need.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You say that, but it's the same problem over and over again. The problems in Bourke are the same problems we're seeing in Broken Hill and Kempsey. Probably Wagga next week as well. I don't disagree with anything you've said, but the problem is that we're seeing the same thing over again. You're right; one model doesn't fit all, but we need to have some idea of some models that are working effectively.

JONATHAN HALL SPENCE: Again, I point to the submissions that other organisations have made to this Committee, of programs that are working at a small scale. Bail support programs, Elders programs, models that have returned good outcomes, in terms of seeing kids avoiding reoffending. The model that's needed is investing in those, investing in creating them if they don't exist yet, and investing in supporting them and rolling them out if they do exist but have to stop at five o'clock because they can't employ enough people to be there all the time. Yes, I think there are examples out there. We just need to get behind them.

ALANNAH DALY: If I could just elaborate on the issue of housing, for example. We know that regional New South Wales has a lack of affordable and adequate housing. The New South Wales Regional Housing Taskforce found that there is an urgent need for more social and affordable housing. What we're seeing in regional New South Wales is that if a family is experiencing domestic violence, the lack of housing options means that that family has to choose between staying in an unsafe environment, risking further violence, or experiencing homelessness. We also know that a lack of adequate housing puts children at risk of being put into out-of-home care as well. That is definitely one of the systemic issues that could be part of a model in addressing these rates of youth crime.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. You'll be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings. Should you have any corrections, please let the secretariat know. The Committee staff may send you supplementary questions. We ask you to return those as per the directions of the Committee. So, once again, thank you very much for your contribution today. It's been very valuable.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Associate Professor TAMARA BLAKEMORE, Project Lead, Name. Narrate. Navigate., sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that , Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having your photos or videos taken. You've also been issued with the Committee's terms of reference. Can you confirm that you've been issued the terms of reference?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: I have, yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions in relation to those?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement before we begin? Maybe tell us a little bit about your organisation and your involvement.

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: I am an Associate Professor in social work at the University of Newcastle, and I'm the project lead of the Name. Narrate. Navigate program. Thank you for having me here today, and I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with us today.

I'm here to talk about our Name. Narrate. Navigate. Program [NNN] and how this has rolled out, particularly across regional New South Wales, but also reflect on some learnings from rural and remote Australia as well. NNN was established in 2018 after a really important conversation with our then local children's magistrate, who was reflecting with us that so many children she saw before her for care matters in the morning would later present, at some time in our future, for criminal matters in the afternoon. As a social worker who has spent all of my career in regional, rural and remote Australia, I have the experience of working now, removing children from parents who I removed as a child. That intergenerational experience is common, but what our local Children's Court magistrate, Magistrate Tracy Sheedy, reflected to us is so many of these young people were dropping out of school and into crime, and she really wanted to understand what the connection was between schooling and crime.

What we found in our location was, it wasn't so much that young people were disengaging from education, but that education was disengaging from them, and we wanted to understand that more. What we also heard were practitioners in our region saying, "We can't get training. We can't get support. We don't feel confident to work with youth violence in a way that is trauma informed and culturally responsive." That was the roots of the NNN program, a program that is designed to break cycles of justice involvement for young people, recognising that young people who are using violence have, most often and most commonly, also experienced violence themselves. How do we hold those two experiences in our hands at the same time, as practitioners? How do we do it in ways that are trauma informed, and responsive to what we know about the neuroscience of trauma? But how do we do so in culturally safe and responsive ways?

The program really is about giving voice and visibility to the experience of young people, understanding that, for people to make a choice to change, those choices have to be informed, and they have to be informed by people understanding their experience. We've developed a tool, and I've got it here for you, if you'd like to have a look, which is a visual tool, where the young people we've worked with have taken photos of their everyday life, to give justice professionals and people involved in their lives a better understanding of what it is, what they see, what they do, who they spend their time with, what they experience. It's a nice little visual accompaniment to my evidence here today. I have that if you would like to have a look.

We have now worked with over 250 young people across regional, rural, and remote sites, predominantly in New South Wales, in custodial, community, and education settings. Sixty-five per cent of the young people—and they're aged between 10 and 18—that we have worked with have been female. Thirty-five per cent have been male. Seventy-two per cent of the young people we work with have been Aboriginal. twenty-four per cent non-Aboriginal, and 4 per cent from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The centrepiece of that group work with young people can be delivered in an intensive, a long form, or an individual format. The intervention is trauma informed and culturally safe. It uses a lot of creative methods, with raising and dropping of the heart rate intermittently, to give people the skill of self-regulation.

The key focus of NNN is to give young people self-awareness, self-regulation, and skills for connecting with others. As I've said, we've delivered it in a range of settings, and evaluation has found that young people experience the program as engaging, supportive, and safe. It's in that context of safety that, as a consequence, young people start to make different choices. They make choices about who they spend time with. Changing who

you spend time with often leads to re-engagement with school, education, and work. An important part of our NNN program is that when young people graduate the program, and stay charge free, they come back to work with us. They become employees of the University of Newcastle, and they deliver the program alongside us, as peer deliverers and mentors.

An important point of difference with NNN is that we recognise that a program doesn't work in isolation. A program works in a system of services and supports. It was those systems and services and supports—as soon as you leave the east coast, people can't get access to affordable, accessible training. So our practitioners in Bourke, our practitioners in Kununurra, could not get training. So it was training the practitioners to work in ways that were responsive to the needs of their community, in place-based ways. We have now engaged with over 2,000 practitioners of all different types of training and qualification—from working with community Elders to run this program in their own communities in the ways that work best for them, to working with police officers who want to deliver it in a one-on-one mode, to working with schools, for teachers to be able to deliver this program in their own schools.

Cross-sector workers have engaged with the training and are crying out for the program to be expanded into more areas, which of course relies on funding. We've also produced a lot of tools with the young people that we work with, so that even if the program can't reach these different sectors, the tools from the program can reach a range of sectors to deliver the same outcomes.

The CHAIR: We'll move on to questions from the Committee. In which regions have you rolled this program out to so far?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: The predominant focus of our work has been the Hunter, being a Hunter-based program. So Hunter, Lower Hunter, Upper Hunter, Port Stephens in particular, Lake Macquarie, Newcastle, Central Coast. The program has also had an intensive delivery in the Clarence Valley, Bundjalung and Yaegl country. We have then also delivered training to practitioners in Western Sydney, who are delivering in those sites and settings. It's been delivered in custodial settings at Frank Baxter [Youth Justice Centre], as well. Then we've had uptake in other parts of the country, in Victoria, rural Victoria, and Kununurra in Western Australia, as well.

The CHAIR: Is this based on a referral system?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: No, what it's based on is actually community. NNN is a community-focused, place-based response. We're really informed by the work of Ross Homel. My training and background has been working in place-based intervention prevention in Queensland, and seeing how the Inala and Logan project really worked in identifying that if we work in a community-based way, we have greater impact across the community.

We work with the community—the Maitland community, for example–who raised an interest in having NNN in their community, and we identify who the key players are in that community that need to be delivering the program. Then we work to upskill those program deliverers, but also make sure, as we're doing in the Newcastle site, we recognise that there needs to be a no one door. This program, and the skills from the program, need to be accessible no matter where a young person is—whether they're at school, whether they're at a sporting organisation, whether they're finding their identity through cultural connection. We need to give cross-sector practitioners—it can't be owned. It needs to be a skill set that is shared across a community, so the community is speaking the same language, and can refer across the community to different sites and settings.

The CHAIR: You've mentioned the age bracket 10 to 18?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Yes.

The CHAIR: How do the kids participate in the program? Is it a voluntary basis?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Yes. I'll give you an idea of how we started. It was with Youth Justice. So, young people who were on community-based orders with Youth Justice were offered whether they would like to spend some of their supervision hours participating in NNN, versus doing some of their in-house programs like CHART [Changing Habits and Reaching Targets] or CBT-based [cognitive behavioural therapy] programs. So we worked with Youth Justice to skill up their practitioners to be able to deliver the program. Young people could choose which way they wanted to go. They didn't have to participate, but time and time again they chose NNN over their other options.

The other ways that we have delivered it is to deliver it as a whole-of-cohort delivery within a school. Our Raymond Terrace primary and our Wiripaang primary in our region have run it for all of year 4/5, and all of year 5/6. Over three days there was an intensive delivery, where everyone in that community, in that school, in those age brackets got to participate. The parents got to come in, see the work, participate in the work, have those

conversations about the work, and the teachers were then skilled in the practice and the ways of working with youth violence that they could then take it on into their classroom from here forward.

The CHAIR: How is this program funded?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: It's difficult to get funding for work that is working with people who use violence, particularly when we're talking about a skill set that a lot of people don't have. Across Australia, there are very few university degrees and TAFE courses for practitioners to learn to work with youth violence. We've got a big issue, there. Finding that funding has been difficult. We had an initial investment from the federal government, the Department of Social Services, which gave good pilot funding. We then had some investment from Westpac, and we've since been lucky enough to have some New South Wales state funding to further, particularly, the tools and the community-based work.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you for your submission and all the work you're doing. You mentioned, just a moment ago, the Logan and Inala programs. Could you just give me an oversight of what they were?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Professor Ross Homel, who is a very important voice in the prevention of youth violence, has talked about when we intervene early, we can change a community, and we can change children's trajectories, and life course trajectories. The program really did start around looking at safe beginnings for children, so looking at the early investment in "How do we get children on the right track?" What our research has followed on from his is, when young people engage in school – some children never get in the gate to start with.

Some young people have been disengaged from the education system at that transition from primary school to high school, and we see that as a big gap, and there's a lot of grief amongst the young people that we work with. But for a considerable number of the young people who are justice involved, it's even getting in the gate. So his work was around that very early intervention of "How do we get kids off to the best start?" Our argument is place-based strategies like that need to follow through, and we need to be thinking about place-based strategies as both prevention and intervention for youth violence.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: And these were trialled first in Logan and Inala in Queensland?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: This sounds amazing. Can you talk to me a little bit about the self-regulating side? What are the techniques that you're imparting onto young people to help them recognise, physically, what's happening to them, and the tools that you have to assist with those physical needs that they have, please?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Thank you for your question. The self-regulation part is really interesting. As far back as the early 2000s in America, some of our foremost neuroscientists were recognising that Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing held the core in a lot of prevention and intervention work for healing from trauma. That's never been picked up. We have got a huge problem and a national shame in Australia of the over-incarceration of young people, but we're not relying on Aboriginal knowledges into that healing space. What they found with self-regulation was that the natural knowledges, and the knowledges of First Nations people, in terms of rhythm, repetition, and story, were integral in helping people to self-regulate and to heal from trauma.

Our work in helping the young people with self-regulation purposefully alternately raises and drops the heart rate in the work that we do, and engages young people in story in that process. We do so in a visual way. A lot of our therapeutic work with young people who use violence has relied on a question-and-answer format—a very western, white, middle-class way of working. What we know is that trauma inherently prohibits people being able to tell their stories in that linear way. What we find is when we rely more on story, and when we rely on visual means of story, we give people the ability to give us a view into their world. When people feel validated and heard, and they have those skills to narrate their life, we can then start to think about different choices, and what different choices might look like. It is around tapping in and learning from our First Nations Elders around this, for all people, not just for Aboriginal young people who we may work with, but for all young people that we work with. We need far more investment and leadership into learning from and alongside our Elders in this space.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Totally agreed, 100 per cent.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Just in relation to dealing with young men, I suppose, who have used violence, or have been in violent situations, how then do you measure the success of your program? I think it's important, because we have a lot of programs that are run. How do you measure your success?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: I think it's an important conversation to have. For a long time we've talked about desistence and recidivism rates as the only measure of success. I'm really interested in how we think about what knowledge young people gain, what skills they gain. What we know from all of the evaluations of interventions for youth violence, in particular, is how important life skills are. What life skills did young people learn in this process? How confident are they at being able to step back in and make different choices? How connected are they with their—I think connection is a massive measure of success. But also their coping skills. Knowledge, skills, behaviour, and actual change in behaviour, which is I think at the moment the only thing we're measuring, in terms of recidivism, but we're not measuring knowledge. We're not measuring skill gain, we're not measuring connection gain, and we're not measuring coping gain.

For me, I feel like we're measuring one of the five things that we need to measure. For the young men, working with young men is different to working with young women. I do want to emphasise the rates of young women being charged with violence at the moment. Over the last five years, the rates at which young men and adult men are charged with violence-related offences far outstrip that for women, but they have remained constant. The rates for young women and women being charged with violence-related offences has risen by 50 per cent in the last five years. Whether that relates to an increase in charges, versus an increase in actual use of violence, is unclear, but what is really clear is that we do not have gender-responsive programming for that rising rate of young women being charged.

We still work with young men like we would work with adult men, and we still work with women and young women like we would work with adult men. We don't have responsive programs. When we work with young men, one of the things that we see time and again that is really different is the grief and loss. As soon as we start to increase empathy, and lift shame, we get a whole heap of grief and loss. There's been very little research into the role of grief and loss in young men's anger. I think that being self-aware, being able to self-regulate, and being able to connect with others is a huge safeguard to recidivism, and it's not one we measure.

Mr TRI VO: Thank you for coming in today and providing evidence. This project, NNN—when did it commence?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: In 2018.

Mr TRI VO: That's about six or seven years. Okay. We have heard that support programs and services also need to target parents and carers of young people. Can you comment on this?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Yes. We absolutely recognise that our current iteration of NNN is working on how we bring parents, carers, and kin, but also coaches, into this space of working with violence prevention, and intervention in a whole of community. So our next phase of NNN is thinking about, how do we shift. We've been talking about NNN in schools or intervention in schools, and we've been talking about intervention in our justice system, and in our community setting system.

A huge space that we haven't talked about is intervention in sports, culture, and community. We haven't talked about how we get intervention and prevention into our sporting clubs. How do we get coaches onside? How do we get our national obsession with sport turning into a national prevention and safety strategy? We're keen to work with parents, but we recognise that young people find and form their identity in multiple spaces, and that coaches, mentors, and community Elders, whether they be in sport or culture, have an important role to play. So we're really looking forward to the next 12 months of increasing our work with those community members, as well.

Mr TRI VO: Can you tell us more about your experience with delivering the program to Aboriginal young people in comparison to other communities? Because you mentioned about 70 per cent of the people who use this program are from the Aboriginal Australian community.

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Yes.

Mr TRI VO: Can you tell us your experience in comparison to other communities?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: So when we deliver to any Aboriginal community, we have an Aboriginal Elder who is our Aboriginal practice lead. The NNN program has been developed in consultation. It's been developed as a participatory action research model. So we have about 100 stakeholders on what we call a stakeholder consortium. We have cultural reference groups in every location that we work, and they're very important to informing how it should be delivered in their space and in their community. Whenever we deliver, we also have a youth advisory group who also advise on that, and key practice members. But when we deliver to Aboriginal young people, the delivery is led by an Aboriginal Elder, or recognised person with cultural authority in that community, and our NNN team is alongside to learn from and alongside the Elder. So it does look different. The language is different, and the language needs to be guided by the person with cultural authority in that space.

What we find is sometimes the delivery can be slower, and has to be paced at the right pace. What we have observed, and what my colleague Louise Rak has written on, in that cross-cultural application, is that young people look to their cultural Elders who are involved in the facilitation, really clearly identifying their need to connect with culture and community. That need for connection has come up again and again for young people who have been justice involved, and who are actively saying, "I want to connect more with my culture and my community." So when I raise outcomes being around connection, this is a really important protective measure in terms of recidivism. If they connect positively with their culture and their community, this can be a really protective measure. So we find that comes up very strongly in our delivery of the program in cross-cultural contexts.

Mr TRI VO: By having the Elder there, that will help self-awareness, self-regulation, connection?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: That's right.

Mr TRI VO: And in many ways, belongingness, as well?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: Yes. And also helping that young person. Our Aboriginal practice Elder—and not to put words in Elsie's mouth, but Elsie talks about a replicated kinship model. She can often help a young person to think about, "How do I replicate what I would need in my kinship model in healthy and productive ways?" So the knowledge of our Aboriginal leaders in place-based approaches is absolutely integral to how this program works in a place-based way, and also gives that community ownership over how their own community addresses violence in their community. It's really important to have Elders trained, to have people with cultural authority running NNN as it should be, in their place and in their ways.

Mr TRI VO: Do you think NNN should be more promoted to different areas in the state and country?

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: We'd love to. We'd love to see it reach as many people as we can.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Associate Professor, for your time and appearing before the Committee today. Your contribution has been very valuable to us. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings. Should you wish to make any corrections, please let the secretariat know. The Committee may send you some supplementary questions. If you can return those, and I'll give you directions in order to do that. So once again, on behalf of the Committee, thank you very much for your attendance.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I don't know if this is correct procedure or not, but I was just wondering if there's any chance that we could ask the associate professor if we might be able to come to them and just sort of see how it all works. If that's a possibility, please, Chair.

TAMARA BLAKEMORE: We'd love to have you, anytime.

The CHAIR: We'll take that under consideration.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr ANDREW JOHNSON, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Youth Action, affirmed and examined

Ms PENNY LAMARO, Chairperson, Youth Action, affirmed and examined

Ms JUDY BARRACLOUGH, Chief Executive Officer, Youth Off The Streets, sworn and examined

Ms NICOLE LAUPEPA, Head of First Nations Services, Youth Off The Streets, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having photos or videos taken. Can you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

The CHAIR: You have all received those. Good. Do you have any questions in relation to those? No. Thank you. Would each organisation like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

ANDREW JOHNSON: I'd first like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and the future generations, of which we're here talking about today. I thank the Committee for undertaking this important inquiry, and for the invitation for us to speak here today. In listening to young people who are in conflict with the law, they often stated to us that they wanted help earlier, and proper supports after they left detention. Everyone is deserving of a safe home and community. Perhaps the most deserving are children and young people. Yet for many young people, they are not safe. We label young people as those in out-of-home care, young people who are homeless, in conflict with the law, but we forget that so many of them are victim-survivors of violence themselves.

In recent consultations we've undertaken, across various areas relating to young people, including loneliness, violence, community safety, and social cohesion, young people talked about needing a safe place where they can link into support services and be with other young people. We recommend significant investment be made into youth hubs in New South Wales. A youth hub can contribute to reducing crime, improving educational outcomes, provide greater linkages for young people into meaningful employment and training, and increase social cohesion across communities.

PENNY LAMARO: While the foundation of a youth hub looks similar from place to place, the model is adaptable to community need, and it leans into the existing community supports to reduce duplication. It's also far more cost effective than incarceration. In addition to youth hubs, we recommend that greater investments be made into drug and alcohol support services, into non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health services, and more activities on weekends or after school for regional young people—activities that are free, age-appropriate, and inclusive. We recommend that investment be made into the education and training of young people in regional communities. School disciplinary procedures need to be reformed, and alternatives to long suspension should be introduced, along with investment into further development of targeted employment support programs in regional New South Wales.

We recommend that the Department of Communities and Justice fund the establishment of a statewide interdepartmental and NGO working group on young people doing it tough in New South Wales. 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 the public and to relevant stakeholders. In response to the over-representation of Aboriginal young people in our youth justice system, we need to ensure that we have a robust, culturally appropriate system supporting them. Our consultations with young people confirm that, wherever possible, services targeted to Aboriginal young people should be delivered through Aboriginal owned and controlled organisations.

Finally, I'd like to raise our concerns regarding the extension to the temporary youth bail laws from 12 months to four years. According to the BOCSAR data, the number of young people on remand in New South Wales is 32 per cent higher from December 2023. The majority of these children and young people are Aboriginal. Youth hubs are an alternative solution in areas of need. They can be adapted to accommodate young people awaiting bail, and provide them with the skills and supports necessary to divert them away from a life of crime.

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: Youth Off The Streets welcomes the invitation to appear before this hearing and share our evidence. For over 30 years, Youth Off The Streets has provided prevention, early intervention, and longer term responses to children and young people who are facing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, covering prevention, early intervention, crisis, post-crisis, education, and a focus on specifically supporting our

First Nations children and young people. Central to the evidence that we have from the 30 years of experience are the voices of children and young people themselves. Their stories, day after day, reflect the gaps in our systems, our policies, and our investment priorities. We detailed nine recommendations in our submission, very much with reference to, and aligned with, the position of Youth Action.

The evidence clearly demonstrates that the causative links between cultural heritage, socio-economic position, and adverse childhood experiences are deeply linked to connection to the youth justice system. Our systems and social structures view cultural heritage purely as a risk factor, and that is actually a tragedy, because it misses the significant opportunities to recognise and strengthen the protective factors that connection to culture and traditional practices provide. Our systems and social structures place a higher value on punitive actions and consequences over recognising the collective intergenerational trauma that permeates many of our communities and the individuals within. If, as a society, we agree that no child is born inherently bad or law-breaking by nature, it's imperative that we do address those causative factors.

The voices of children and young people tell us that these factors include personal circumstances and a significant lack of opportunities for age and culturally appropriate supports for health, wellbeing, safety and housing, for education and training pathways, to name a few. Youth Off The Streets also submits that we must take a holistic and aligned approach across our systems and funding initiatives, bringing all levels of government, non-government, and communities together to share our collective wisdom. We must actively engage children and young people, their families, and their communities, bringing them into the picture, drawing on their expertise. We must utilise First Nations cultural principles of hospitality and reciprocity in system design, and embed Closing the Gap targets to drive intervention design, and we must look beyond short political terms in our horizon planning, building foundations for long-term change.

The CHAIR: We'll move on to questions. As I've said, this is our fourth hearing and we've been out to the regions on three prior hearings. One of the common themes that's coming out is crime doesn't stop at 5.00 p.m. Crime usually occurs after 5.00 p.m., but there are no services that are available or open to look after the youth after 5.00 p.m. How do you respond to that, Youth Off The Streets, or yourselves? What's needed to provide services to get the kids off the street when they're roaming the streets at all hours of the night?

ANDREW JOHNSON: I think what we're all saying, and it's not the solution for everything, but certainly hubs and a safe place for young people to go after school. My colleague is setting up a hub in regional New South Wales as we speak, and that was based on consultations with about 150 young people.

The CHAIR: Whereabouts is that?

ANDREW JOHNSON: In Armidale. Whether it's Armidale, Dubbo, Gosford, Albury, or Wagga, young people tell us all the time, "I wish I had somewhere to go after school to feel safe. I wish there was somewhere where I could just sit back and relax"—which is incredibly important—"but somewhere where I can go to get the supports and services that I need." That's why we're calling upon—not just in regional New South Wales, but that's what we're talking about today, but all across New South Wales, to have those integrated youth hubs for young people to be able to get the supports and services that they need. But certainly as you raise, where do young people go after 5.30, six o'clock, so it takes the pressure off a lot of systems.

One of the things that we've learned, we have a hubs group at Youth Action, so we're looking at modelling and hubs in a box, and we've looked at how much each hub should cost. But some of the things that we know is that they certainly ideally need to be located close to schools, so that you can get young people walking down a hill or up the road to go somewhere after school, and those services ideally go to 10 o'clock. Ideally, we need a model, and the model funded, to go for 24 hours, particularly for those young people experiencing homelessness and/or violence.

The CHAIR: Just expanding on that, is this particular model the first of its kind or are you modelling it on other similar programs?

ANDREW JOHNSON: For those in the youth sector who would be listening, it's what we've been doing forever.

The CHAIR: I'm talking about the hubs.

ANDREW JOHNSON: Yes. It's essentially location based, although we do have members at Youth Action that do have a hub model that's mobile, but really it's something that's been around for a really long time that we haven't invested in. There are many examples across the state, whether that's RYSS in Gosford, or whether that's Wollundry in Wagga Wagga. I've already mentioned the hub that's about to be established in Armidale. It's what we know that works, but at the centre of it is actually having experienced, qualified youth workers. Because young people are saying to us, "We need someone to walk beside us." These are young people who are

experiencing violence, disengaging from school, and could have been in out-of-home care. They don't always have trust in the system, so they need a place to go that someone can be at their space, in their time, to assist them. Also, the hub model is open entry, so it's not just for the "kids doing it tough", but all young people are able to go there. But for those people who are doing it tough, there'll be supports and services available to them, if and when they need them.

The CHAIR: Are there any discussions about accommodation in those hubs?

PENNY LAMARO: Certainly there's a recognition that hubs need to be locally designed. Some hubs do require accommodation, others don't. For example, in Armidale, we have been given a building that is able to have accommodation attached to it. So there'll be an element of the hub that is open to all young people in the region, and for those who don't have a safe place to go to that night, we will be able to provide temporary or crises-level accommodation. There are other hubs in other areas that wouldn't require that. There may already be a good youth crises accommodation service, or it may be that there are other programs that are more suited. I think one of the things that Youth Action has found, in putting together what really works for hubs, is that local design, and adaptability of a hub to meet that local need, is really important.

The CHAIR: Some of the stakeholders have gone as far as saying that for kids who end up in the criminal justice system, there should be some type of educational boarding facility where those kids, instead of roaming the streets, can be taken and put into an education facility that has accommodation that gives them safety, accommodation, food and so forth. Turning their lives around. What would be your views on that? By the way, some of the stakeholders are Indigenous leaders that have made such a suggestion.

NICOLE LAUPEPA: Can I just speak to that? Sorry, I don't know who else is, but I actually am Aboriginal. I'm a very proud Gamilaroi woman, and my people are from Tamworth and Moree, some of the towns that are actually being spoken about of late. At Youth Off The Streets we also work in Dubbo, right up into the Queensland border, and across Western Sydney, in the Aboriginal communities. I think it's really important that when we talk about the Aboriginal community, and Aboriginal children and young people, when children are removed from family in country, whether it be through the out-of-home care sector, or incarcerated, they're actually removed off country.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I'll just interrupt you for a second. The Chair is actually talking about doing it on country. It would be in Moree, and it would be in Broken Hill. It would be wherever it is.

NICOLE LAUPEPA: Yes, that's why I wanted to get to that. I absolutely agree with you, that part of the solution to this is to keep Aboriginal children on country. That's also because of around their wellbeing. When an Aboriginal child is actually taken off country—this is a topic that a lot of people actually don't speak about. They're actually affected by what we call a culture-bound syndrome, which is called "longing for country". A lot of services actually don't know how to work within that, to be able to say, "Well, what is actually happening or causing the cultural distress? Is it mental health, or is it culture?"

So I think it's absolutely paramount that one of the solutions is that we provide an alternate educational response for Aboriginal children, regarding their education. It's very similar to what we do at YOTS. We have special assistance schools. I guess from an Aboriginal perspective, why I love that is that Aboriginal people have—it's very aligned to the way that we learn as a collective. So I think that is absolutely paramount, that we actually provide that response.

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: Our starting point always has to be trying to have a holistic approach that involves family, community, and all levels of society. I would not like for us to assume that we need to give up on families as the primary space for healthy and whole living. I want to echo Youth Action's desire to see more integrated service models. I would hope that if you would take away one thing from this conversation, it would be the importance of early intervention—not waiting until a young person is in crisis, but investing in the programs that provide supports, whether that be as simple as diversionary activities that are a good, healthy use of time, through to working really productively with young people to teach them life skills and give them the ability to set goals, and to do that in a culturally sensitive and age-appropriate way, with an integrated approach, and an early intervention bias.

Specifically answering your question about night services, Youth Off The Streets does have a night-based assertive outreach service. We also have accommodation services for young people. Both are extremely under-resourced. It's a typical response, I'm sure, but the funding is absolutely a place to focus attention on, because it is expensive to run night-based services, and the accommodation-based offerings are, again, in a quite constrained and restrictive system, as we currently see it.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Just two questions, but I expect either side can answer. Firstly, for Youth Action, in your submission on page 13, at recommendation 4, you recommend that the bail accommodation trial

is extended to other regional sites. I want to know why you think this, and I'm guessing we're talking about the Moree Bail Accommodation Program. What you think of it compared to your hubs?

ANDREW JOHNSON: I think what we're finding is a lot of young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness—we talk about young people being multisystem young people. They could be in out-of-home care. They could be in SHS [Specialist Homelessness Services]. They could be in conflict with the law. We think that experiencing homelessness shouldn't be a reason for the refusal of bail, so that's our starting point. Those programs that take into account that recognition are incredibly important because, often for young people, it's not just that they're experiencing homelessness. There's other trauma happening in their lives, currently or historically.

Obviously, Youth Action's position would be detention is a matter of last resort, as it is under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. But if we're incarcerating young people because of the fact that they're a victim of homelessness, then what we need to do is any programs that enable a young person to be able to get safe, secure housing for themselves. This is on the path to recovery and getting their life back on track, rather than further deepening their interaction with the law.

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: We would note that we have seen with the Bail and Crimes Amendment Bill 2024 a real increase in the rate of both young people held on remand as well as young people incarcerated, with a disproportionately higher number of Aboriginal children. We do seek that that be reconsidered.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What would you do with the kids now? They come out on bail. They go home. There is extreme violence in their home or worse, if there can be worse, and drug and alcohol addiction et cetera. They get back out of the house because it's just too unsafe for them, so they are back on the street again. Then they go to the police station and they say, "Listen, I want to go back to juvie." Police say they can't do that. "You have to commit a crime." "Okay, I'll commit a crime." They commit a crime. They go back. These are cycles we're seeing. I know you have just said that about the bail Act, and I'm not trying to be evil about this. I'm just asking you because we're trying to find a solution to this. What would you do now? What could we do?

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: I think everyone around this room would acknowledge the complexity of the issue. We are extremely supportive of the New South Wales Koori Court concept, and I might ask my colleague to speak to that. We have been involved with the Elder on our team–Aunty Pat Field has been involved in the design, conception, and development of that concept. Perhaps you could talk about how Koori Court helps with the issue that has been raised.

NICOLE LAUPEPA: We've been blessed. Aunty Pat has been part of Koori Court since 2015, and also helped establish the roundtables for the first regional response in Dubbo. I guess for us, employing an Elder to help lead that response, to support the outcomes of Koori Court, we've seen great success in all the communities in which we're working with Koori Court. I think for me, what Koori Court does, it wasn't that the system had changed. It was that what we did, as I mentioned before, Aboriginal Elders are the knowledge holders. They're the gatekeepers. They're the ones that hold cultural authority within our community. Having Aboriginal Elders sit with the local magistrates, representing that cultural authority, representing home and community, allows the Elder to provide recommendations to the Children's Court on a culturally appropriate outcome for the young person.

I think for us, having that Elder lead that response, we're seeing that success with Aboriginal children. It's also teaching Aboriginal children their cultural identity. It teaches them cultural responsibility, cultural accountability within community. I guess for us, all our programs at Youth Off The Streets are led by Aboriginal Elders, and we're incredibly proud to see that. It's probably something that I'd like to see a lot more of. Even when we go into the detention centres here in Sydney, and we see our young mob from all across New South Wales, when an Elder walks in, they represent home, they represent safety, and they are also the medicine bottle. They have all the wisdom and knowledge to apply to that particular circumstance. I think there needs to be a lot more of that embedded within programs, so we're culturally appropriate for Aboriginal children.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Within the court system.

NICOLE LAUPEPA: Yes. We work in both Surry Hills and Parramatta Koori Court and we also work at Dubbo. We've had incredible success. We work right across the state, and we would absolutely love to see Koori Court embedded right across the Hunter and places like that as well.

PENNY LAMARO: Can I just add to that as well? As a frontline service provider in regional New South Wales, I'm with the women's shelter. What I can tell you is a little bit of what's happening now, certainly in our area.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What's your area?

PENNY LAMARO: Armidale, so Northern Tablelands. I'm not going to pretend it happens 100 per cent of the time; I'm going to say this is my experience in many regional areas of our size. When there are young people who are, for example, being released on bail, and home is not an appropriate place, as you described that cycle, it's a really good opportunity to get in and see, rather than allow the young person to take responsibility for that. It's a good opportunity for SHS services like ours to start getting in and seeing what responsibility, what assistance can we provide the family, to make it a safer place. I think there are a lot of communities who are working very hard to try to meet the need that allows these homes to be safer for young people.

I think that those resources are always stretched. But it is that kind of collaborative response that comes from working out of a space, and comes from that hub mentality, where the women's shelter can do their bit, the men's shelter can do their bit, the youth refuge can do their bit. We can supply food, we can supply parenting assistance, we can supply education, but it's reimagining that space for the young person to make it more appropriate. I think that there is something in that as well. That is happening in places around the country, but, unfortunately, it does come back a lot to resources. We know that it's boring to talk about that. Nevertheless, it often comes back to, what resources do we have to make that home safe? I would really agree with the comments earlier. It's about, how do we bring the family along for that journey, rather than further isolate young people in community, where we try and re-create a better version? How do we get those supports in the family?

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Obviously from both of your organisations, what do you say are the key factors to youth crime?

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: I can start by saying it's complex and multifactorial.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I get it, but what are you actually getting through the door mostly? I'm from the regions. I'm from Bathurst, so I understand. I'm just getting a take as to what you're potentially getting through the door as the main factors of regional youth crime.

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: Regional youth crime, I think, to some degree reflects what we're seeing across the country, but in many cases exacerbated. There are situations of disengagement from education, and that is somewhat to do with the model, and the importance of providing alternative education systems and options for young people. We see a high rate of domestic, family, and sexual violence, leading to young people disengaging with society or education. We're seeing higher rates of mental health challenges and substance abuse. All of those factors are risk factors for our Aboriginal young people. As Nicole was saying, it's disconnection from culture, disconnection from country. The evidence base shows us that also creates a very high risk factor.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Sorry, can I just understand. Youth Off The Streets, where are you actually? You're in Dubbo, Maitland, Singleton. Is that right?

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: Not Singleton. We operate in the Hunter region from Maitland. We operate in Dubbo. We have a site on the Central Coast, then down to the Illawarra, Wollongong, and also in Queensland as well. Then we operate in urban areas also.

ANDREW JOHNSON: We would agree with everything that our colleagues are talking about, except listening to young people themselves, particularly those in detention, we said, "Well, what would have helped you?" A lot of the pipeline issues are school suspensions. A young person says, "Look, I mucked up. I wanted to get back to school. Suspensions are quite long." There's no alternative suspension centre in their regional town or area. They then get back to school after a long time and they say, "Look, I stuffed up again because I was feeling disconnected. I felt a bit stupid." Using their words. "Then I committed another low-level offence, and I got suspended again." That's when they said, "And that's when I started engaging in crime-adjacent activity", let's say.

I think everything that our colleagues are saying, we would agree with. I think we need to focus on the top of the hill, as well as the bottom of the hill. That's why we're talking about hubs. That's why we're talking about brokering services. But it really is young people, when we ask them, they're saying, "I know I mucked up." They're saying, "I want to get a job. How do I get a job?" So these are not young people who are not aspirational, in a sense, but they're saying, "I just didn't get enough help early." The number one thing that young people who are in conflict with the law told us was, "If only I could have got help early." Whether they were experiencing homelessness, whether they were in conflict with the law, we would see—and we hear from our members all the time; we heard from 300 in Dubbo recently, a hundred last week—that it really is the supports and services that are lacking, but this pathway via school suspension is a big part of it.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Just following on, you're all believers in safe place hubs. I'll just give you an example, because I think they work really well. Sorry, Mr Chair, I'm just going to raise this. I raised it with the mayor earlier to say that there are safe place hubs which are actually like clubhouses around the state. Their funding is about to run out in say June of this year, where kids that are actually not going to school can be picked

up from the shopping centre and have a safe place where they can do technology, they can do music, they can do lots of other programs that aren't going to be fitting into a school.

I know you're going to say—and I agree—these programs need to continue. My question is how do you go as an organisation and your membership when it comes to funding? Do you have advance notification that the funding is running, or does it get to the point whereby people are leaving? I don't blame people for leaving because they go, "I need security for a job", so therefore is it always last-minute? I'm interested to know what your funding model might be to really give an appropriate time frame for an organisation.

PENNY LAMARO: Working in this sector is really a commitment to not having that kind of security. You really need to be able to be agile, because currently there is very little to no notice, of necessity sometimes, when things are not going to be—it's not unusual for conversations with contract managers to be had that, "We're going to review the funding. You'll get your new contract. We can run that right out until March or April when the funding is to be renewed in June", and then it's not renewed.

The timelines can be extremely tight, and we lose an enormous number of really good people. We also lose an enormous amount of community faith and trust when we lose good services, because the community comes to understand how that service fits into their community, and then it's gone and nobody really quite understands why it's gone, or for what reason. As a service provider, I would say—now our SHS contracts, for example, are five years. That's a nice long contract for us. That's a refreshing change from the three years that we've worked on traditionally, and hopefully that will continue. Five years allows you a little bit of time to wind things up and get things going.

ANDREW JOHNSON: Just quickly, on holistic from the member point of view, certainly one of the areas of the things that we're talking about, but not exclusively, would be an increase in the TEI funding, which is Targeted Earlier Intervention. It's just had a review. The review thought that it was incredibly important. We know that there's overwhelming demand, and we know it should be much more. We've called, in our budget priorities statement, for that to be tripled, particularly for youth services. But we see people—there was enormous great work being done on the Central Coast by RYSS, but that's another example about that scenario of that should be being funded. We also welcome the Government's decision to expand those TEI contracts longer.

But I think we need to look at it more holistically. When you're talking about youth services, the SHS service, the out-of-home care system, and the criminal law system can't work without a well-funded youth service, because we're at the top of the hill, and at the bottom of the hill. So if you were doing a review of out-of-home care, you need us because we're at either end. One of the things that's often forgotten about the youth sector is that every other system that exists cannot exist because we're either there stopping the flow, but we're there catching those young people who fall through the cracks.

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: My short comment would be that I think one of the most destructive things that can happen to a young person who's facing all of this vulnerability is to have the person that they've built trust with at great risk to themselves suddenly not there the next day or next week. We've taken a decision, which is high risk to us, of converting the employment contracts of our specialist workers in this space to permanent, rather than linked to contract. We do that because we have intentionally sought to have an income coming from non-government sources, as well as government. But if there is room in your remit to encourage contracts from the state to be five years, absolutely that would help the system.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Both organisations, just quickly, collaboration with police, community organisations, school groups—I presume both organisations do that quite extensively?

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

Mr TRI VO: Thank you so much for coming today. I've got a question for Mr Johnson or Ms Lamaro from Youth Action. You mentioned integrated youth hubs preferably operating near schools until 10.00 p.m. or preferably for 24 hours if possible. Do you know the cost involved or the number of people involved if you have to have integrated youth hubs?

ANDREW JOHNSON: Yes. We'd love to come back to you and take that on notice because we're currently working with our service providers now. We're looking at it and if the number changes, we'd like to get back to you. When you're looking at a project coordinator, a project leader, three support workers, and all the other on-costs and participants, we'd say between $600,000 and $700,000, but that does not include the cost of the building. I beg your forgiveness. We're just about to have another meeting of that group to go through this. That's the bare minimum that we're talking about. Obviously, as Penny said, who's actually doing it on the ground, each site will be slightly different, because a big part of a youth hub is brokering.

If you're in an area where there's lots of work done by YOTS, we would go and talk to YOTS, who's one of our great members, and say, "We don't need to reinvent the wheel. What could you do in that circumstance?" There'd be other areas that will be more expensive, because there just isn't enough service delivery in that area. We've talked about the key tenets. Youth Action, along with many others, recently did a report about what were the key tenets of good youth work, and that would be embedded. But we would say that we'd love to come back to you with a final hubs-in-a-box document, which we should get done in the next month or two.

Mr TRI VO: So $600,000 to $700,000 per year?

ANDREW JOHNSON: Yes.

Mr TRI VO: And you think this is feasible or capable of being done in remote and regional areas?

ANDREW JOHNSON: It's certainly being done in regional areas as we speak. Once again, it really differs. There are some NGOs that have got this site for free. There are some NGOs that would have to rent the space. For those members of ours that are renting space and don't have a free space, they're constantly having to reinvent the wheel. We'd like to see that part of it. But, as Penny said before, we want to be responsive to the local community, so that means, where's the building? What's the cost of the building? But we wanted to come back with government and say, "Assuming that we have a building, what would it cost?", and also understanding that you need support workers. When we spoke to young people we said, "What are you looking for?" They said, "Someone to walk beside me, someone to help me with Centrelink, someone to help me with housing, someone to get me into government." Rather than, say, a caseworker, we'd like to say that individualised support workers are what young people are looking for. That's what we've costed out.

Mr TRI VO: This question is to Ms Laupepa and Ms Barraclough from Youth Off The Streets. Could you tell us more about the critical 72-hour post-release period? What supports need to be in place during this time and why?

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: Research does show that the first 72 hours after release are the most critical to prevent recidivism. What we need is, first of all, long-term engagement from organisations within their community. In a live example, if we're talking about a young person being released from Reiby Detention Centre, that would be a caseworker who's had connection with that young person through their detention period, ready to connect with them on release, to work with them on any immediate needs related to accommodation and physical safety, then working with them around a case plan for setting goals, and re-engaging them with employment and education specifically for Aboriginal young people. Do you want to add anything to that?

NICOLE LAUPEPA: Yes. I think for us it's really important to be able to transition Aboriginal children and young people in a safe manner back into family and community, to make sure that that connection is actually restored. We do that through cultural mapping, and developing those cultural case plans with young people while they are in detention, and working with our caseworkers on the ground within those local towns. We do a lot of work with young people from Bourke, Brewarrina, Dubbo, and around those areas.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you to all of you for coming today. I know a little bit about Youth Off The Streets. Father Chris was here in Engadine Boys' Town, now known as Dunlea Centre. A remarkable human being. I've got a lot of love and respect for that man. Your organisation has run for 30 years. You've delivered a range of wraparound services. You've got independent high schools. I'd like to know a bit more about that independent high school and how that runs. I don't know whether you've heard us in previous times today talking to others that have come before us, to talk about the principle of maybe looking at an education-type centre that has the wraparound services and that also, of course, has cultural engagement. Maybe it has skills-based training, like TAFE, to give them employment opportunities. I'm really interested to know about the independent high schools and the wraparound supports that you've been providing for young people.

My second question would be to Youth Action. We also know that by listening to somebody who's gone through similar or the same experiences, it breaks down a lot of barriers. Do you have young people that are trained who have walked the same pathways as the youth that you are assisting? Is it peer-to-peer type of support that you're talking about? Is it like-with-like type of support? I'm really interested to see the investments that we're also putting into young people who can be leaders in the future.

JUDY BARRACLOUGH: I might speak to your first question, thank you. We've mentioned a couple of times already the importance of engagement with education and the importance of providing alternative education offerings for young people. The alternative schooling model that Youth Off The Streets provides is a specialist assistance school. We provide years 9 to 12 under the regular curriculum, meeting all of the standards of schools. The difference with this school model is it provides that wraparound support that you're describing. In addition to teaching staff, we provide youth workers and mental health workers access to culturally sensitive training as well as cultural mapping, that Nicole was referring to before. We also connect into the services that

would be provided to a young person who was facing an accommodation crisis. For a number of our students, they're experiencing homelessness, and that may happen while they're in our school program, so we can connect them to our homelessness services.

The wraparound service model being integrated with an education service is really valuable. The addition of vocational training that you mentioned is also really important. Youth Off The Streets has a registered training organisation, and we are currently building the offerings for our students, as well as young people outside of our schools, to get them in a position that they can be ready for employment right from the beginning of being able to write a resume, get their goals together, all of the basics, as well as then preparing them through other vocational training courses. I am not familiar with the exact concept that this Committee is considering. I think from our experience, I would note the importance of specialised streams of skills. So the value of being able to run alternative schools within a larger youth services organisation is complex, but I think advantageous, because we can tap into specialised streams, whereas I think trying to come from any particular lens as the majority would mean that you'd not necessarily get the full range of wraparound support.

ANDREW JOHNSON: To quickly address your issue of peer to peer, I think that's one of the toolboxes of the sector for many years, which is about when it's appropriate to get young people to work with other young people to solve problems. I think that's the DNA of the sector, essentially. But it is important, when it's appropriate, are those young trainers, of which Youth Action has a program that relates to that as well—when is it appropriate for them. It's all about ensuring that the young people are empowered, and have the information that they need, before they go into those kind of programs. But it may be worthwhile hearing about what's happened on the ground in relation to engaging young people, engaging the sector, so I pass on to my colleague.

PENNY LAMARO: This is one of the more powerful aspects of the hub model. Our hub is due to open in the first week in June, barring any big thunderstorms in Armidale, so everybody cross your fingers. That hub model really centres the young people, and it really looks at, how do we create a space that is safe for all young people to be in, and that is comfortable and welcoming and accessible to all young people? Inherent in that is putting young people first, and raising their capacity to provide some of that peer-to-peer support and mentoring, looking at meeting their needs first, and creating a space that they can engage with. Secondary to that is engaging the sector to work out of that hub, and to take part in that hub.

What you're alluding to there I think is really important, where young people can relate to young people on a different plane That hubs model really is central to providing all of the resources needed to be able to upskill and raise the capacity of young people, because we are providing them, firstly, with the modelling of what it looks like when you feel safe, what it looks like when you have somewhere to be, and what it looks like when people miss you when you are not around.

Especially an on-the-ground front line, that is what peer to peer ends up looking like. It ends up looking like our hub in Armidale is not just for the naughty kids. It's not just for the kids that are in trouble. It's not just for the kids that Youth Justice are dropping down there because they've got nowhere else to go. It's for all the young people. It's for the young people who are literally walking down from the high school, as well as the kids who are walking up from the train tracks who haven't been at school in a number of years. That kind of peer-to-peer focus, that centring the young person and meeting their needs, that is really what the hub model is for, and that's why we believe it's such an effective model when it's adapted to its local environment.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: To all of you, thank you, not just for being with us today but for everything that you do every day. If it is possible for the Committee to be able to visit a hub and maybe look at this independent school, I would ask if that's a consideration the Committee could have. I would appreciate that.

The CHAIR: We will take that into consideration. Thank you all for attending this hearing today and giving your evidence. Your contribution has been very valuable to the Committee. You will be receiving a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings. Should you have any corrections, please advise the secretariat. Should the Committee wish to send you supplementary questions, they'll do that and they'll give you guidance as to when you need to return those.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Ms NICKY SLOAN, Chief Executive Officer, Community Industry Group, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms CARA VARIAN, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Council of Social Service, affirmed and examined

Ms NEHA SHAH, Policy Lead, NSW Council of Social Service, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. Thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform the Committee should you object to having photos or videos taken. Could you all please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

NEHA SHAH: Yes.

CARA VARIAN: Yes.

NICKY SLOAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about those terms of reference?

CARA VARIAN: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement before we begin questions?

NICKY SLOAN: I'm joining you today from the beautiful land of the Dharawal people. When I review the feedback from our members in relation to this inquiry, several themes stand out. Firstly, they expressed concern that an inquiry into community safety should have such a strong focus on youth crime. There are many demographic drivers that impact community safety, including social cohesion, ageing populations, loneliness, and many more. The second theme that strongly emerged was that incarceration of children should be avoided. Our members recognise that crime and antisocial behaviour are often associated with experiences of trauma and disadvantage. They universally recognise the need for long-term, well-resourced, place-based, and community-led programs to engage young people and address trauma.

The third theme was a recognition that there's a strong correlation between poverty and criminal behaviour, and that many rural and regional areas across southern New South Wales have very low socio-economic indicators. Finally, members spoke strongly of the impact of the chronic shortage of key community infrastructure, such as affordable housing and public transport, in our region. Housing insecurity is strongly correlated with disengagement from education, poor physical and mental health, and unemployment. Lack of transport limits opportunities for education, vocational training, access to services, and employment. Indeed, the youth unemployment rate in southern New South Wales is around 12 per cent, and many young people spend the crucial first 12 months of unemployment on the digital case load. This means that, for the critical period after leaving school, they have very little support in developing employability skills, workplace readiness, or jobseeking skills.

Furthermore, the rates of truancy and school refusal, which escalated during COVID-19, have continued. Alternative education providers report an increase in demand, and note that young people who disengaged from school during COVID are now becoming influences for their younger siblings and friends. Community Industry Group members encourage the Committee to take a strengths-based community development approach to community safety, and to work with community and not-for-profit organisations to address underlying causes of poverty, disadvantage, and intergenerational trauma to build stronger, safer communities, families, and individuals.

CARA VARIAN: I start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Gadigal people, and pay my respects to Elders, past and present. My name is Cara Varian. I'm the CEO at NCOSS and this is Neha. We're really happy to be here, so thank you for inviting us. I want to start by talking about a 12-year-old boy from Orange, and we're going to call him Tyson. Tyson's childhood has been tough. It's been marked by domestic violence, sexual abuse, and past involvement with the juvenile justice system. His brothers have disengaged from school, and have also been involved in that same juvenile justice system, and Tyson was following a similar path. He was only going to school about one day a week, and he was engaging in what we would call antisocial behaviour.

Concerned about his future, his parents and family connected him with the Ngurang-gu Yalbilinya, which is NGY for short. It's a program designed to re-engage Aboriginal boys with the education system by combining mainstream educational needs with Aboriginal culture and connection programs. Through this program, Tyson

participated in cultural activities, learned about traditional tools and instruments, and had language classes. This helped him develop a sense of identity and belonging. That program also facilitated medical checks, connecting him with the medical service, but also support for his learning difficulties. Through this support, routine and engagement, it led to a transformation in his school attendance from 30 per cent to 90 per cent. When he finished the program, NGY ensured he remained connected to his community by linking him to local programs through the PCYC and Youth on Track.

Staff there continue to engage the family, checking to make sure that he has everything he needs to have the best start at high school. These ongoing supports helped him maintain progress, and have reduced the likelihood of disengagement, demonstrating the power of culturally responsive and holistic intervention in changing young people's lives. Tyson's story shows us that poverty and disadvantage must be addressed if we are to genuinely help make our community safe. Without this focus, reform will fail, and the cycles of crime and incarceration will continue. It also shows us that the non-government community service sector is key to keeping youth out of the justice system. It makes sense to invest in, to tackle crimes at the root, to build a safer and more supportive community. I look forward to answering your questions today, and I want to thank you again for the opportunity to be here.

The CHAIR: Ms Sloan, we've heard about a lot of programs that are trying to target young people. Are you familiar with any programs, or do you know of any programs that target the parents? What we've heard from these inquiries is that the problem starts at the home. There is trouble at home, kids don't want to be at home, they leave at all hours of the night, roam the streets and then engage in criminal activities. Are there any programs that can target the home itself that you are aware of?

NICKY SLOAN: There are a whole range of child and family programs around. I think one of our wonderful members down in Moruya is an organisation called The Family Place that works specifically with families, and particularly for families who are at risk of losing custody of their children. There are a whole range of those across the region. I think one of the issues is that there's a lack of access. There are not enough programs to meet the demand. The other is often they're quite time limited. I think, as you pointed out, the causes behind youth crime and youth disengagement from society are very long and multi-varied. What we really need to see is a long-term systemic program that can work with families, and that can dip in and out, to support families and be there again when more crises occur.

We are very fortunate in this region that we've just had Australia's first domestic family violence trauma recovery centre. That recognises that you can't treat long-term trauma over a short-term time frame. This one will be able to work with women, in particular, and families, over the long term, but we really just need to see much more of that, and we need it to be there for much longer periods, than some of the short, time-limited programs we currently have.

The CHAIR: Similar line to the Council of Social Service, in your submission you mention the School Gateway Project. Can you elaborate on how does this work to engage parents and young people?

CARA VARIAN: We're really proud of the work that we're doing at Ashcroft Public School. It's a philanthropically funded demonstration project of how a community hub could be set up at a school environment. Basically, kind of the power, but also one of the reasons why I think it's accessible, is that the person that's in charge of that community hub doesn't report to anyone else. So they become a really powerful navigator between the health system, the justice system, the education system, and the social services system. I'm sure that it's not going to surprise the Committee to hear that sometimes those systems don't work together very well, and they can be really challenging for the families and young people to be able to navigate. The beauty of this particular set-up is that it's been basically born from the community. The great thing is that it's got a public primary school, as well as a pre-school, as well as—it's called The Hive. It's a place where you can have supported playgroups.

We find in this community of intense, concentrated disadvantage that, while there is a low engagement with social services, the health system, and the education system, most people know they've got to bring their child to school when they turn five years old. When that child turns five, and they turn up, they're also coming with their little brothers and sisters, and that's the point where the hub can then start engaging those families in a non-judgemental way. So that looks like a Foodbank breakfast program, which they've actually turned one of the rooms into a big kitchen. Instead of just allowing the students from that school to use it, the students and their families and their older brothers and sisters can come along. Food, as you probably know, is a really good way of overcoming barriers and trust, so that people can sit down and regularly have a chat.

Also, in the hallway next to that kitchen, there's a place where there's sandwiches and fruit available every day. No-one checks who's taking the food. If you need food, it's there available, anytime. We can see that, on a Friday afternoon, more people take food than they would on any other day, because they're stocking up for the weekend. A separate part of the hub is an area where families can get uniforms, clothes, and nappies. There's

a freezer full of pre-made food. The teachers have a stash of high-protein food in their classroom, so they can just throw it through to the kids if they need to. Often, what we find is that it takes a while for the parents to turn up and chat to the staff, but eventually they will disclose what's concerning them, or what's concerning their kids.

The other really powerful part of this structure is that the teachers are an incredibly good early warning system. They can see when the kids are not behaving—they can see the changes in the kids, well before it becomes a risk of significant harm. At that point, it's really easy to be able to—if there's trust built, it's really easy to just check in with those parents, and see what we can do to help. Sometimes that means helping apply for a visa. Sometimes that includes translating medical documents into what the school needs, in particular forms. That's really tricky. I have a seven-year-old. It can be tricky for me. It's very tricky if you have English as a second language, or you have low literacy, which some of the families do. Really, the idea is that that hub is able to connect those families to whatever services they need.

To give you one last example before I stop, we realised that it would be very helpful to have paediatricians come into the school, and it took over 18 months to find paediatricians to come into the school, because there is such a backlog of demand in south-west Sydney. When we finally got those paediatricians to come into the school, we then had to have a bit of a battle with the education and legal department to allow those paediatricians to come into the school and do those checks. What we discovered, in doing those checks, is that something like 75 per cent of the students that were in kindy at that time had a learning development delay in four out of five of their learning areas. But we can see, in only a year, because we have this collaborative approach between the allied health, the paediatrician, the social services, and the teachers, that there have been huge improvements in those developmental delays. We're running both individual as well as group activities to help with that learning development. So it's very powerful, but it requires us to change the way we think about service delivery.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you for your evidence, for your submissions and for all the work your members do. It's extremely important. Ms Sloan, we're finding that when we go to most country towns we've been to, there are no social services after five or six o'clock at night—that's it—if not during the day, as well. It's a real problem. People have to do vast amounts of travel to be able to get any type of social service. It's a problem we have to try to deal with. Do you have any suggestions for improving the recruitment and retention of skilled workers, like social workers and mental health professionals, in regional and rural areas?

NICKY SLOAN: Well, yes. We have certainly led some generalist recruitment programs for our sectors in the past few years. One of the things I think we have to recognise, though, is that housing is a structural barrier to employment across our region. The South Coast of New South Wales is a beautiful area, but we've certainly seen housing prices escalate. We've seen a huge rise in the sharing economy. Airbnb is huge across those coastal areas. In fact, I was talking to one of my large early childhood education members recently, just in the past two weeks, who had successfully recruited to fill three positions. All three of them ended up not accepting the job because they couldn't find anywhere that they could afford to live.

Recruitment and retention is definitely one of the issues, but I do think that there are so many structural barriers to recruitment as well. I think your point about having access to services after hours is particularly pertinent in regional areas. Most services stop at five. Perhaps there might be a youth service that might run until six, but usually they're all gone after that. I think back to my really early career in community services. One of my very first jobs was as a community safety officer in an area that had very high rates of crime. It had very low socio-economic indicators. It was a big public housing area. There were strong feelings of a lack of safety in the community, and the community got very angry. My very first meeting I had with the community was very, very loud.

When I listen to Cara, and talking about collaboration, over the years I was able to pull together some really great collaborative projects that incorporated youth workers and the generalist community sector. The council became involved, and local religious groups became involved, and it became very big. But one of the key things that we were able to do was to have street-based youth workers who could work at night, who had a van, who could work at night, who could go where the young people were, and really engage with young people and get them activated. Once we were able to do that, we were able to bring them into a lot of other great programs, and we set up some absolutely wonderful infrastructure in that community, including working really closely with the police, and building community safety committees that continue to this day. But there are so many elements to that.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: If we go back to my question, which was about recruitment and retention, that's what I'm talking about. It's great that all those programs exist. I'm really happy to see that and that they work. I have no doubt that we'll draw on stuff that you've talked about, especially at night. But as far as recruitment and retention of social workers, is there a magic fix here?

NICKY SLOAN: There is no magic fix. As I pointed out, there are far more than just the recruitment issues. It is community infrastructure, and having a community that is well set up. We need access to housing. We won't be able to recruit to our sector in regional areas unless we have access to really good housing. It's true that our sector is perhaps not the most attractive sector, often, for people to come and work in, and we have certainly been doing programs that are about raising awareness of the great jobs in the community services sector, and the great opportunities. But until we address some of those structural barriers it's always going to be difficult.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Ms Varian, do you want to comment at all on this?

CARA VARIAN: There is a program going on at the moment, within DCJ, called the Secure Jobs and Funding Certainty taskforce. It was announced during the last election, and I raise it today with both hope and disappointment—hope that it will one day deliver something great, but disappointment that we are two years into this electoral cycle and we haven't had much movement.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: It was an election commitment was it, from Labor?

CARA VARIAN: Yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: And you haven't seen any results of it?

CARA VARIAN: We've been working very hard with the Department of Communities and Justice to progress it. The intent behind this group is to fix some of these structural issues that lead to some of the contribution to recruitment and retention. If we have community service organisations that are living on two-year grant applications, that means it's very hard to provide longer term jobs for the staff. It makes it less likely, particularly in rural and regional areas, that people can recruit over a long period of time. People move away because they can't get secure jobs. Some of the things that I hope the Secure Jobs and Funding Certainty taskforce one day will deliver is minimum five-year funding grants, as well as a greater visibility of the community need, versus the availability of funding, but also having the pay levels aligned with what is competitive, and making sure that those contracts have indexation and reflect the operational costs of delivering those services.

We're hearing all the time at the moment that, in particular this year, rent and insurance are just skyrocketing for our community service organisations. Because there's no flexibility to adjust that, in a contractual way, with the government, all that means is either less services are being delivered, or the staff that are working for the organisations are getting paid less, or for fewer hours than they would otherwise. I think in terms of recruitment and retention, those initiatives that are being discussed through the Secure Jobs and Funding Certainty taskforce will help.

Another part of it is to reflect on what Nicky has mentioned. We talk a lot about essential worker housing, but community services staff are not considered essential workers, and I'd argue that they do have an essential role in community. Finding a way to include them into the essential worker pool, when we're considering housing, would be very important. Then the other part of this is the funding pool. When we build new suburbs, when we go out and try and create a place where people can be, we're really comfortable in making sure that there is infrastructure in place—that there's sewerage, water and roads—but we're not as good at remembering to put in the social infrastructure and the transport.

I sat on the bus taskforce last year. We can see that there are places within outer Sydney, as well as in regional and rural areas, that just don't have access to the transport that they need to be able to connect the clients with the services. All of these things combine to make it so much harder for the staff that are on the front line delivering those services. That contributes to burnout and a lack of interest in retention. That's the issue that we have here. The combination of making sure that we've got a funding pool that reflects population need and changing demographics would be great, the outcomes of the Secure Jobs and Funding Certainty taskforce, and, of course, housing.

Mr TRI VO: What can help young people feel a sense of belonging in their community, and how do you think this can be achieved? I'll probably start with Ms Varian or Ms Shah first.

CARA VARIAN: I think we've seen this really well demonstrated at the Ashcroft Public project. We can see that when we started in this school about three years ago there was a really big disconnect between the school and the community. Over time, including, firstly, changing some of the ways the school engages with the community, and welcoming them inside the school gates has been really important. Also, making sure that we celebrate the parts of the calendar that are relevant to that community, so that people feel like what's important to them is also what's important to the school that they're connected to. Also, being there and available to help when they need assistance.

One of the disconnects, and I think one of the things that was undermining a sense of belonging, is that the teachers could see that there were some challenges happening within their school environment, but didn't feel

like they knew who to refer it to, or what they could do about it. Rather than saying, "I've noticed this is happening in your life. I'd like to help you", they tried to ignore it, or the children were excluded because of behavioural disruptions. Now that we have this hub in place, it means that, when the issues are identified, there is a support network to be able to help those teachers manage that situation.

Also, that disruption can be dealt with by assuming that it's a problematic or difficult child, or it could be dealt with by assuming that it's a child that is struggling, or has a learning development or a medical issue that needs support. Again, having that structure in place enables that sense of belonging. Through this project we do annual updates, we survey the community, and we can see that the sense of belonging has increased for children, families, and the teachers.

Mr TRI VO: When they feel a sense of belonging, the child, family, or community, is there a high chance of them overcoming some of their difficulties?

CARA VARIAN: There's a much higher chance of them turning up to school and achieving at school. I think that would be a really great outcome, if we could make sure that people are coming to school, and being able to feel a sense of achievement and mastery with their own future. Last year, NCOSS did some new research into the economic cost of childhood poverty in New South Wales, and we looked at a range of domains. I think, the two points that I wanted to share with you today from that is that, if you look at that cost of childhood poverty, across a whole person's life, 7 per cent of those costs are borne by the economy of the state in childhood, and 93 per cent are borne by the state and the economy in that child's adulthood. If we can invest early, we will be avoiding those costs of childhood poverty in adulthood.

Of the amount that it costs the state per year, which is $60 billion per year, the biggest domain is education. If we can use the social services and the health system to facilitate children staying connected with the school system, it's obvious, but we're setting them up for a future, where they can have greater productivity, greater health, greater longevity, and a better quality of life.

Mr TRI VO: In many ways, early intervention starts in the schools?

CARA VARIAN: It starts when they're born. I talk today about this example, because we have lived experience through this program. But really, it has got to start as soon as the child is born, and then extend through primary school and high school. I think that's one of the challenges, particularly in rural parts of New South Wales, where there are some fantastic programs, but there is a huge fragmentation, either because the government and the not-for-profit non-government organisations don't necessarily work together, or because there are just deserts of availability of those services. As an example, there are no detox units for youth in New South Wales at all. There are two rehabilitation units, but only two in the whole state. You can't go to a detox. You can't go to a rehabilitation unit if you haven't done the detox program. We have to look at the whole ecosystem together.

Mr TRI VO: Can I get Ms Sloan's opinion?

NICKY SLOAN: Yes. I reiterate what Cara has said there. I won't go back into engagement at school. I completely concur that it has to absolutely be at the family level as well. But those school programs can be absolutely amazing. I guess I would address perhaps those young people who are no longer connected with school, and how we can give a sense of belonging to them, because we know that there are many of those who feel not connected to their community. I think a great example of this is one of our members, BCR Communities, which is a community centre where they run quite a few different programs down in Sanctuary Point, which is a very low socio-economic area in the Bay and Basin area of the South Coast. BCR Communities has been very successful in engaging with disengaged young people, and they have really done that by getting those young people involved.

Often when we go to the young people, we tend to go to those sorts of high achievers in schools who are doing really well and we ask them, "What should we be doing?" But BCR Communities are very good at working with the really disengaged young people, and building them into community leaders. Through their work with these young people, they have really been able to identify what the young people want in order to be connected. From that, they've done things like run driving programs, because the young people identified that they are often prone to driving offences, perhaps steal a motor vehicle, perhaps drive unregistered or uninsured. They tend to do that because they have no adult who can teach them, give them the 120 hours that they need to be able to get a driving licence. They can't get a job, because there is no bus service. They identified that you could really address driving-related antisocial behaviour if you ran a driving program. So BCR Communities have done that.

Then they identified, "We need a place within this community. We need a place that we feel that we can go to", and that place is now being built. It is in the centre of town. It is really quite public. They said, "We don't need a big centre. We need a space, we need a yarning circle, we need some areas to hang out." They are also putting in some pods, like dongas really, I suppose, but pods that will be training facilities for hospitality work.

When they have got a licence, there is actually a lot of hospitality work in that area. I think it's a great example of working with young people who were disengaged to really engage them, make them see their own leadership skills, and create a place within the community for them.

Mr TRI VO: Just a follow-up question: Do these young people get involved in designing and implementing crime prevention initiatives?

NICKY SLOAN: I don't think they would call it crime prevention initiatives, but they are absolutely preventing crime because, as I said, it's the young people who identify that kids are stealing cars and kids are driving without a licence because there's nobody in their family who has a licence or access to a vehicle. You could cut crime by that. I don't think they would have identified that as a crime prevention strategy, but it absolutely is a crime prevention strategy. I think that's a great way to engage with them. The same with the hub—the space that they created—and saying, "You know what? We need pods. If we put pods in here that had a cafe set-up, we could learn and get a job." I think that these are all crime prevention strategies that these young people have come up with. I think young people are very clever at knowing what will divert them from going into crime.

The other thing I've seen that is really successful has been the youth workers in school program. The council had employed youth workers that were working in a youth centre. But a couple of days a week they went and worked in some of the schools in some of the low socio-economic areas, and they found that very successful, because young people who might not go to their teacher and probably won't go to a social worker in school will hang out with the youth workers and will work with them. That was also a program that I think was really effective.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you to all of you for your submissions and for your time today. The first question is in regard to Nicky. You mentioned that social services need to be integrated into planning. That's a really good idea. Can you give the Committee examples of where that's happening so that we might be able to look at those after?

NICKY SLOAN: I actually think it's easier to show where it's not happening than where it is happening. In our region, when we have a look at the Illawarra, in particular Wollongong LGA, we have some really large growth areas of West Dapto, Albion Park, and the Calderwood area, and social services are not being planned for those areas. In fact, even things like our police force are not growing to meet that. So, no, I'm really sorry.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: No, it's fine. It's actually me who should be sorry. It wasn't you who said it; it was Cara. Let's park that for the moment. But I will ask you a question in regard to youth workers employed by councils going to schools. Can you cite some examples of where that is happening? What councils are offering that service to schools?

NICKY SLOAN: I don't even think it's happening anymore. But Shellharbour City Council had run the youth workers in schools program for many years.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you, Nicky. My apologies to you. Over to Cara. You mentioned that when we are planning around housing to incorporate transport and infrastructure we should be thinking about social services. Can you give us any examples of where that's being delivered on the ground?

CARA VARIAN: I understand that maybe a couple of decades ago, when the planning process happened, part of that process was to include initial funding to develop social service sector organisations and programs in new environments, or new communities and suburbs. But about four or six years later, that planning contribution was removed. The idea was that DCJ then took over the delivery of those social service sector programs, but there was no corresponding funding for that. Even when I think it was done better than it is done now, there was still a time which doesn't reflect how humans live. I don't think it has ever been done in a way that would be sufficient to meet community need. What that means, in reality, is that each year we are only meeting a smaller proportion of community need. That's obviously made more complex by the fact that the funding pool for community services is not growing at the same rate, and then it's also not being distributed by the community size.

There are some programs that I'm aware of, in DCJ. When they were set up 20 years ago, the population need was greater in inner-city Sydney, and that proportion of funding has stayed for inner-city Sydney, and also a smaller proportion has gone to Western Sydney, even though that population has grown significantly more over the last 20 years. I am constantly shocked to find how we are making decisions about the funding allocation that's not in line with population need or size, but also that we can put together these population plans that only include infrastructure, and not social infrastructure. We did research, not last year but the year before, around this. Just looking at Western Sydney alone at the moment, the expectation is based on current funding and funding growth that we've seen historically. We're only meeting about 37 per cent of needs for some social service sector categories like domestic and family violence, as an example.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I appreciate that and the information that you've provided. I have no further questions.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I'll be pretty quick. Ms Sloan, at the start you said that there are not enough programs to meet demand. Without going through them all, if I said to you there was one particular program where there were gaps in regional areas of New South Wales, what would you say that would be?

NICKY SLOAN: Gosh, just one? I would say mental health. I would say mental health, drug and alcohol, family and domestic violence services, youth services. I'm sorry, it's very hard to pick one. There are many, many gaps across regional and rural New South Wales.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I get that. I was just trying to work out what you thought the main gap might have been. Is there anything more distinct standing out?

NICKY SLOAN: No. As I say, mental health is the one that springs to mind. I think there are big gaps in mental health, and we do know that so many people who are incarcerated have mental health issues. But we really need the whole range of services to address whole of life.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Guys from NCOSS, I was going to ask you about better support for mental health, so I think that's agreed. Do you feel the PCYC programs are successful?

CARA VARIAN: Yes.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I wanted to ask you that because I had a previous group here today that said they don't think the programs work well, so I'm glad that you actually think that they do. My other question is Ashcroft—it's obviously a metropolitan school. What about any schools that you're working with in regional communities?

CARA VARIAN: We've actually just got a couple of students that have started working with us so that we can do a map of the whole of the state, for all of the school hubs that are happening. It's a much more established kind of structure in both Victoria and Queensland, having the schools as community hubs. In New South Wales, there hasn't been the philanthropic injection that has enabled any big statewide infrastructure, and so there is no central repository of where all of these programs are happening. They're being born from the communities. I don't know the answer off the top of my head, but we are working on trying to work out where they all are. I know there's one in Albury.

NEHA SHAH: I think we've also spoken and connected with Narromine High School as well, and the challenges that they've faced. As we've heard already, the regional challenges that they've faced are getting paediatricians or doctors to come to their hubs, the waitlist to see any health services, or the distances that people need to travel for those. They have linker roles in those hubs, to link them and make sure that those kids are getting to those appointments. Those are some of the big challenges that some of the regional hubs are facing. But we do know a couple, but not all of them.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before the Committee to give evidence today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of the proceedings for any corrections that you need to make. The Committee staff may also send you some supplementary questions, and we'll ask you to return those at the direction of the Committee staff. Once again, thank you for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms ELAINE YALLOP, Regional Manager (Eastern NSW) Youth and Education, The Salvation Army, sworn and examined

Ms ROBYN BUST, Regional Manager (Northern NSW) Youth and Education, The Salvation Army, sworn and examined

Dr TOM McCLEAN, Head of Research and Social Policy, Uniting NSW/ACT, affirmed and examined

Mr CHARLIE CHUBB, Head of Northern and Western NSW, Uniting NSW/ACT, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance. Please note that Committee staff may be taking photos and videos during the hearing. These photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having your photos or videos taken. Can you also please confirm that you've been issued with the Committee's terms of reference? Yes, you have. Are there any questions in relation to those terms of reference? No. Okay. Would each of you like to make a short opening statement on behalf of your organisation?

ROBYN BUST: I'd like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend this respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us today. The Salvation Army is embedded in local communities across Australia, providing a variety of diverse services that support children, young people, and families from all walks of life. We believe every person deserves to feel safe in their community.

While we recognise the damaging impact of crime on victims, survivors, and communities, we know that locking up young people does not effectively reduce crime. We also know that young people who offend are often victims themselves. By transforming how we respond to young people who offend, we have the critical opportunity to ensure that every child and young person feels supported and empowered to thrive. This is why we welcome your commitment to this inquiry, and are appreciative of the work that the Committee has done to understand the drivers of youth crime.

Children who encounter Youth Justice responses are often those who are also the most marginalised. Children who experience social and economic disadvantage are 10 times more likely to be under Youth Justice supervision. Those in regional and rural communities face additional challenges due to their geographical location. We see the benefit of compassionate and holistic responses for children and support the following: raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 without exception; enhancing preventative and early intervention responses to address disadvantage as a driver of crime; focusing on building the capacity of young people through diversionary responses to facilitate long-term change; and prioritising localised place-based solutions, such as our Oasis, Central, and Mid North Coast services, which support young people experiencing significant adversity. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear. We look forward to being of assistance.

CHARLIE CHUBB: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee. In our submission we highlighted the impact and value of youth coaching, demonstrating how our proactive approach transforms the lives of young people who have experienced disadvantage. Evidence, including the evaluation of Uniting's Extended Care program, shows that this significantly reduces interactions with the criminal justice system, compared to other young people needing state care. We also emphasise the importance of place-based whole-of-community initiatives, such as Becoming U in Toormina and the Nambucca Valley LGA. Uniting is also a signatory to the Raise the Age submission, which outlines four key asks. Ask 1 is that New South Wales resources and supports the Aboriginal community controlled sector, ACCOs [Aboriginal community-controlled organisations]. Ask 3 states that New South Wales funds services that help young people to thrive and learn accountability when they go off track.

Since our submission in May 2024, NSW Youth Justice has conducted ACCO-only procurement processes for two key programs, Youth on Track, and the Casework Support program. While Uniting strongly supports investing in ACCOs to deliver youth justice services, the current approach, funding only ACCOs without additional investment, creates unintended consequences. Non-Aboriginal children and young people who previously benefited from these services are now effectively excluded from crucial support that helps them get back on track. For true community safety, we must ensure that services remain accessible to all young people who need them. Thank you again for inviting us to present today.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for your opening remarks. If I could just start by asking both organisations, do you have any diversionary programs that you run in the regional areas? Can you give us an idea of what they look like, if you do have such programs?

ROBYN BUST: One program that we've got is the Casework Support program, which is in partnership with Youth Justice, where the Salvation Army is contracted to provide casework support for young people who are under supervision. Also, we run a program called Shifting Gears, which was developed to address the high youth crime rate of car theft in the region. That program has been developed to provide education around the crime of car theft, the challenges of that, and the consequences. It provides a safe space to be able to have those conversations with young people, to help them to understand, and for us to understand the drivers of why they do those acts.

The CHAIR: Is there a particular area where you're running this particular program?

ROBYN BUST: On the Central Coast at the moment.

CHARLIE CHUBB: We don't deliver programs that are diversionary by design, but they have diversionary effects for young people. Examples of that would be the community-based Becoming U programs that operate in the Nambucca Valley LGA and the Toormina part of the Coffs Harbour LGA, the 2452 postcode. Those programs work with young people, from whatever background, who maybe are disengaged from school, hanging around the local shopping centre, things like that, engaging them in prosocial activities, connecting them with mentors, including local Aboriginal leaders, and engaging the young people in activities like surf camps, or multimedia things, making videos, music, that kind of thing. It is providing young people with alternate prosocial activities and taking away the temptations of boredom, particularly hanging around the Toormina Gardens shopping centre.

The CHAIR: One of the themes coming out from all the stakeholders that we've witnessed is that the problem starts at the home. We've been told that the kids don't want to live in a toxic environment, so they go out, roam the streets, get together with a few other mates and then go and engage in crime. Are there any programs where you work with the actual families to address the core issue, the home issue, rather than focusing on the kids in the first instance?

ROBYN BUST: From our service that's a gap—family restoration, and intentional work with families. We do work with the families, with the young people, through our casework support or our drugs and alcohol counselling program where it's required or invited. We do try to work with the families, but not a direct, intentional family restoration program. That is a big gap on the Central Coast, and in the northern part of our regions.

The CHAIR: How do we address that gap? What's required to address that gap?

ROBYN BUST: Funding to run the program.

ELAINE YALLOP: It's an intervention with the family before the child's an adolescent. We're working with young people from age 12 to 24, but you really start even younger than that, to look at the adverse childhood experiences of those young people, to reduce the trauma in the child before they get to offending age.

CHARLIE CHUBB: I think we'd agree with those thoughts. We deliver quite a large number of DCJ or child protection focused programs that work with the primary aim of increasing safety in and improving family functioning. Those programs, broadly, are very effective at keeping children safe at home, improving family functioning and reducing conflict. Examples of that would be multisystemic therapy for child abuse and neglect, or family preservation programs. What I would say is that those programs are often very focused on young children. By the time a child that the system is concerned about reaches middle childhood years, or starts going to high school, they've dropped right down the concern list under the statutory child protection authority, and there often isn't a service response for those kids.

ELAINE YALLOP: We find the same with our young people. Around the age of 12 upwards you want a DCJ response to invest with the younger children.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: From your different organisations across the state and everywhere, what are you hearing as the root causes of regional crime? You're going to get different things from Nambucca versus Moree versus Broken Hill, but I'm just curious to know what you might be hearing as the drivers of regional crime that's occurring right now in our communities.

CHARLIE CHUBB: I think that people will often reference family functioning—parents who haven't got the skills, capacity, capability to supervise their teenage children in a way that community might expect that to happen. I think that people would point out family functioning.

ROBYN BUST: For us, a lot of it is the family breakdown. Children experience a lot of trauma and family and domestic violence. Drugs and alcohol are a big driver of that as well. One of the drivers is also around economic factors—you've got parents or adults at home that aren't working. Young people need to go and earn a

bit of income, so they'll turn to crime to do that. But mainly family breakdown, family and domestic violence, drugs and alcohol. We're seeing young people coming from generational spaces where that's occurring for them.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Would homelessness be a big part of it as well? I know that at Uniting you do a fair bit around homelessness. I know the Salvation Army provides support on the ground as well around homelessness. Is that also potentially a driver, not necessarily as much as the breakdown of the family function?

ROBYN BUST: For us there's an element of that, where young people don't feel safe at home, or they don't have a home to go to. Going out and doing crime, some of them actually do that in order to get incarcerated because they feel safe, and they've got security. They've got meals, they've got a bed, and they get provided with a lot of other additional resources that they don't have in the home. There is an element of that, yes.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: If the Committee had an open chequebook, what would you want to do as an organisation today to try to change the cycle?

ELAINE YALLOP: We would need more investment in place-based solutions. Local solutions. Local problems. Ask the young people what they need in their community, what's missing. What recreational opportunities are missing? Where are the strong adult mentors and the strong role models that meet the needs of those young people, if they're not at home? Then the socio-economic investment in families, to ensure families have enough to alleviate poverty, to provide for their children, to stop some of those adverse childhood experiences.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Like we've said, it's tailored. What the needs are in one local area—and we hear that all the time—are very different compared to another community. It can't be that one size fits all, as well.

CHARLIE CHUBB: I think one of the things we observe, in the place-based initiatives we're involved in, is that local people want to help local young people. If there's an opportunity for local business owners, people who've got professional experience, living in a local area—in a regional area like Nambucca Heads, the local people will step forward and provide that assistance. People are very generous with their time, and wanting to support young people locally to be successful. That does need scaffolding. It doesn't just happen. That needs a frame around it to provide ways that people can get engaged and provide support so that it's safe and all that kind of stuff.

Thinking about those drivers and what needs to happen, the question you asked about homelessness earlier I think is very valid. We know that there are some people who experience homelessness who are more likely to be in contact with the criminal justice system. Just like people who have left the out-of-home care system are more likely to be in contact with the criminal justice system. They're not naturally criminal-type people; it's that they are coming from a place of particular disadvantage, and they need particular supports to help them find their way in life. The kind of coaching and mentoring that we talked about in our submission, underpinned by evidence-based models like Advantaged Thinking, can really make a big difference, and young people with opportunities can do the kind of things that society would generally want them to do.

Mr TRI VO: I just want to say thank you to the Salvation Army and Uniting NSW. I came from a refugee background, as a boat refugee. I came here when I was five or six. People like me had a lot of help from organisations like yourself. I'd just like to say thank you. I know your work has been—in terms of experience—wide and far. You have a lot of experience in terms of helping people. Especially in this case, the intergenerational issues, problems, disadvantages, dysfunctional family breakdown, drug and alcohol and family domestic violence. The problem is quite difficult to solve. A lot of times we just solve the symptoms of it, but we have to solve the root cause of it. In your opinion, from your wide experience, what do you think is the best way of solving it for the long term?

ELAINE YALLOP: I think we need long-term sustained investment that doesn't change or turn on the government. A real investment in the families and the communities to build infrastructure, to start with. A lot of our young people in the communities, they can't get a job, because they can't get to the job, because there's no public transport routes. So we need investment in driving programs, to start with, or we need better bus services. We need investment there. The mental health services don't capture all the needs of all the young people. We know early interventions are working well enough, then we need investment in the pointy end. Then we need recreational youth services to meet the young people, provide them with opportunities outside of the family home to develop as adolescents. I can go on. I'm sure someone wants to jump in.

TOM McCLEAN: As you can see from our hesitancy, it's a very simple question to ask and a very complex one to answer. I think the start of our answer would be that youth crime and the youth justice system are outcomes of much deeper problems. If we focus just on responding, then we're responding to a symptom, rather than the cause.

The solutions lie outside the justice system, and preventing people from getting there in the first place, which is the implication of your terms of reference, so I'm endorsing that very strongly. The only thing I'd add in addition to what you've just said, which is to look at the experience of young people as they're growing up, and give them opportunities so that they don't need to take this path in life, is to recognise when young people are on that path, and to help them move off that path.

That's one of the reasons why we've found youth coaching is so effective. It's not just an activity that you can assign, for example, to a caseworker in DCJ. It's a kind of relationship with the young person. It's a relationship with an attuned adult, to help you formulate your own goals in life and to figure out how to pursue them, and to give you the social networks and the supports that you need to attain those. We find often that it's that combination of autonomy, the ability to decide for oneself, and social networks, and the ability to find the resources to achieve them that are most lacking in the young people. That's where they need the most help. So, in addition to preventing the problem from arising in the first place, a program that achieves those things and doesn't simply give a tick box—gives a different sort of support to a very busy social worker, would be one of the things that we'd emphasise.

Mr TRI VO: So pretty much in the short term, help them, guide them. In the longer term, maybe try to empower them to help themselves.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: We talk about the diversionary programs, and you talk about pre-justice or pre-court. Do you think the courts should have the power to instruct accused offenders into these programs that you talk about?

TOM McCLEAN: We've found in our work—and I'm sure my colleagues will endorse this—these programs are most effective when young people choose to be in them, and they're motivated to, so I think, in an ideal world we would like almost all people to be in them voluntarily. I'm not an expert in what's most effective in the court system, and the coercive powers of the justice system, so I don't think I'm the right person to answer that question, but in terms of the effectiveness of the programs themselves, they're almost always more effective when people want to be there.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I think if someone wants to be there, there is more chance they're going to learn from it, aren't they?

ROBYN BUST: We have a good relationship with the Local Court systems, where the magistrates would refer people as part of their orders into, say, our drug and alcohol program up in Newcastle. It's still voluntary, but they're mandated to attend. It works in part, and it works in not so part because it is a mandatory thing. It's confusing. But we work quite closely to help advocate for our services within the magistrates system, so that there are options for young people to have options to access services. We work quite closely with the Children's Court on the Central Coast down at Woy Woy, where our youth workers would actually go in and provide support or be a presence for young people while they're appearing. It's important that we do have that relationship so that there are options in that process.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: In Muswellbrook, Uniting's involved with the correctional centre there. There are programs you run there. Is that correct, or am I getting it mixed up with someone else?

CHARLIE CHUBB: I'm not aware that we are.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Do either of your organisations go into prisons and do programs within the prisons or juvenile justice itself, in the detention centres?

ROBYN BUST: We do, through our youth justice programs. Part of the process is that we'll go in and do some support work with them as they're on their exit out, to build that rapport and relationship, so that when they come out into community, they've got access and are already connected with services. The Shifting Gears program that I referenced earlier—we run that in Baxter [Frank Baxter Youth Justice Centre], in partnership with Youth Justice workers. Where we can, we do try to get in access to those programs.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What about Uniting?

CHARLIE CHUBB: We work with the Acmena [Youth Justice] facility for transition out of young people, but that's not common, to be honest. That's something that happens on occasion—that there's discharge work for young people leaving Acmena, and us working with Youth Justice caseworkers to facilitate that. Most of the work that we do in the youth justice space in northern New South Wales is in the pre-custodial area.

TOM McCLEAN: In other parts of New South Wales, I'm aware of some occasional collaborations, for example, between social work services and juvenile justice. I'm aware of one program several years ago in Dubbo, for example, but I'm not aware of any other systematic programs. I'm happy to take that question on notice, if you'd like information.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Yes. I think it's Red Cross that does the stuff at Muswellbrook, so I've got that incorrect. Are any of your programs within juvenile justice focused for Indigenous children and sensitive to their cultural backgrounds? Are there any particular courses that work well?

CHARLIE CHUBB: The services we provide that are currently funded by Youth Justice—the majority of the young people who access those programs are Aboriginal young people. It's something like 70 per cent of the young people who work in our services delivered in the Mid North Coast, and our team members who work with those young people are also Aboriginal team members. They work a lot on connection to culture and country, as well as the young people's other goals around re-entry to education, getting a driver's licence, and all that kind of stuff.

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings for any corrections that you might wish to make. The Committee may also email you some supplementary questions. We ask you to return those at the direction of the secretariat. Once again, thank you for your time. Your contribution has been very valuable.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Ms ZOË ROBINSON, Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. They will be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. If you object to photos or videos being taken, please let us know. Can you please confirm that you've been issued with the Committee's terms of reference?

ZOË ROBINSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about those?

ZOË ROBINSON: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement before we begin questions?

ZOË ROBINSON: I don't have a short opening statement, other than to acknowledge that we're on the lands of the Gadigal people and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I think it's important for the purposes of this inquiry to declare that I am also on the board of BackTrack, an organisation in Armidale that serves young people.

The CHAIR: Let's go straight to questions from the Committee. We just want to get your thoughts on the Moree Bail Accommodation Program. Do you think this approach is appropriate as a way to divert young people from custody?

ZOË ROBINSON: I think there has been a lot of investment in Moree over a number of years, and I think there have been ongoing concerns and issues for the community in Moree, both for young people, and those in the community. What we've heard from young people—and obviously my role as the Advocate for Children and Young People is to lift up the voices of the young people—is that anything that provides them with opportunities and access to a variety of programs, be that sport or be that after-school programs, is always something that's very welcomed.

What I would say is when that particular funding was announced, we immediately went into custodial settings and spoke to young people from Moree to ask them about what had been missing for them, noting that there have been young people from Moree in custody for a number of years. They did talk about access to programs. They also talked about the fact that they hadn't necessarily been in school, but also that they didn't feel like there was enough. I know that the Committee today has heard a lot about things after hours, and what that actually looks like. But also we still aren't necessarily in those conversations addressing the things that they're talking about, around sense of belonging and identity, their community, and what their community needs as well.

We would welcome any investment—and we do welcome investment—that looks at a holistic approach, which includes housing, which includes access to programs and supports. I think obviously it's got to be long term, and it's got to be a long-term investment. We know that these things take time. Again, I know the Committee heard this morning that if we could have solved it, I know a lot of organisations would have thought that we could have solved it by now. Obviously we've got to keep looking at what those communities need, and how that changes.

If I can, as an anecdote, when I first came into this role, I went to Moree and went into that community. Community will tell you, obviously, there were a number of services in that community, and they do incredible work, and they give a lot to the community. But on a Friday afternoon you are bound to find 250 kids at the local basketball court, or down by the river. Thinking about how we go where young people actually are, and where they're prepared to meet, I think, is a very useful thing to think about as well. If they're not going into a particular building to do that, we still have to think about what it could look like, and where they're actually going, and, how we meet them in those places where it matters to them.

The CHAIR: That's great. One of the themes that's coming out from all of the hearings we've had so far is that the problem starts at the home, where the home is, if I can use the word, toxic. There's alcohol and there are drugs and the kids don't want to be at home, so they go out at all hours of the night and roam the streets. Some of them even knock on the doors of the police station to get a feed or ask if they can just sleep on the bench at the police station because they don't want to go home.

One of the themes that's coming out from the witnesses that we've heard from is if there could be a facility similar to a boarding house with accommodation and education, not just accommodation, so those kids that fall through the cracks can be at home, can be at school. If they can go through some type of facility where they can be accommodated, fed and educated. Do you have any views if such—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: It's on country, with the Indigenous kids.

The CHAIR: It's on country, yes. We're talking about the country and mainly Indigenous communities. Do you have a view on that type of model?

ZOË ROBINSON: It's important—that's why I declared at the beginning that I sit on the BackTrack board, because BackTrack does that. It provides accommodation and has a teacher—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: How many kids are in BackTrack?

ZOË ROBINSON: Currently there was a waitlist, when we had the last board meeting, of 60 young people who had been referred from the school system. There are accommodations for—I'm going to get this wrong—let's say, I think, approximately 10. I'll take it on notice and give you those figures.

The CHAIR: Whereabouts, sorry?

ZOË ROBINSON: It's in Armidale. It's got two properties now. It's got one that houses predominantly young men. There are tiny homes on that property as well, that the young people themselves build, and then they can transition out of the house that has carers, and they can move into that. They're currently in the process of building another accommodation, which will be primarily for young women. That facility itself, in the town of Armidale, also has a place where people can come and do their schooling throughout the day. There has been a really strong relationship between police, the school, that particular organisation, and the local members, about those young people, if they can't be attending the school that they're currently at, for a variety of reasons, being referred into the BackTrack program. I should note that funding for that particular teacher hasn't continued under the Department of Education, so is now self-funded by the organisation. Which makes good sense, and it's a commitment that the organisation undertakes.

Put that organisation aside, hence declaring it at the very beginning, if I can come back to the family conversation that I've heard a lot throughout the day, I think we have to be very conscious when we're talking about these families, that the adults in those families have their own complexities as well. There has been a number of times throughout the system, where we have failed people, and where they haven't been able to have access to those things. One of the things that I've learnt in the six years I've held this job is we all probably, in various departments and agencies, have a different definition of what intervention and diversion is, and when it starts. If you think about a family who may be a young parent, knowing that young parent is pregnant, what are the services and supports we need at that time, because of all the other risk factors we might know about young parents, as an example.

I'm just very conscious of the language that we are using when we're talking about these families, because there are complexities in these families. It's not because people aren't trying to be good parents, or trying to engage as a child, or any of that space. It's because there's a lot of, as you've heard today, family supports that are needed at the time that happens. We have heard from young people in custodial settings, and those that have exited from custody, that the thing that has helped them the most is stability. Unfortunately, for some young people, that has been in a custodial setting, because that's where they might have had access to school for a long period of time. It's where they might have had mental health supports during that time. I think things that are in the community that reflect that you have safe, stable housing, but also you're getting access to all of the other things that you need, are very important.

I know when I first took this job, people said to me, "Why can't we put them all in a boarding school because it's cheaper than putting them in a custodial setting?" You heard this morning, we've still got to think about culture, community, country, and belonging. Just because you move one young person into a particular place, doesn't mean they still have the connections to their friends and all of that, and they will go looking for that. I think it's got to look like housing, but it still has to have all of the other supports as well. The education piece is also about time. It's not easy for everyone to want to re-engage in school if they haven't been engaged in school. So giving them time to have access, and what that might look like for them. Noting my excellent Education colleagues who are appearing this afternoon behind me, perhaps it also needs to look different for different people, as well.

Mr TRI VO: Thank you so much for coming here today. Could you tell us what you learnt from conducting the exit interviews at Youth Justice centres? Why wasn't the report publicly released and what key recommendations and findings were made in the Youth Justice exit interviews report? Were you satisfied with the Government's response?

ZOË ROBINSON: Lots of questions in that. The first part of that, the reason we did it was because it was a particularly sensitive piece of work, conducting exit interviews with young people, because sometimes, as you would appreciate, as you've heard, they were in custody because they had reoffended. Some of them were out of custody, hadn't managed to stay out of custody, had reoffended. So we wanted to make sure that the young people felt comfortable to participate, and speak openly and honestly about their experiences. The purpose of it

was that we wanted to work with custodial centres and Youth Justice centres about what we need to be doing for that. So it wasn't that there was anything that couldn't be published. It was more the fact that it was a really internal document about saying, "Okay, what do we need to be doing to improve this?"

Also, the Inspector of Custodial Services and lots of people do very public reports about this, and they do it from the view of looking at a centre and that. We were taking it from the view of the young people, lifting their voices up, and saying, these are the things that worked well, and didn't work well. In saying that, if the Committee would like that information, I can take that on notice and come back and share that. It is mostly full of quotes, and very clear ideas as to what young people would say would help themselves.

In terms of the exit part of it—and, again, you've heard it a lot today—it's not just about stable housing, which is a big part of it. A lot of young people also talk about their own concerns about being exited back into a community where they know that—perhaps it is where home is for them, but they're a bit nervous about the fact that they're going to maybe go back and see similar people, or there's going to be an expectation from that community as to what that kid is like, and so they're not going to be given a fair go, for want of a better description.

But we've also, as an office, firsthand, tried to assist young people coming out of custody, and getting a job, and seeing the actual need to get ID, and what that process looks like—which I know seems for all of us very straightforward. It's actually not that straightforward, if you don't have your ID documentation. So, going through that process, then trying to find them stable housing, and finding them a job. All of these things you need ID to be able to get, so you have this kind of lag in process, in terms of, you might come out, but none of that's available. Getting access to mental health in your community. Interestingly, one young person wanted to keep contact with their psychologist they had in custody, and they couldn't.

There's all of these consistent hurdles and roadblocks. The big ones are housing, access to paid employment, and time. It is going to take time. You can't just assume that they'll go straight back to school, or they'll immediately engage in some of the things that we say are positive programs. It takes time, and that's why the caseworkers, and those programs that you heard about, are so important. Build those relationships before they come out, and be the same people when they're out, and help them do those things, and sometimes that looks like sitting in Service NSW and helping them get ID.

Mr TRI VO: So it wasn't publicly released so that the interviewees would be more comfortable to participate?

ZOË ROBINSON: We wanted them to be very comfortable in terms of having that conversation and being very frank.

Mr TRI VO: It's not publicly released, but we can get a copy if we wish to?

ZOË ROBINSON: I'll take that on notice, and I have a feeling it will be fine.

Mr TRI VO: Okay, great. And what key recommendations and findings were made from that interview report?

ZOË ROBINSON: The young people talked about before they came into custody, and disengagement from school, and suspensions—as you know, and, again, noting my wonderful colleagues behind me who I do a lot of great work around this stuff with, that's the first start, where we start to see they're disengaged in school. They might start participating in antisocial behaviour. They talked about not having access to some of the mental health supports. As you would have heard today, a lot of people come in with undiagnosed mental health problems.

But the big thing is that exiting, so if they're learning skills while they're in custody, and they're engaging in education, making sure that, on exit, there is a good pathway for them to gain employment. You will see the successful young people who have exited custody. It's because they have something that gives them a sense of belonging, or a sense of purpose, that they can immediately engage in, and participate in. And that's not just sport for young people. It can look like a variety of things. It does look like training, education, housing supports, and work.

Mr TRI VO: Were you satisfied with the government's response? If so, why, and if not, why not?

ZOË ROBINSON: As it wasn't a publicly or tabled document, I didn't need a formal response from government, but I would say—again, reflecting on the six years I've held this job for—what I've seen Youth Justice do for young people, in terms of positive outcomes, is incredible. Noting that the view is not that we want to lock these young people up, but that actually some of the programs that they run in there are incredible programs, and the people are so well meaning.

I would say that Youth Justice is one of the most receptive agencies to work with in terms of improvements, and that includes the fact that they've got leadership programs, where young people can voice

what's going on for them, and engage in the settings in the centres and what it looks like, as well as really responding to the needs of the community. It's not just Aboriginal programs in custody. You're seeing Pasifika programs for the young people from Pasifika backgrounds. African nights exist in one of the centres now, for some of the young African people. So those centres have responded to the needs of the young people who are coming through those centres.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks, Zoë, for being here, for your submission and for all your great work. What a huge job you've got. Thank you so much for doing it for our young people. You would have perhaps heard during the course of today that, over the period of these hearings, we're hearing ideas. Our job is basically that we're tasked not only to identify what the findings are but also to make recommendations. One of those recommendations that we're seeing popping up is an on-country diversionary type of centre designed to offer education and maybe vocational training—things like that—rather than a youth detention centre. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on this proposal.

ZOË ROBINSON: It's something that we've advocated for internally, across governments, and with other service providers as well. Something needs to look different. Like I said, if youth justice was working, we wouldn't see what we're seeing right now. If all of the programs were working, we probably wouldn't see what we're seeing right now. Individually, there are amazing programs that are working, but we do need to think about culturally appropriate ways to respond to things that are going on. Again, like I said, that also means that we need to look at Pasifika kids. We need to look at some of the stuff that's going on in African communities. We also need to think about how it can be different for young women, and the increase that we're seeing in some of the statistics around that. I would welcome that. I know there are a lot of great organisations that would be very interested in providing support and insight around that. We would welcome something that looks different to benefit these young people.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: To pick up on something that you've said before around the exit interviews, I would be interested in being able to read whatever you're able to provide the Committee. The answer from me is yes, thank you.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Ms Robinson, thank you for the work you're doing. A lot of the stuff you've discussed in your evidence has been for youth. I want to take a step further down to children and look at that. We're seeing, throughout western New South Wales predominantly, children as young as nine being involved in criminal activity and being before the courts. It's a significant, increasing problem and a real concern. They're out of school. There's all the dysfunction at home. Are there programs that you're aware of that have been successful in capturing this group? When I say "capture", I mean getting them onto the right path, getting them back to school, getting them into some kind of program to assist them at such a young age.

ZOË ROBINSON: I'll take on notice the details of specific organisations because right now, in my head, they're not coming to me. But things that I have seen that have been successful—you may have heard of them. When I went to Bourke years ago, they talked to me about granny patrol. The local aunts—of an evening, after about five o'clock—had their own bus. They went around, and tried to make sure those kids were safe. That doesn't feel like a formal program that runs like we would think, in terms of the programs you've heard about today, but it was a community response to a need as they were seeing younger people do that.

There is an organisation in Dubbo called LeaderLife that has a building that sits in the middle of south-west Dubbo, and that is a drop in. That takes particularly younger kids but also the siblings of others. When they can perhaps identify in their community that an older sibling has come into contact with police custody, they would do the natural thing of making sure the siblings know that the organisation exists, and things like that.

The formality of that I will take on notice, in terms of other programs. I think one of the things that we probably forget is that there's an assumption that a nine-year-old should be in school, so we're not necessarily always looking for the nine-year-olds. But I hear you in terms of the ages. We still need to think about, as you've heard from most of the submissions today, why a nine-year-old is in that situation, and what are the earlier things that we need to be doing.

I note that commentary about doli incapax, and everyone thinking that that's part of the assumption. Years ago, when I had to do a presentation on youth crime, I talked about belonging. I talked about the fact that we call them gangs but, originally, they are people who are similar who like to hang out, and we've called them gangs. We do have to go back to this sense of belonging, and where you find it, and your purpose. My first question is I always want to know why a nine-year-old doesn't feel like they should be in school at that time. What program is a nine-year-old going to walk into after seven o'clock at night that makes them feel safe, and that they want to be a part of? We should probably be thinking about the design of what that program looks like.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You mentioned the bus going around Bourke. The YMCA tried to do that, but their biggest fear is that they have to take them home at 11 o'clock at night. The kids literally go in one door, out the window and back onto the street because they're not safe at home.

ZOË ROBINSON: That's why the community-led programs are very good, in terms of Elders or others being funded, who know those kids. I'm hesitant to keep talking about the organisation, but the three young people in BackTrack in Armidale had a recent town meeting. Those three young people who have been through BackTrack and are successful graduates of the program went to that meeting and shared their story. They are now funded to go out at 10 o'clock at night in that community, to try to engage with those young people. Those three young people have taken that initiative. There is a small amount of funding to assist them with the car. They are supported by organisations to make sure that they themselves are safe.

But that was three young men who said, "We want to contribute to making sure our younger generations are okay." It's so important that community gets to lead that conversation, but that it also looks like it's strength based, like it's someone like them that those young people can relate to. I'm not going to be the person who's going to solve the problem in some of these communities. There are going to be young people who know how to engage with those young people. I think that's a good example of it not just being the granny patrol, which I still think is one of my favourite things I've heard of, but it being this youth-led movement to try to help the future generation as well.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: That's very good. We are certainly very much aware of BackTrack. I think it's only a matter of time before we're up there talking to them again. You mentioned doli. Obviously there has been talk about how the age of criminal responsibility and the defences should be removed. That was today's law and order ridiculousness that has come out. I won't use the word "ridiculous", but I would just like to hear your view on that. Obviously there's a view that the age of criminal responsibility should basically be removed and these children can go into juvenile justice at any age. They're also putting forward that bail should always pretty much be refused for these children and that their sentences should be increased. I was just wondering, as the Children's Guardian, what you thought of such ideas.

ZOË ROBINSON: We've been signatories to #RaiseTheAge, unsurprisingly, and I think bringing ourselves up to a global standard is the very least that we can do. I think that all of those measures that are being talked about—the people before me said it before—are the very pointy end of responding to a problem. I've been reading a lot of the 22C judgements. Since July there have been three. You can see the uncomfortableness of judges who are using that 22C part now, in terms of bail. I think that is because part of it is we still have to think about what true intervention and diversion looks like. We know all of the research says that as soon as you come in contact with the criminal justice system, it is going to change your pathway, and you are then going to have to—and I mean the individual, because the system isn't doing a great job around this—work very, very hard to change that pathway for themselves.

Putting 10-year-olds in custody, I've been out to our centres where we have under-14s in centres, and have seen them, and they're little. You're seeing children in this space. But we still need to figure out what those children need, and we still need to invest in that end. The justice system, I accept that there are some interactions; it is inevitable. I'm not going to deny the fact that communities have been through a lot. There are a lot of things going on in communities, and I have deep empathy for that. I think looking at one end without actually properly investing very early in that front end, the first 2,000 days, is important work, making sure that we know that there are things that young people need early, and their families need early, and we're investing in that early. But none of the research ever says putting a 10-year-old in a custodial setting is going to assist that person, or necessarily change their behaviour, if they're not in custody.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Robinson, for your valuable contribution today. The Committee will provide you with a copy of the transcript for any corrections that you need to make. You've taken a couple of questions on notice, so we'll chase those up. Committee staff will also email you any supplementary questions that they may have. If you can return them at the direction of the secretariat. Once again, thank you for your time today. We wish you all the best. Have a good day.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr ADAM BENNETT, Executive Director Learning and Teaching, Health, Wellbeing and Human Services Faculty, TAFE NSW, sworn and examined

Ms ALISON McGAFFIN, Chief Student and Community Officer,Student Support and Community Group, TAFE NSW, sworn and examined

Mr MARTIN GRAHAM, Deputy Secretary Teaching Learning and Student Wellbeing, NSW Department of Education, affirmed and examined

Ms DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES, Deputy Secretary for Public Schools, NSW Department of Education, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you all for your attendance. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having your photos or videos taken. Can you please confirm that you've been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses? Yes. Do any of you have any questions in relation to those terms of reference? No. Would each organisation like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

MARTIN GRAHAM: We're happy to go straight to questions.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you very much and thank you for being here. You've probably heard, if you've heard any of the evidence today, that it's been put to this Committee a number of times that the best solution for these kids—it was first put to us that the children should be taken away from their homes, which put alarms up for us. We wouldn't think of that with Indigenous kids. Then the scenario was painted that an educational institution, a school, should have accommodation on country and that the children could go there. They would be safe, they would be educated, they would get their meals, et cetera, because they're not getting it at home. Also, it would be a central type of place. We've heard that BackTrack in Armidale has something similar to that for older kids. Is there anything in the Department of Education or TAFE, at the moment, that is along similar lines in New South Wales? If not New South Wales, other places, that you're aware of?

MARTIN GRAHAM: We know that stability for children is something that's incredibly critical because we find, as you know, that it's related to so many other outcomes for them. The residential side is not something that schools typically do. Obviously, we work with a lot of NGOs. We have lots of students in out-of-home care, for example, who may have been in residential care, as well as with families, and so on. From an Education perspective, we are much more working with children who are being supported, whether through DCJ, NGOs, or others. I think from a policy perspective, the experience in Connected Communities, and the kind of considerations that we give in a school about how you work with community might be of most relevance to the Committee. I'll ask Ms Summerhayes if she has some comments about how we work with families to produce that culturally sensitive outcome.

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: When we are most successful is when we are able to intervene early, so I did want to speak to that in this conversation. Ms Robinson was right. We were talking about youth, and you asked the question about younger children. But our belief is that we see great success in our school communities when there is early intervention. There are examples across the state, of schools who are really active in local community, working with NGOs, health, police, and other interested parties, from the time young students from our school are carrying babies.

We are keeping an eye on those young women when they're in hospital. When they come home, we're working with those young women and their families, and we're ensuring those babies are being cared for. We are doing things, not just on the school side, but in community, where we are wrapping around children from a really early age. We know that when we're able to do that, we often have wonderful success. It doesn't mean that things don't happen when students get older, but it's a great starting point for us, and different communities go about it different ways.

I think this morning you heard about some schools like Ashcroft Public School or Ashcroft High School, or other schools, like James Meehan [High School], where they have actually put in wellbeing hubs. In these hubs, families can come and not only connect with educators and support children to be at school or to be engaged in programs out of school that will help them in their learning and their wellbeing, but they also have access to services that will actually help the whole family. We know in Education that when we work with the whole family, we tend to have better outcomes for our students.

But sometimes we can't do that in the ways that we would like, for all of the restrictions that we have in our community, and so working with families and working with community in the best way we can to get outcomes for kids is what we strive to do across the state. Each context looks really different, so I need to call out the importance of country, community, and culture, and what that means to any kind of work that we do that will be successful with children and their families.

It is also really important for us in the work that we do in Education. We don't like to lose children. We don't like to suspend children. We don't like to have kids disengaged from learning. But I know that you've heard in this Committee lots of reasons why that occurs for some children in particular communities, and how educators are really keen to work with consistent organisations in communities, those that hang around, those that stay around to build the relationship, because we find that when we're able to build the relationship, we will get better outcomes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: We have heard evidence in the first days of these hearings about the things that you've talked about, that there is issues with resourcing where they just didn't have the teaching staff, they didn't have the people available in those certain rural areas to go chase those kids, to go and find them. They would get no response from parents, because obviously they were dealing with their own demons. But they did not have the person power to be able to deal with those issues. Is there an issue with resourcing that we need to be aware of in communities?

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: It would be fair to say that I wish we had so many more resources across the state to support our communities in that space; particularly, our regional, rural, and remote colleagues do suffer from not being able to get appropriate staff that can be in schools, or that can be connected to schools. We find in our regional, rural, and remote [RRR] areas, even when our school staff is fairly stable, the NGOs and supporting organisations in community change all of the time. There's not that constancy of people that work with our students. So resourcing is always an issue, people power is always an issue, and encouraging folk who may not come from those regional or rural or remote areas to actually want to work there can be quite difficult.

In the Department we run a number of programs to encourage teachers to be willing to take on RRR schools, with some success. Our vacancy rate is diminishing, thank goodness, but we still don't have the numbers that we would like to be able to staff our schools, particularly in those areas around those special programs for being able to keep that connection up when kids aren't at school.

I think Ms Robinson's point about being where the kids are, at their point of need, is really important. So many of our schools are quite amazing at that—going to find the kids down at the river and bringing them back to school, or actually doing the schooling at the river, so those lessons can take place in a place where the children are. New South Wales public educators are incredibly creative to try to make sure that they are connecting with as many children as they can, but I am not naive enough to say that there aren't enormous challenges in different parts of the state, and you've explored some of those in this hearing.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: When a child does get themselves into trouble and they're suspended from school, what's the process? What happens to them then?

MARTIN GRAHAM: A child will be suspended if they're a risk to themselves or to others in the school. That's the basis upon which children are suspended. As a department, we have 29 support and inter-agency coordinators who work across the state. Often it's not just Education. Perhaps it's an issue at home, and DCJ is involved—those kinds of things—so we have people who work inter-agency to try to find out what's happening for the child. The purpose of suspension is to give the school time to put a risk management plan in place, and that's not just about safety. That's also about—are there alternative programs we should be offering this child? Do we have some TAFE options, for example, that might be more appropriate for this child at this point in time?

The process is very individual child based, but we do have tiers of intervention. We have staff around the state. If a child has been suspended repeatedly, that triggers something for us in the head office, and the regional offices, saying, "Look, there's something happening here for this child." We reach out to the school and our support people come in and say, "What support can we offer you to be able to try to assist this child?" That's fairly recent, that more proactive approach. It's much more standardised. No matter where you are in the state, if you reach the maximum number of days of suspension, we'll call the school and offer assistance to the school rather than waiting for them to reach out. That's something we have found to be more helpful.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you all for coming today and for your submissions. I'll ask you the same question that I asked Zoë beforehand. In previous hearings, it has been brought to our attention that some stakeholders have proposed that a specialised, on-country diversionary centre, providing culturally relevant education and vocational training, is something that has been flagged to us as the Committee. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on this proposal, as opposed to the conventional styles of education.

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: I suppose I would say that I'm always interested in looking at ways to connect with young people that we aren't able to connect with in more traditional ways. But, having worked with students across the state, having led schools with large numbers of Aboriginal students, and having worked very closely with Aboriginal community in all of my time in New South Wales public education—and certainly the work that we do with our prime partner, the AECG [Aboriginal Education Consultative Group]—it is very clear to me that, whatever we do, we don't want to put trauma on trauma. We don't want people to see it as harking back to other sorts of institutionalised racism that these families have lived through, and that these children continue to be impacted by on a daily basis.

It is a very fine line that we walk in trying to meet the needs of young people in community in a potential institution like this. I would say that, if we could work in concert with community and with agency, both within the system and with NGOs, and collaborate on what that could look like for young people, and get that agreement that it is not a pseudo-boarding school, or a pseudo-institution that has some sort of connection to historical trauma—and that's a big ask in lots of parts of New South Wales—then I think it's definitely worth exploring. But I know that anything we do without collaboration and deep consultation with our local communities is not going to be successful. The children will not be able to sustain if they can't be supported within community.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Was there anybody else on the panel that wanted to contribute?

ADAM BENNETT: Just from a TAFE perspective, I think it's important to caveat that we don't have residential services. We're primarily working with young people and progressing towards adulthood and aligning to future careers. I think I'd just echo the importance of partnering with community, but in quite a specific fashion. Community needs to be defined for the specific community, the stakeholders, and the leaders there who can have an influence. There are certainly examples, at least in terms of the skill development aspects of what we can do, where those sorts of partnerships with the particular place, which can mean all of the government stakeholders, schools, and other people that are there—community representatives, and particularly employers, and the role that they can play—and then providing training in situ that's delivered in a fashion that's sensitive to the culture and the custodians of these, are useful.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Do you have any programs that are targeted at the Indigenous community or people that are in the TAFE system?

ADAM BENNETT: Yes. There are a small number of programs which are specifically for Aboriginal learners. We have a program which is about preparing people for careers in the Police Force, IPROWD—in true TAFE fashion it's an acronym—the Indigenous Police Recruitment Our Way Delivery program, specifically for helping people with aspirations to enter the NSW Police Force. We do have programs that are focused on Aboriginal cultural knowledge, particularly related to vocation—things like Aboriginal sites training, and things like that. There are a small number. Probably more significantly is the way our Aboriginal support staff and our community engagement teams wrap around to connect what we would do as our ordinary services, to make them accessible for all of our Aboriginal learners and communities. Ms McGaffin, do you want to comment on that?

ALISON McGAFFIN: No, thank you. That has covered it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Proudly, I'm a benefactor of TAFE, so I'm a strong believer in TAFE, especially because it is so hands on. It's so practical, especially for students who are more visual than they are auditory. My colleagues will be able to correct me if I'm wrong, but when the Committee was out at Bourke and we were talking about access to TAFE, the nearest TAFE, from memory, was four hours away and there's no public transport. So the learning was done online, which is great if you're visual but if you're also wanting to be hands on and do the practical work that TAFE provides us that's really difficult to do online. I'm wondering if there's anything that Mr Bennett or Ms McGaffin can pass on to the Committee that you would like to see done differently in TAFE in regional New South Wales, for example, to make it more accessible to these young people that may not have a driver licence and there is no public transport to get to their nearest TAFE, which is four hours away.

ALISON McGAFFIN: Thank you very much for the question, Ms Stuart. Probably just to reflect on the facility that we have at Bourke, which is a Connected Learning Centre. The TAFE NSW campus at Bourke is a specialised centre that's equipped with technology and digital capability to allow learners to really engage in a high-quality online and virtual study experience. Connected Learning Centres that we operate in various locations across regional New South Wales have the benefit of allowing people who live in small regional and remote locations, such as Bourke, to access a wide variety of courses, without the need to travel or to relocate for further education.

I take on board your concern about the fact that online actually represents quite a different option to face to face. I think it's important to understand that Bourke Connected Learning Centre, as with many of our

Connected Learning Centres, are also supported by mobile training units, that actually go to that facility to give that really high quality, face-to-face practical experience, to complement the virtual and online experience. I think it's important, probably, for us to potentially talk more about the opportunity that those Connected Learning Centres provide. There are a number of courses that I'm aware of that will be delivered at Bourke Connected Learning Centre through the course of this year, that will have a hands-on, face-to-face dimension to them.

So just because the Connected Learning Centre really is digitally enabled, and very much focused on the technology to connect learners and students more broadly across the state to those learning opportunities, I think it's also important to recognise that it's not the only experience. It really can be very much a blended and face-to-face experience that they have the opportunity to engage in.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I'm happy for you to take this as a question on notice: How often do they go out there with this presence? I'm happy for you to get back to me on that. Also, the range of courses that are being delivered. If a young person has to travel four hours to the nearest main campus of a TAFE, are we helping them by doing mechanical type of courses for motor vehicles, for example? So when they are eligible to get their licence, they also have learnt how to take care of their vehicle, if they're travelling four hours to and from a job in the future. Again, happy for you to take that on notice, but what courses are actually being delivered for these young folks in regional parts of New South Wales?

ALISON McGAFFIN: I think we will take that on notice so that we can give you a complete picture of the range of courses, but I certainly understand that there are both practical construction-type courses, as well as more pathways career preparation, more community-focused courses. It's a broad range that we're proposing.

ADAM BENNETT: If I just add, I think it's useful to just say that we note the challenges that the students have in regional areas, in being able to get to another location. We really do try and prioritise the teacher and the equipment going to them, not the student coming—in this instance, as you say, coming from Bourke into Dubbo. There will certainly be situations, particularly if they're undertaking a full apprenticeship or something like that, where the nature of the teaching, the equipment, and whatever else is involved with that, probably is the only feasible solution for the training. But in areas like civil construction, a lot of those sort of areas, the teachers are actually moving to the community and connecting to people there, not the students coming the other way.

It's quite typical, then, for us to have a hybrid-type approach, where the learning is occurring through technology. Probably just to help visualise that, it's far more likely to be this sort of experience, where the teacher or students may be remote, and we're connecting by video. That's been a very typical way of accessing teaching for some time, rather than necessarily a self-paced working through theory on the internet. Asynchronous learning, as we refer to it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I do want to do a shout-out to all the TAFE teachers that are out there. They do a phenomenal job right across our state. To our NSW Department of Education, just probably anything that you would like to advise the Committee on, what you would like to see? I guess the family is probably the first educators of our little people, but you are certainly extremely influential as teachers when they start school. I think about my own children, my son used to say one of his teachers was his school mum. So I know how important, influential and special our teachers are, right across the state.

Is there anything that you would like to advise the Committee for us to take on board to look at? You, being the educators in the school environment, pick up things that we as parents may not pick up. I know that we have as a government now—nurses are starting to come back into schools, for example. When you identify challenges our little people might be having or even our older students, is there anything that you would like us to take on board? Anything you'd like to share? Is there anything, if you had a magic wand, you would like us to be able to introduce?

MARTIN GRAHAM: Obviously what we want most dearly for all of the children, and particularly for children in rural and regional New South Wales, is to have the same educational experience that other children get, and to have success at school, because their future is going to be extremely influenced by their final educational outcomes. There are lots of jobs in regional communities, but most of them require a degree, or some kind of post-school qualification. To set people up for success, we have to remember that the absolute fundamentals of schooling are so important as well.

The question about early intervention is a really good one. We now have a phonics check, so we know in year 1 if a child's falling behind. While it probably hasn't been in the terms of reference of this Committee, some of the most important work we are doing in Bourke at the moment is intensive work on phonics, so making sure our literacy and numeracy advisers are out there, in those schools, actually giving children the skills they need really, really early, and intervening early, because it's that that will actually give them the highest level of success.

While sometimes we absolutely have to look at alternatives, alternate forms of education—people might need to dip in and out—our absolute driver is to hold children as long as possible, and give them the best possible education. So these schools are doing amazing jobs in their communities. They've got porous boundaries with their families, and they call them in, but the absolute best thing we can do for those children with intergenerational issues is to give them the same education that they would get if they were from an advantaged school in the city. That's what drives us. We're also trying to make sure that they have access to literacy and numeracy, HSC support, and access to subjects. They don't get the same access to subjects and so on. I think you've just alluded, with TAFE, as to some of the reasons, but that's one of the things I would call out. We've still got to really keep a focus on that.

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: I would just add that schools are often the hubs of community, and we know that what happens in community comes into schools; we don't live alone. We do have a relationship, where it's really important that our parents, carers, and community members are well supported in the regional and remote space as well, because their mental health, their physical health, and their wellbeing is going to impact on the children and young people that we are working with. And so when we are supporting our students, we need to be able to connect and support our families as well. We also need to make sure that school is a place where our families feel safe to come, and there are historical reasons why that has been difficult for many families in many communities. How we try and build those bridges is so important.

If I had a magic wand, I would love to see in every one of our schools the ability to have a wellbeing hub where you have a mental health nurse and you have the paediatrician who will come in occasionally. You have the dental, you have the hearing, and you have anything that families cannot access in local community that takes away that disadvantage that exists if you cannot get to a paediatric appointment, or get to a referral, and all those kinds of things. A wellbeing hub is where you can welcome people in to feel really comfortable to be in the school and come to the school. They can encourage their children to also feel that the school is a place where they can be well supported and, when things aren't going well, they can reach out to the people that are caring for them and educating them every day, to get the help that they need.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I think you hit the nail on the head. Apart from being educators, you're carers. If I can just extend my gratitude—our gratitude—to not only the TAFE teachers and the Department of Education teachers but all staff within our education department right across the state. A massive thank you for everything that you do every day.

Mr TRI VO: I have questions. Firstly, to Ms Summerhayes and Mr Martin Graham from the NSW Department of Education. My first question is does the department provide any guidance for schools on managing students who are disengaging or have disengaged from school?

MARTIN GRAHAM: Yes. There are a number of different layers. One is resources that we provide to schools if you're having trouble with students. There are resources, but probably more important are the human resources that we provide. We have what's called a Team Around a School. When they're having difficulty with a particular student, or if something's not working, we have support staff. That's particularly important when they've got other agencies involved, so it might be Housing, or the Department of Communities and Justice. Often they'll be able to tell the school, "We're working with other agencies around this child and around their family. We've been working with them before." They bring that in. There's no simple fix, and every family can be unique, but we certainly support schools in those ways.

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: Can I add, Mr Vo, that when you teach children well and you're taught by a person who knows their syllabus, who knows how to teach, who knows to engage kids in learning, that makes a big difference as well. We don't just approach it as the wellbeing aspect of a school and connecting, as we've talked about this afternoon, which is so critical, but wellbeing and good teaching and learning are linked. They cannot be done separately to have success for children.

We always make the point that, like other agencies that families might engage with, and our children might engage with, we are the only agency that is educating children. They have a right to a teacher who is well educated, knows their syllabus, knows how to teach, and knows how to open doors for students so they have choices for the future. We take that really, really seriously. Within our curriculum delivery, within our focus on explicit teaching, we also talk about engagement, and how to engage children in the classroom, or in school learning and wellbeing programs. I think that's a very important element of what happens in a school.

Mr TRI VO: If they've done something wrong and they are, say, suspended we've heard that out-of-school suspensions can significantly increase criminogenic risk. What is the department's policy on in-school suspension? Can you comment on whether in-school suspension is preferable for managing challenging behaviours while ensuring the child remains engaged in their education?

MARTIN GRAHAM: Certainly schools will always try an in-school option first. The reason for a suspension is if there's a risk to actually having the student onsite. But there are many schools where, say, there might have been an incident between two students. They might be able to say, "Look, this school is big enough. We can keep the students separated." Often they'll have a special room or a place, sometimes even outside the principal's office, or working directly with the deputy principal. We also have, across the state, 22 suspension centres which are offsite. If it's not safe for a child to be onsite, we can actually have them in a department or school that helps them reintegrate. Fifteen of them are in regional areas as well.

Mr TRI VO: So they're not too far from the school?

MARTIN GRAHAM: It depends on the area as to how far they are. But we do everything we can to hold them in the school. People talk about the link between suspension and perhaps criminal behaviour, but often it comes from the same root. The reason the child was suspended was probably a question around their impulse control, particularly as they're teenagers. That's the same problem that's driving potential criminal behaviour—that impulse control, and their risk-taking behaviour. It's not the suspension that leads to the criminal behaviour. Perhaps it's also not a stable family life, and those kinds of things. Both of them are symptoms of the same cause.

Mr TRI VO: What factors determine the type and the length of suspension for a young person?

MARTIN GRAHAM: It's all based on risk. There's not a "If you do this thing, this is the tariff." It's all based on the risk. So it might be that it takes you some time to be able to put in place a plan, particularly if there are multiple students involved, or it might be something that's very simply sorted, and they just need the child to be at home for that afternoon, even, and you'll be able to resolve it. The important thing is that a principal might say, "This is a suspension for five days." But if they can sort the situation out faster, they can resolve it early, so they can solve that faster. It really is all risk based.

Mr TRI VO: What training do teachers, principals and school support staff get in providing culturally sensitive and appropriate support to Aboriginal young people?

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: Teaching and support staff, Mr Vo, engage in professional learning around a number of areas within a better understanding of Aboriginal culture. Many of our schools will do a Healthy Culture Healthy Country, where whole school communities will have an on-country experience with local Aboriginal Elders. That's a way of really understanding how to create culturally safe places for our families and our children. We do other professional learning, like Everyone's Business, where you're understanding about intergenerational trauma. I could list a whole lot for you that are particularly relevant to different communities at different times, but we take our commitment to our Aboriginal students very seriously.

We are very proud that one in 11 of our students in New South Wales public education comes from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. With that comes the onus on us to have a really deep understanding of how best to work and support our children and our communities, so those young people can be successful, confident citizens of the future. We are constantly working in our school communities, depending on where we live, and where we're placed, and the nature of our community, on how we can best be able to learn ourselves, so we can do good things in the school as teachers and support staff.

Mr TRI VO: During the hearing today, we heard a lot of stories about how some of the problems of the young Aboriginal youth originate from the family. Are there any programs in regional areas aimed at supporting Aboriginal families' engagement with the school community?

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: I am aware of particular programs across the state, Mr Vo, that may involve, as I said when I started, young mothers or families. As a principal myself, I worked with Elders and aunties in the community to support programs for students. I would say to you that across the state it looks different in different contexts for different communities, but that is all about tapping into what we need to best support our students.

Mr TRI VO: My next question will be to TAFE NSW—Ms McGaffin and Mr Bennett. How does TAFE NSW collaborate with schools to support young people and help them understand the pathways to vocational training?

ALISON McGAFFIN: Thank you very much for the question, Mr Vo. TAFE NSW really is the state's largest provider of vocational training, and does play a very pivotal role in delivering future-focused, responsive, and flexible skills development to the people of New South Wales. You would be aware that only in the last couple of weeks the government has released the TAFE NSW Charter, and it reflects the New South Wales government's expectation of TAFE NSW at the centre of the provision of vocational education and training within the state, with the focus on delivering for the public good and particularly, meeting the needs of many of our disadvantaged cohorts within the community.

The Charter focuses on three key stakeholder groups for TAFE NSW, being students, industry, as well as our local communities. Over the last 18 months we've been moving towards a program where we are reconnecting with communities right across New South Wales through our TAFE Connects community engagement program to better understand the needs and aspirations of communities, and to use those insights to inform our planning around our service delivery, and also our places and our campuses.

As Ms Summerhayes said, our schools are often the hub of our communities. We don't have quite the same footprint as the Department of Education; nevertheless, we have 150 active campuses across New South Wales, which gives us an incredible opportunity to be part of the fabric of those communities, and to be there and present to support skills development to further the government's expectations around those skills needs, but also to support the communities, and deliver economic and social outcomes for them.

Mr TRI VO: As you said, there are a number of programs lately. How is TAFE NSW promoting its Aboriginal cultural programs—for example, languages, mentoring on country management to young Aboriginal people?

ALISON McGAFFIN: As part of my group, the Student Support and Community Group that stood up as part of our new TAFE operating model at the end of January 2025, we have an Aboriginal Engagement and Student Support branch that brings together all of our regional Aboriginal education and engagement officers under one unified and cohesive culturally appropriate leadership under an identified director. Those teams are actually in community all the time. They're place based. They're connecting with community on a day-to-day basis, and are really the conduit for engaging TAFE and members of our Aboriginal community to support their needs, and to identify those pathways into skills, development, and then hopefully into employment.

ADAM BENNETT: Of course, we're promoting all of our courses and services to all of the potential students in New South Wales. Certainly, a significant proportion of the students that we work with are Aboriginal learners, but from many other backgrounds, and many different ages and histories, as well. I think it's useful to distinguish between promoting our full range of courses that are available for all of our learners, and for our Aboriginal students. Certainly having a very direct team that is available to support them is really important. For those programs which are specifically for Aboriginal people in communities, they're something that need to be handled with a different level of sensitivity than just a marketing plan. That's really, I think, where the team that we have, of skilled educationally experienced Aboriginal people, help us to connect with communities in a really sensitive way.

That's important, for instance—things like the protocols with Aboriginal languages depend very much on the particular interests of the custodians of that language, and how they would like that to be shared, with whom, and by whom. So we need to work really carefully with specific communities to understand how they would like us to collaborate with them, and to support the people of their country, and how we have a role in that. Yes, there's a full spectrum of how things work, from marketing our courses through to engaging very specifically about a particular community and particular courses at that spot.

Mr TRI VO: You mentioned the skilled worker or liaison officers who are skilled in terms of promoting these cultural programs. You said place based—just in New South Wales, where are they based? Or are they just based in the regional areas, depending on the need?

ALISON McGAFFIN: Thank you for the question, Mr Vo. Yes, they're spread across New South Wales. We actually have a range of different team members, right across many locations.

Mr TRI VO: How many people are involved in that team?

ALISON McGAFFIN: I would need to take that on notice. I believe that the number of positions is about a hundred in that team, across the state, but whether we have all of those positions filled is probably something that we're still striving to achieve.

Mr TRI VO: A hundred. That's quite a lot.

ALISON McGAFFIN: If it's okay with you, I will confirm that on notice.

Mr TRI VO: Yes, thank you. How can at-risk young people be encouraged to access vocational training?

ADAM BENNETT: It's probably at the nub of the complex question, I think, of what motivates young people and what challenge they've faced. I think starting first of all from—we try to have a very individual focus on what a particular student's circumstances and challenges have been. They can be cultural. They can be language, literacy, numeracy. They can be mental health. As some of the previous speakers said, the challenges they may be facing might be to do with housing security or other things, which are sort of outside immediately.

I think a couple of the key factors that help to increase engagement in vocational education—really, alignment to strong interests in what they would like to be doing. Not just learning experience, but seeing something that has potential to lead to something that they think adds value to their life and to their community. A job, or other way of contributing to community, whether that's in a voluntary capacity, or whether that's employment.

I think then being able to have a strong and nurturing relationship with their educator. Often, we hear that the TAFE teacher is the responsible role model and adult that takes an interest in them and helps them believe that they can do something more. That relationship with them, and with their peers in the group, makes a significant difference to them continuing to be engaged. And then, I think, responding to the challenges that they experience. Just acknowledging that, as with all of the rest of society, our students have challenges with mental health wellness, and supporting them with those sorts of issues that they might experience, and our team of counsellors that are available to help with that. Or other practical things that they may experience, where they need guidance or assistance to navigate through those experiences, to understand how they can persist as best they can.

Mr TRI VO: Let us say that a mate or someone who has problems in school sometimes has difficulties learning. A good pathway is TAFE. Young people can start to do TAFE in prison, in juvenile detention centres or during school. Is that encouraged? Is there a way of encouraging them because they're not always academic, but they're quite practical? Is there a way of encouraging them or showing them that's their path?

ADAM BENNETT: Yes. We have a range of programs that are available working directly in schools—the Educational Pathways Program, things that we call TVET, which I'm sorry is another acronym and my brain can't immediately dredge up what that stands for.

DEBORAH SUMMERHAYES: TAFE Vocational Education and Training.

ADAM BENNETT: Thank you, DOE colleagues. Another acronym—SBATs—school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. Those work similarly in correctional and juvenile justice. We're deeply involved in all sorts of training programs in those sorts of settings. That enables not only people to be working towards specific vocations and their aspirations; it enables them to build their core competencies—things like literacy and numeracy—but they can do that in the context of an application. They're learning about those things in the context of a vocation, and all of those things help to build direction and confidence. So yes, that was a long answer. We're partnering with all of those sorts of agencies and training is occurring in all of those sorts of contexts and many others.

The CHAIR: Just a couple of points. You mentioned the Connected Learning Centre. Can you give us an idea how that works? Is that a centre where students have to go, or is it operating from home?

ALISON McGAFFIN: A Connected Learning Centre is basically a different version of a TAFE campus that's digitally enabled, it's got great technology for a range of different learning opportunities, but also has potentially space for a mobile training unit to actually pull up, so that the training can be done in a blended way, both virtual and online and/or face to face. So it is actually a campus within TAFE's suite of campuses.

The CHAIR: Where's that rolled out at the moment?

ADAM BENNETT: I'll battle to get the list right. We can take it on notice.

The CHAIR: Is Bourke one of those or not?

ADAM BENNETT: Bourke is, Cobar—

The CHAIR: Can you take it on notice?

ALISON McGAFFIN: There are approximately 20, I believe, Mr Chair, across the state.

The CHAIR: When we visited Bourke—I've written to you through the Minister, Mr Bennett, in relation to insufficient face-to-face learning and you've addressed the issue with Maranguka, but you've also indicated that this year you're going to have face-to-face learning for an attainment certificate in Aboriginal works. Has that started or is it about to start?

ADAM BENNETT: I would have to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Can you take that on notice, because we need to get back to them with a response. Just one more thing. I've got both Education and TAFE here. Is there a close relationship, particularly in regional areas, between the Department of Education and TAFE to transition students from school to vocational study? Is that relationship there? From some of the regional visits we've had we've heard that each department works in silos, so students have to navigate their own way to go to vocational studies once they leave school or want to leave school. Is there a relationship there?

MARTIN GRAHAM: I would say in regional areas there's probably a close relationship, because the people know each other, because they live in the same town. We don't talk about data in those areas; there are kids' names. The new area is school-based apprenticeships. That's something that's fairly new for New South Wales. I think that probably is the area where we can strengthen relationships.

The CHAIR: I'll leave that with you. Thank you for your attendance today. Your contribution has been very valuable. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings for any corrections that you may wish to make. You've also taken some questions on notice, so the Committee will send those to you for a response. If there are any other supplementary questions, they'll send them out to you as well. Thank you for being here today and giving us your valuable time. We wish you all the best.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 16:45.