



Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Select Committee on Youth Justice

Greater Western Sydney Advocacy Network (GWSAN)

Introduction

The Greater Western Sydney Advocacy Network (GWSAN) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the NSW Legislative Council Select Committee on Youth Justice.

GWSAN is a community-led regional organisation focused on spatial justice, equitable infrastructure investment, and long-term social and economic wellbeing across Greater Western Sydney.

Our work focuses on how access to opportunity, community infrastructure and local services shape social outcomes for young people and communities. We support policies that strengthen early intervention, reduce inequality and ensure young people have access to safe environments, education pathways and meaningful opportunities.

We are concerned that structural barriers such as service gaps, youth disengagement and unequal access to community infrastructure contribute to young people becoming involved in the justice system. Addressing these drivers is essential to reducing youth justice involvement and building safer communities.

Why Youth Justice Matters to Our Work

Youth justice involvement is rarely the result of a single factor. It is usually associated with broader social conditions such as school disengagement, housing instability, poverty and limited access to support services.

Greater Western Sydney contains one of the largest and fastest-growing youth populations in Australia. However, rapid population growth in many outer metropolitan suburbs has not always been matched by investment in youth services, community infrastructure and early intervention programs.

This creates environments where young people may face structural barriers to opportunity, increasing the risk of disengagement from education, employment and community life.

Key systemic concerns include:

Youth disengagement and limited access to opportunity

Young people who disengage from education or employment are significantly more likely to come into contact with the justice system. In many outer metropolitan areas, young people face long travel times to education and training institutions, limited access to youth services and fewer entry-level employment opportunities.

Ensuring that young people remain connected to education, training and employment pathways is critical to preventing youth justice involvement.

Community infrastructure and youth engagement

Access to safe community spaces plays an important role in supporting positive youth development. Facilities such as youth centres, sports facilities, libraries and community hubs provide environments where young people can gather safely, build social networks and connect with mentors or support services.

In rapidly growing suburbs, the absence of these spaces can increase the risk of social isolation and disengagement.

Intergenerational and regional inequality

Greater Western Sydney contains a large and growing population of young people but continues to experience disparities in access to services and infrastructure compared with other parts of metropolitan Sydney.

Ensuring that young people in growing communities have equitable access to youth programs, infrastructure and opportunities is essential for preventing disadvantage from compounding across generations.

Impact on vulnerable young people

Young people experiencing disadvantage, including those in unstable housing, out-of-home care or families experiencing financial stress, are significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system.

Stable housing, supportive services and accessible youth programs are essential protective factors that help reduce the likelihood of young people becoming involved in the justice system.

Drivers of Youth Justice Contact

The inquiry's Terms of Reference highlight several key drivers of children's contact with the criminal justice system, including school disengagement, housing instability, disability, mental health issues and family dysfunction.

Young people who experience multiple forms of disadvantage are significantly more likely to come into contact with the justice system. Research consistently shows strong links between youth justice involvement and factors such as school exclusion, housing instability, family violence, and exposure to trauma. These structural drivers are often concentrated in communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and limited access to services. Addressing these underlying conditions is therefore essential for reducing the number of children entering the criminal justice system.

These drivers often interact with one another.

For example:

- housing instability can disrupt school attendance
- family stress can contribute to disengagement
- limited access to youth services can reduce opportunities for positive engagement.

Young people who experience multiple forms of disadvantage are significantly more likely to come into contact with the justice system.

Addressing these underlying drivers requires coordinated investment in early intervention and community-based support.

Young people with disability, mental health challenges or substance misuse issues may face additional barriers to accessing appropriate support services. Improving early identification of these needs and ensuring coordinated access to services, including disability supports where appropriate, is an important component of prevention and rehabilitation.

Aboriginal Youth and Community-Led Prevention

Aboriginal children remain significantly overrepresented in youth detention across New South Wales. This reflects broader structural inequalities including poverty, housing instability, intergenerational trauma and limited access to culturally appropriate services.

Addressing this disparity is also central to national Closing the Gap targets aimed at reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system. Community-led and culturally safe youth programs have been shown to play an important role in strengthening engagement and supporting young people before they come into contact with the justice system.

Supporting Aboriginal-led initiatives and investing in culturally appropriate youth spaces should therefore be considered an important component of prevention strategies.

Community Infrastructure and Youth Engagement

Access to community infrastructure plays a significant role in supporting positive youth development. Facilities such as youth centres, libraries, sports facilities and community hubs provide environments where young people can gather safely, develop social networks and access mentoring or support services.

These environments are often described as “third spaces”, places outside the home and school where young people can participate in community life. However, many rapidly growing suburbs in Western Sydney have experienced residential development without equivalent investment in youth-focused infrastructure. Ensuring that new communities include accessible youth spaces and programs is an important preventative strategy.

Community infrastructure can play an important preventative role by creating environments where young people remain connected to positive activities, mentoring relationships and support services. Accessible youth spaces can complement diversionary and early intervention programs by addressing the social conditions that contribute to youth disengagement before young people come into contact with the justice system.

International youth justice frameworks increasingly prioritise prevention and diversion rather than detention. Approaches such as Scotland’s Whole System Approach emphasise coordinated early intervention and community-based support services. These models demonstrate how integrated support systems can reduce youth justice involvement by addressing the social drivers of offending.

Youth-Led Community Programs

Community-led initiatives can play an important role in preventing youth disengagement and strengthening social connections. Programs designed and delivered with young people themselves often achieve strong participation because they reflect the interests and needs of the local community.

One example is the **Loofern Project**, a youth-led exercise initiative established in Waterloo following the redevelopment and temporary closure of a local youth centre. In response to the loss of their regular gathering space, young people organised informal group exercise sessions that created opportunities for physical activity, social connection and peer support.

Programs of this nature can provide several benefits:

- creating safe environments where young people can gather outside school hours
- strengthening peer networks and community connections
- encouraging healthy physical activity and wellbeing
- providing informal pathways to mentoring and community support.

Although the Loofern Project operates outside Greater Western Sydney, it illustrates a model that could be replicated in rapidly growing suburbs where youth services and infrastructure may not yet be fully established. Supporting youth-led initiatives and maintaining accessible youth spaces can play an important role in strengthening early intervention strategies.

Response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference

Drivers of youth justice involvement

Structural factors such as school disengagement, housing instability and lack of access to services play an important role in shaping youth outcomes.

Early intervention and diversion

Community-based programs that connect young people with education, employment and mentoring opportunities can reduce the likelihood of youth justice involvement.

Data and transparency

Improved regional data on youth opportunity and service access would support evidence-based policy decisions. Greater transparency regarding youth justice data, including recidivism rates, remand populations and the costs of detention compared with early intervention programs, would support more effective and evidence-based policy responses.

Disproportionate impact on Aboriginal children

Aboriginal children remain significantly over-represented in youth detention in New South Wales. Addressing this disparity requires prevention strategies that are community-led and culturally appropriate.

Community-based programs, culturally safe youth services and Aboriginal-led mentoring initiatives can play an important role in strengthening engagement and supporting young people before they come into contact with the justice system.

Whole-of-government coordination

Reducing youth justice involvement requires collaboration across education, housing, planning and community services.

Key Questions for the Inquiry

The Greater Western Sydney Advocacy Network encourages the Committee to consider the following questions when examining approaches to reducing youth justice involvement in New South Wales.

1. How does access to youth services vary across metropolitan Sydney?

Access to youth programs and services can vary significantly between communities. Some areas benefit from a wide range of youth centres, mentoring programs and community initiatives, while others have limited options available locally. Understanding these regional differences can help identify areas where additional investment is required to ensure that young people have access to early intervention programs and support services.

2. Are rapidly growing suburbs receiving sufficient investment in youth infrastructure and early intervention programs?

Many outer metropolitan suburbs have experienced rapid population growth in recent years, particularly in Western Sydney. However, youth services and community infrastructure have not always expanded at the same pace as housing development. The inquiry should consider whether existing planning and funding mechanisms adequately provide youth infrastructure in growth areas.

3. How can urban planning and infrastructure policy support preventative youth justice outcomes?

The design of neighbourhoods can influence social participation and community safety. Communities with accessible public transport, safe public spaces, parks and community hubs provide environments where young people can gather and engage in positive activities. Planning and infrastructure policies should consider how built environments support youth wellbeing and reduce the risk of social isolation or disengagement.

4. What role can community hubs and youth centres play in reducing youth disengagement?

Community hubs and youth centres provide important spaces where young people can access mentoring, recreational activities and informal support networks. These environments can help young people remain connected to their communities and reduce the likelihood of disengagement from education or employment pathways. The inquiry should consider how these facilities can be strengthened as part of broader prevention strategies.

5. How can employment and training pathways be strengthened for young people in outer metropolitan communities?

Access to employment opportunities is a key protective factor for young people. In many outer metropolitan areas, young people face longer travel times to employment and fewer entry-level job opportunities. Strengthening vocational training, apprenticeships and youth employment programs can help young people remain connected to positive pathways and reduce the risk of involvement in the justice system.

Recommendations

GWSAN recommends that the NSW Government consider the following measures:

1. Increase investment in youth-focused community infrastructure

Rapidly growing regions such as Greater Western Sydney require additional youth hubs, community centres and recreational facilities to support a growing population of young people. Accessible youth infrastructure provides safe environments where young people can gather outside of school and home, participate in recreational activities and connect with mentoring or support services. Investment in these spaces should be prioritised in high-growth suburbs where population growth has outpaced the provision of community facilities.

2. Expand place-based early intervention programs

Early intervention programs that support young people before they enter the justice system are among the most effective ways to reduce youth offending. Programs that provide mentoring, leadership development, sport and recreation activities, and employment pathways can help young people remain connected to education and their communities. Expanding these programs in communities experiencing disadvantage or rapid growth would strengthen prevention efforts and reduce the likelihood of young people becoming involved in the justice system.

3. Integrate youth wellbeing into planning and infrastructure policy

Urban planning and infrastructure decisions influence the environments in which young people grow up. Neighbourhoods that provide walkable streets, accessible parks, safe public spaces and reliable public transport support social participation and community engagement. Planning frameworks should consider how the design of communities supports young people's wellbeing and access to opportunity, particularly in newly developed growth areas.

4. Improve regional data on youth opportunity

Improved data on the distribution of youth services, infrastructure and employment opportunities would support more effective policy responses. Mapping where youth services, community facilities and education pathways are located would allow governments to identify gaps and prioritise investment where it is most needed. Better data can also help evaluate whether current programs are reaching the communities with the highest levels of disadvantage.

5. Develop a Western Sydney Youth Opportunity Index

GWSAN proposes the development of a Western Sydney Youth Opportunity Index to measure and map access to opportunity for young people across the region. The index could assess factors such as access to youth services, proximity to education and training institutions, public transport connectivity and youth employment opportunities. This framework would allow policymakers to identify areas where young people face the greatest structural barriers and guide targeted investment in early intervention programs and community infrastructure.

Conclusion

Youth justice outcomes are shaped not only by the justice system itself but also by the environments in which young people grow up.

Early involvement with the youth justice system is also associated with an increased risk of later involvement in the adult criminal justice system, highlighting the importance of preventative strategies that support young people before they enter justice pathways.

Ensuring that young people in Greater Western Sydney have access to opportunity, community infrastructure and supportive environments is essential for reducing youth disengagement and strengthening community resilience.

Strategic investment in youth opportunity, early intervention programs and community infrastructure can help prevent young people from entering the justice system and support positive long-term outcomes.

Reducing youth justice involvement requires a whole-of-government approach that addresses not only justice system responses but also the broader social and environmental conditions that shape young people's lives.

The Greater Western Sydney Advocacy Network appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and would welcome further engagement with the Committee.

Warm Regards,
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