

Submission to the NSW Inquiry into

Youth Justice

13 March 2026
Final Submission

Introduction

NCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Youth Justice. This Inquiry gives us a vital platform to draw attention to the interconnected drivers of youth crime – poverty, housing insecurity, homelessness, domestic and family violence, and mental health – and make the case for a comprehensive response.

NCOSS maintains an ongoing dialogue with a broad range of service providers, community members and stakeholders to identify emerging issues and drive meaningful policy change for communities experiencing disadvantage. This submission builds on these discussions and NCOSS's previous submissions to the NSW Legislative Assembly Inquiries into Community Safety in Regional and Rural NSW (2024) and Adequacy of Youth Diversionary Programs (2018).

Key Findings

1. **The drivers of youth crime are complex**, it is fuelled by a web of personal, family, and social influences. To address this complexity, a holistic policy response is essential; one that examines and addresses root causes rather than over-relying on policing and justice system responses that target symptoms.
2. **Investment and reform will fail unless youth crime is addressed as a symptom of poverty and disadvantage.** Breaking cycles of incarceration requires direct action on the significant unmet needs of children and families— including access to safe and stable housing, mental health support, and robust domestic and family violence prevention and response.
3. **The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in detention and across the justice system is deeply alarming and demands urgent attention.** Any serious effort to address youth crime in NSW must include dedicated provisions for working alongside Aboriginal communities, with genuine space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making in the design and delivery of programs and services – consistent with the Government's obligations under the Closing the Gap Agreement.
4. **The non-government sector plays a critical role in diverting young people away from the justice system and in keeping communities safe.** These organisations deliver critical services across the full spectrum of community services— from early intervention and wrap-around supports to programs that help young people navigate the justice system. Greater investment in this sector is fundamental to addressing the drivers of youth crime and ensuring young people feel safe, supported, and connected to their communities.

Summary of Recommendations

UNDERLYING DRIVERS OF CHILDREN'S CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

1. In partnership with the Commonwealth Government, lead a community-wide commitment to eliminate child poverty, backed by standardised measures, targets and public reporting on progress.
2. Lifting Jobseeker and the Youth Allowance so that young people can afford essentials including housing, food, medical support, transport and education.
3. The NSW Government should partner with the community services sector to identify the current hubs service system. This mapping will ensure that investment in both new and existing hubs targets communities facing concentrated disadvantage.
4. Establish a program to fund dedicated linker roles in existing wellbeing hubs located in schools within areas of concentrated disadvantage.
5. Fund 15 new youth hubs across NSW, with a focus on communities experiencing significant disadvantage and at least 9 located in regional, rural and remote communities.
6. Invest in strengthening 10 existing youth hubs, including 4 located in regional, rural and remote communities.
7. Double the investment in early intervention and family preservation programs, prioritising funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
8. Develop a long-term plan to build towards 10% of all housing as social housing, prioritising investment in housing for groups that are particularly vulnerable to interactions with the youth justice system.
9. Increase baseline funding for Specialist Homelessness Services by 50%.
10. All First Responders and youth detention staff and officials should be equipped with mandatory initial and ongoing training and support that integrates disability-competency with trauma-informed, culturally safe, and gender-responsive practices.
11. Prioritise a 50% core funding increase for all specialist domestic and family violence services.
12. Increase investment in services for young people that provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support.
13. Increase investment in drug and alcohol support options for young people, particularly in regional areas, including intensive residential rehabilitation and

inpatient programs, counselling, therapeutic groups, and health education and information provision.

AVAILABILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF EVIDENCE-BASED AND COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES

14. Increase the investment, availability, scope, and capacity of existing, effective diversionary programs with positive evaluations to ensure young people have access to appropriate services, especially those living in regional and rural NSW.
15. Aboriginal-owned and controlled solutions must be a matter of first principle in working with Aboriginal young people and any increase in investment must prioritise Aboriginal young people and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
16. Introduce an evidence-based, data-informed funding model that is linked to demand indicators, population growth and demographics, economic and workforce conditions and the real cost of service provision for the sector, including a consistent, transparent, and evidence-based approach to indexation. Any such model must support Indigenous Data Sovereignty.
17. Invest in a regional workforce strategy: Design a targeted, whole-of-government approach to address significant workforce issues in regional NSW. This might include targeted incentives (e.g. key worker housing; better pay; and travel allowances) to attract and retain social sector workers.
18. Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to at least 14 years old without exception.

1(a): Underlying drivers of children's contact with the criminal justice system

Most young people who encounter the criminal justice system have experienced disadvantage or trauma. Research identifies several systemic factors linked to youth offending, including contact with the out-of-home care system, poor education attainment, Indigenous identity, early police contact, unsupported mental health or cognitive disability, problematic alcohol and drug use, homelessness or unstable housing, and socioeconomic disadvantage.¹

A report from the Victorian Youth Parole Board in 2025 found that of the 153 young people in custody:²ⁱ

- 61% had been subject to a child protection order;
- 63% had experienced abuse, trauma, or neglect as a child;
- 44% had experienced family violence;
- 58% had accessed mental health support in relation to their diagnosed mental illness;
- 27% had an active cognitive difficulty diagnosed or documented by a professional;
- 52% had a history of use or misuse of alcohol;
- 77% had a history of use or misuse of drugs (illicit or prescription).

NCOSS recognises that youth crime in NSW has many causes. We draw the Committee's attention to the role that child poverty plays in driving many of these causes, and the strong link between childhood poverty and involvement in the justice system.

Correlation between poverty and youth crime

Poverty plays a clear role in higher rates of youth crime in New South Wales. This is not to say that poverty is the key driver of youth crime; the relationship is more complex. Other factors such as cognitive stimulation, family context, and peer pressure also play significant roles in determining a child's likelihood of entering the justice system. However, even when controlling for these factors, US research indicates a persistent link between child poverty and delinquency.³

In Australia, children aged 10 to 17 from the lowest socioeconomic areas are about six times more likely to be under youth justice supervision compared to their peers from the highest

¹ McCausland, R., & Baldry, E. (2023) Who does Australia lock up? The social determinants of justice. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 12(3). As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.2504>

² Victoria Justice and Community Safety (2025) Youth Parole Board Annual report 2024-25. Accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://files.justice.vic.gov.au/2025-10/Youth%20Parole%20Board%20Annual%20Report%202024-25.pdf>

³ NCOSS and Impact Economics and Policy (2024) Lasting Impacts: The Economic Costs of Child Poverty in NSW. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via https://ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Cost-Child-Poverty-NSW_V8_WEB_SINGLES.pdf

socioeconomic areas.⁴ In NSW, poverty is more widespread in rural and regional NSW. The poverty rate for young people (15–24 years) is 25% higher in rural and regional NSW (15.1%) compared to Greater Sydney (12.1%). It increased from 2016 (13.8%) to be the highest poverty rate of all age groups in rural and regional NSW.⁵

A key issue is the connection between poverty and the rate of child neglect. For instance, an increase of 1,000 additional poor families is associated with 141 more juveniles involved in crime, assuming other factors remain constant.⁶

Intergenerational effects also contribute to this cycle of disadvantage, with a quarter of Australian prison entrants reporting that they had at least one incarcerated parent or caregiver during childhood. Moreover, prison entrants aged 18–24 are three times more likely to have a family history of incarceration compared to those aged over 45.⁷ For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, incarceration rates are often a reflection of intergenerational and ongoing trauma and stressors that have affected their parents, families, and communities.

Recommendations:

1. In partnership with the Commonwealth Government, lead a community-wide commitment to eliminate child poverty, backed by standardised measures, targets and public reporting on progress.
2. Lifting Jobseeker and the Youth Allowance so that young people can afford essentials including housing, food, medical support, and education.

School disengagement and educational exclusion

Young people and families with the greatest need for support are the least likely to access services, receive support or have the social networks to overcome their challenges.⁸ The fragmented, inflexible and hard-to-navigate service system prevents access, compounding

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing (2025), *Youth justice*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. As accessed on 11 March via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/youth-justice>

⁵ Vidyattama, Y., Brown, L., Tanton, R., and NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS). (2023), *Mapping Economic Disadvantage in New South Wales, 2021*. NATSEM, Faculty of Business, Government and Law, University of Canberra. Report Commissioned by NCOSS. As accessed on 11 March via <https://ncoss.org.au/areas-of-work/publications/mapping-economic-disadvantage-in-nsw-report-2023/>

⁶ Weatherburn, D. and Lind, B. (1997), *Social and economic stress, child neglect and juvenile delinquency*. *NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research*. As accessed on 11 March via <https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/17-95-6.pdf>

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022), *The health of people in Australia's prisons*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/prisoners/the-health-of-people-in-australias-prisons-2022/contents/summary>

⁸ Youth Action (2025) *From Fragmented to Coordinated: Building stronger systems for young people through youth hubs*. Accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://youthaction.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Youth-Action-Fragmented-to-Coordinated.pdf>

existing disadvantage and perpetuating cycles of vulnerability. For young people, navigating these systems can be overwhelming, particularly for those experiencing mental health challenges, disconnection from education, housing insecurity, economic inequities and exposure to the justice system.

The scale of this challenge is significant. In 2024, the percentage of children from a low socio-economic background and who were not developmentally on track in at least one of the five domains was 58.8%, disproportionately affecting First Nations children (66.1%).⁹ The health and social supports these children need mostly exist, but they are difficult to access. When children enter school already behind, and their families cannot navigate the system to access help, disengagement follows.

School-based hubs

School-based hubs, like the NCOSS School Gateway Project and the hub at Narromine High School (see below) demonstrate how embedding services within familiar, trusted school environments removes barriers to access and creates a platform for integrated support. When families feel welcomed rather than processed, the results are tangible: stronger parental involvement in children's learning, improved wellbeing, and critically, earlier intervention before crises escalate.

Youth hubs

Youth hubs offer a parallel solution beyond the classroom. As a central 'third place' in the community, they give young people access to trusted, professionally qualified youth workers and meaningful peer connections, support that schools alone cannot always provide as adolescents navigate greater independence. By strengthening social cohesion and empowering young people as active, valued community members, youth hubs address the distinct needs of this cohort at precisely the age when disengagement and risk behaviours are most likely to emerge.

The case for investment

The economic case is equally compelling. The Mitchell Institute found that full-service schools integrating education, health, and social supports deliver substantial benefits, with USA cost-benefit studies showing returns up to \$23 in social and economic value per dollar invested.¹⁰

Investing in integrated wellbeing hubs in schools and youth hub settings provides an essential framework for implementing current national and state reforms including Thriving Kids. These hubs offer young people and families a single point of access to holistic support,

⁹ Australian Early Development Census (2025) AEDC National Report. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/aedc-national-report-2024_da7-409a37b9d-95ce-43e7-af00-51aa604cf0b3.pdf?sfvrsn=b56015ba_1

¹⁰ The Mitchell Institute (2025) Achieving Better and Fairer Schools: the case for full-service school models in Australia. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/research-focus-areas/schooling/achieving-better-fairer-schools-the-case-for-full-service-school-models-in-australia>

reducing barriers to accessing early intervention and education engagement and ensuring reforms translate into meaningful outcomes for children. When these hubs have 'Linker' roles that work across programs and supports, children and their families get more support to overcome barriers to get support at the right time. School hub-based Linker roles also give community service providers a valuable direct access point to work with children within an education setting, a barrier of access that has been expressed by providers to NCOSS.

Research has demonstrated that hubs with a dedicated, funded linker compared to those that do not have this role provided on average 22 times more value in partnered services.¹¹ By investing in dedicated linker roles, Governments can increase the impact of the Building Early Education Fund (BEEF) by ensuring the most vulnerable children receive support when they need it most and before disengagement and risky behaviours take hold.

NCOSS is aware of a growing network of schools who have turned to this way of working, or who are keen to explore integration. However, knowledge and awareness of how many hubs and where they are in NSW is informal and not coordinated. This knowledge gap presents a significant barrier to strategic investment. Before any further investment can be made in either supporting existing hubs and investing in new ones, the NSW Government should partner with the sector to map this service system and identify any critical gaps.

Breaking through the silos: Narromine High School

Narromine may only be 40 kilometres outside of Dubbo, but its young people face significant barriers in accessing health, development and social services support in a timely and affordable way. As a result, they often go undiagnosed for critical conditions, which in turn impacts their overall well-being and education outcomes.

To assist with overcoming these challenges, Narromine High School established a school-based hub in 2019, offering students access to a general practitioner, speech and occupational therapists, a psychologist, as well as hearing and dental check-ups. The hub ensures that students receive timely, tailored, and ongoing care without major disruption to their lives.

The results have been transformative. In the year following its introduction, the High School Certificate completion rate rose to 74%. By 2023, that number had reached 100%, with over a third of students also completing a vocational education and training course. The hub has also had a profound impact on student health, with over 300 GP appointments conducted in 2023, including 93 Indigenous students receiving a comprehensive health check to assess chronic illness risks.¹²

¹¹ Social Ventures Australia (2025) From vision to viability: Funding requirements for effective Early Childhood Hubs. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Funding-requirements-for-effective-Early-Childhood-Hubs-1.pdf>

¹² ABC News (2024) Narromine High School's social wellbeing hub gets a big tick from NSW students, families. As accessed on 12 March 2025 via <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-30/narromine-social-wellbeing-hub-popular-with-students-families/104576414>

By integrating healthcare and community services into the school environment, the hub has not only improved academic success but also empowered young people to take charge of their health, setting them up for a stronger future.

Recommendations:

3. The NSW Government should partner with the community services sector to identify the current hubs service system. This mapping will ensure that investment in both new and existing hubs targets communities facing concentrated disadvantage.
4. Establish a program to fund dedicated linker roles in existing wellbeing hubs located in schools within areas of concentrated disadvantage.
5. Fund 15 new youth hubs across NSW, with a focus on communities experiencing significant disadvantage and at least 9 located in regional, rural and remote communities.
6. Invest in strengthening 10 existing youth hubs, including 4 in regional, rural and remote communities. This additional funding will empower services to engage more staff or specialists, bolster programs, increase hours of availability or explore other opportunities to upgrade service delivery to meet the growing needs of their communities.

Engagement with the child protection system

Young people who have contact with the child protection system are significantly more likely to enter the criminal justice system. More than half of young people (53%) aged 10 and over who were under youth justice supervision during 2020–21 had received a child protection service in the 5 years from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.¹³ Of those aged 10 at their first youth justice supervision, just over 4 in 5 (81%) had an interaction with the child protection system at some stage in the 5-year period from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021. The likelihood of involvement with the child protection system fell steadily as the age of a young person's first supervision rose.

The NSW Child Protection system continues to be crisis-oriented, making it hard for families to connect with the right support early on. Recently, the NSW Ombudsman found that more than two thirds of the Risk of Significant Harm reports received by the Department of Communities

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) *Young people under youth justice supervision and their interaction with the child protection system 2020–21*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/young-people-under-youth-justice-supervision/summary>

and Justice were closed due to no capacity to allocate them to a caseworker.¹⁴ Further, the number of Aboriginal children entering Out of Home Care is the highest it has been in the last decade, despite 40% of those entering care only being the subject of one or no risk of harm reports.¹⁵ Aboriginal children are 9.6 times more likely to be taken from the care of their families compared with non-Aboriginal children.¹⁶

This provides clear evidence that greater investment in prevention, early intervention and family preservation is required to provide timely support and prevent outcomes from worsening – particularly for already disadvantaged children. Investing in these services significantly benefits child and family well-being by reducing exposure to risk factors such as abuse, neglect, family and domestic violence, and poverty, and thus lowering the risk of offending in the first place. It can also reduce crime at a population level by as much as 31% and reduce offending among at-risk populations by 50%.¹⁷ The needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must be prioritised within this, and services must ensure that they provide culturally safe programs.

Recommendation:

7. Double the investment in early intervention and family preservation, prioritising funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Housing and housing instability

When young people lack stable housing, they are exposed to environments that significantly elevate the risk of contact with the justice system. Housing instability in Australia is growing.

People experiencing homelessness, and those at risk of homelessness, are among Australia's most socially and economically disadvantaged. Nearly a quarter of homeless people are young people from 12 to 24 years of age.¹⁸ Furthermore, almost 15% of young people under

¹⁴ NSW Ombudsman (2026) "No capacity to allocate" – The Department of Communities and Justice's practice of closing ROSH (Risk of Significant Harm) reports. As accessed on 20 February 2026 via

<https://cmsassets.ombo.nsw.gov.au/assets/Reports/No-capacity-to-allocate-DCJs-practice-of-closing-ROSH-reports.pdf>

¹⁵ Newton, B.J. (29 November 2022) *Building the evidence: Restoration from Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal Children and Families DCJ Lunch & Learn*. UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

¹⁶ SNAICC (2025) Family Matters Report 2025. As accessed on 20 February 2026 via <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Family-Matters-Report-2025-v3.pdf>

¹⁷ Justice Reform Initiative (2024) Alternatives to incarceration in New South Wales. As accessed on 11 March via https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/337/attachments/original/1710872157/JRI_Alternatives_Report_NSW_FULL_49_.pdf?1710872157

¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) *Youth experiencing homelessness, Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021*. As accessed on 11 March via <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/2021#youth-experiencing-homelessness>

juvenile justice supervision had received homelessness support in the year before their most recent supervision and 8% received support in the year after their most recent supervision.¹⁹ A national study found that half of adults experiencing homelessness first became homeless before the age of 18, and three-quarters before the age of 25 (Melbourne Institute, Journeys Home Research Report). Without a safe place to sleep, store belongings, or access support, young people become more vulnerable to exploitation, offending behaviour, and recidivism – making housing instability one of the strongest structural predictors of youth crime. Crisis accommodation without a pathway to stability does not interrupt this cycle; it merely delays it.

The consequences of failing to invest across the full continuum of youth homelessness support – from early intervention and prevention through to long-term tenancies – are felt acutely across health, justice, education, and social services. The Housing First for Youth model recognises that young people have distinct developmental needs requiring flexible, wrap-around supports to successfully transition to adulthood (Housing First Europe, 2022). Early intervention programs that keep young people safely housed within their family or community reduce the need for crisis responses and, critically, reduce downstream justice involvement. Sustained investment across the housing continuum therefore delivers not only long-term economic savings, but meaningful reductions in youth crime by addressing one of its most fundamental root causes before it takes hold.

Affordable and secure housing that meets the needs of its resident/s, is a key element of social support that contributes to the mental and physical wellbeing of people. It allows them to participate fully in all that life has to offer – including education, employment, and social connection. The NSW Government has a critical role to play in the provision of social and affordable housing. As a first step, the NSW Government should provide long-term housing for groups who are particularly vulnerable to interact with the youth justice system. These groups include women and children escaping domestic violence, young people, people with a disability, and First Nations communities.

Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) agencies receive government funding to assist people experiencing, and at risk of, homelessness. The services are aimed at prevention, early intervention, crisis, and post-crisis assistance, and include accommodation-related services and personal services. In 2024-25, 3 in 10 people presenting to SHS agencies were aged under 18.²⁰ Demand consistently outstrips supply, leaving many unable to access the support they need.²¹ Furthermore, approximately 40% of clients of SHS present with complex needs,

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) *Children and young people at risk of social exclusion: links between homelessness, child protection and juvenile justice*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/children-and-young-people-at-risk-of-social-exclus/summary>

²⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024-25*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-services-and-outcomes>

²¹ Homelessness NSW (2022) *Submission to the Productivity Commission Review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement 2022*. As accessed on 11 March via <https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/our-work/submissions/page/3/>

including mental health issues and/or alcohol and other drugs (AOD) use.²² While there are some programs that address these challenges by combining stable, long-term housing with wraparound support for as long as it is needed, these programs are inconsistently spread throughout NSW and not accessible to everyone. Increasing availability and accessibility to these programs will ensure more young people and families can deal with the ongoing impacts of trauma, mental and physical health issues, and/or addiction, and attain the stability they need to maintain a tenancy and improve their quality of life.

Recommendations:

8. Develop a long-term plan to build towards 10% of all housing as social housing, prioritising investment in housing for groups that are particularly vulnerable to interactions with the youth justice system – women and children escaping domestic violence, young people, people with a disability and First Nations communities.
9. Increase baseline funding for Specialist Homelessness Services by 50%, so services can meet demand and deliver both preventative interventions and crisis support.

Disability, mental health, and Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) issues

Young people with a disability are significantly over-represented at every stage of Australia's criminal justice system. Those who are from a First Nations background face disproportionately high contact with the justice system, from their first encounter with police through to detention. Often these young people fall through the cracks and are set onto a harmful trajectory because of early misidentification which then impacts their ability to get the right supports. Ensuring that training opportunities for First Responders are strengthened, so that they have the knowledge and resources to respond sympathetically and appropriately to young people with disability, can have an impact on a young person's involvement in the criminal justice system.²³ Additionally, ensuring all materials relating to criminal procedures are accessible, easy to read, and written in plain language, will ensure that young people with disability can understand what is happening to them and meaningfully participate in the process.

Young people aged 16–24 have the highest prevalence of poor mental health, according to 2019 data, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more than twice as likely to

²² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024–25*. Ibid.

²³ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2023). Final report: Volume 8, Criminal justice and people with disability. Accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/Final%20Report%20-%20Volume%208%2C%20Criminal%20justice%20and%20people%20with%20disability.pdf>

experience a mental health condition.²⁴ Poor mental health can significantly limit young people's ability to live fulfilling and productive lives. While having a mental health condition does not make a young person more likely to commit a crime, people who do engage in criminal behaviour are disproportionately likely to experience mental health issues, which is evident in the over-representation of people with mental health conditions in NSW prisons.²⁵

Despite this, young people continue to face serious barriers to accessing mental health support, particularly in regional and rural NSW. Member organisations regularly report waitlists for specialist services – including paediatricians, child and adolescent mental health services, and psychologists – stretching into years.²⁶ These prolonged waits can cause a young person's situation to deteriorate and increase the likelihood of engagement in risky behaviours. Compounding the waitlist problem, private mental health treatment is often unaffordable, and youth-friendly, culturally safe services remain scarce outside metropolitan areas.²⁷

Substance use issues, especially when combined with mental health disorders, can heighten the risk of crime, particularly violent crimes.²⁸ A significant number of young people involved in the criminal justice system or supported by diversionary programs have a history of drug and alcohol dependencies.²⁹ Investment in post-release support programs targeting problematic alcohol and other drug use and complex needs has shown meaningful results: two years after referral, participants recorded a 65.8% reduction in days in custody, a 62.6% reduction in new custody episodes, and a 62.1% reduction in proven offences.³⁰

²⁴ Impact Economics and Policy (2022) *Aftershock – Addressing the social and economic costs of the pandemic and natural disasters. Report One – Mental Health*. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://ncoss.org.au/areas-of-work/publications/aftershock-addressing-the-economic-and-social-costs-of-the-pandemic-and-natural-disasters-report-series/>

²⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) *Ibid.*

²⁶ NSW Health (2023) *NSW Regional Health Strategic Plan 2022–2032*. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/regional/Publications/regional-health-strategic-plan.pdf>

²⁷ Youth Action (2023) *Youth Action NSW Election Platform: What matters to young people in the 2023 election*. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via https://youthaction.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Youth_Action_NSW_Election_Platform.pdf

²⁸ Pickard, H., & Fazel, S. (2013). Substance abuse as a risk factor for violence in mental illness: some implications for forensic psychiatric practice and clinical ethics. *Current opinion in psychiatry*, 26(4), 349–354. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://doi.org/10.1097/YCO.0b013e328361e798>

²⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) *Overlap between youth justice supervision and alcohol and other drug treatment services: 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2016*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. As accessed on 11 March 2026 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/overlap-youth-justice-supervision-and-aodts/summary>

³⁰ Justice Reform Initiative (2024) *Ibid.*

These programs – which include intensive residential rehabilitation, inpatient care, counselling, therapeutic groups, and health education – have real potential to break cycles of dependency and help young people build lives beyond substance misuse. Critically, they must be delivered in culturally safe environments that genuinely empower young people throughout their recovery.

Recommendations:

10. All First Responders and youth detention staff and officials should be equipped with mandatory initial and ongoing training and support that integrates disability-competency with trauma-informed, culturally safe, and gender-responsive practices.
11. Prioritise a 50% core funding increase for all specialist domestic and family violence services.
12. Increase investment in services for young people that provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support.
13. Increase investment in drug and alcohol support options for young people, particularly in regional areas, including intensive residential rehabilitation and inpatient programs, counselling, therapeutic groups, and health education and information provision.

1(b): Availability, effectiveness, and evaluation of evidence-based and community-led responses that prevent offending and reoffending

Support services targeted at at-risk children and families, particularly in regional and remote areas

Community-level investment is essential to addressing the drivers and impacts of poverty, ensuring equitable access to health, housing, education, support services and employment opportunities for all young people. It is important to recognise the systemic issues that contribute to poverty and disadvantage, such as racism, discrimination, and intergenerational trauma.

The NSW Government must ensure that critical social infrastructure is available for young people in regional and remote NSW. This includes the buildings, spaces, services, and networks that support the quality of life and wellbeing of our communities. It is vital that

individuals and families can access the services they need, when they need it, and before they hit crisis point. Our member organisations regularly report the significant challenges they face in terms of accessing specialist services for young people they work with across the regions.

Centralisation of services

For regional and rural communities in particular, the centralisation of services in regional hubs has made it more difficult for rural and remote communities to engage with support in a timely and culturally sensitive manner. The availability and affordability of transport can impact a young person's ability to receive the health care they need. When some specialist services become available for rural communities in NSW, through outreach programs, often the frequency is not enough to assist the young person in a timely manner. Additionally, services report that while the introduction of more online services can be beneficial for these communities, young people already present challenges in relation to engagement and therefore in-person appointments can create a sense of connection and improve accountability in attending the appointments.

Services gaps

During NCOSS member consultations over the last two years in Far West NSW, participants stressed the need to map services in the region to gain a better understanding of what is being provided and at what stages of a young person's life. Consultations revealed that early intervention is critical. Services reported that it has been challenging to engage with the young people that currently need their services the most and so there is a need to be working with children as young as 7 years old to curb exposure to risky behaviours earlier. Funding constraints currently limit services to working with older cohorts, mainly from 10 years and older. There is also a notable gap in programs specifically for young girls in regional NSW. This fragmentation impacts young people's ability to access services as well as the capacity of the services themselves to coordinate their efforts for the greatest benefit.

Coordination challenges are compounded by a number of systemic barriers. Many services are not funded to operate outside of 9am–5pm, limiting their ability to reach young people at the times they are most at risk. Where services are funded to provide outreach to remote towns, this funding remains insufficient to meet this need.

Workforce sustainability poses an additional and significant challenge. There is little attraction for workers to relocate to or remain in regional NSW, given limited professional growth and opportunity, and organisations are not funded adequately to train new staff or provide spaces and opportunities for collaboration. When workers leave, they take their families with them, creating a brain drain that further erodes the capacity of already stretched services. Addressing these compounding pressures requires not only better service mapping and coordination, but sustained investment in the regional workforce and funding models that reflect the realities of delivering services outside metropolitan areas.

Raising the Age of criminal responsibility

This lack of access and availability of services is particularly felt by those children that have early contact with the criminal justice system. Children as young as 10 are locked up instead of being given the support they need to overcome the challenges they face from deep, systemic disadvantage.³¹ Raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years gives these children an opportunity to build a brighter future.

Criminalising children at a young age does not deter crime; instead, it initiates a cycle of disadvantage and trauma that frequently leads to adult incarceration and permanent social marginalisation. Connecting children – especially First Nations children – to effective community-based supports will avoid behaviour that leads to contact with law and justice systems or can support them during or after any experiences they have with the system.

There is a suite of programs offered that range from diversion and sentencing alternatives, in-prison programs to post-release support. These programs need to be strengthened with increased funding alongside building the workforce capacity to provide specialist culturally safe, trauma-informed, and evidence-based services to these young people.

³¹ Justice Reform Initiative (2021) Ibid.

Recommendations:

14. Increase the investment, availability, scope, and capacity of existing, effective diversionary programs with positive evaluations to ensure young people have access to appropriate services, especially those living in regional and rural NSW.
15. Aboriginal-owned and controlled solutions must be a matter of first principle in working with Aboriginal young people and any increase in investment must prioritise Aboriginal young people and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
16. Introduce an evidence-based, data-informed funding model that is linked to demand indicators, population growth and demographics, economic and workforce conditions and the real cost of service provision for the sector, including a consistent, transparent, and evidence-based approach to indexation. Any such model must support Indigenous Data Sovereignty.
17. Invest in a regional workforce strategy: Design a targeted, whole-of-government approach to address significant workforce issues in regional NSW. This might include targeted incentives (e.g. key worker housing; better pay; and travel allowances) to attract and retain social sector workers.
18. Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to at least 14 years old without exception.

1(d)(ii): Cost of incarceration and the broader fiscal impact of the youth justice system

NCOSS and Impact Economics and Policy³² estimate that the overall economic cost of child poverty in New South Wales is close to \$60 billion a year and demands urgent attention. Of this, the total crime-related costs attributable to child poverty reach as high as \$855 million per year across the state. The NSW Government alone spends \$221 million annually through the legal system responding to poverty-driven crime – \$61 million on the youth justice system covering courts, statutory agencies, community supervision, detention, and group conferencing, and a further \$160 million on policing offences committed by children. These figures represent not just fiscal waste, but a systemic failure to intervene before children ever enter the justice system.

³² NCOSS and Impact Economics and Policy (2024) *ibid.*

The long-term costs are even more damning. An additional \$247 million per year is spent incarcerating adults who were first incarcerated as children — a direct pipeline from childhood poverty to adult criminality that the current system does nothing to break. The disproportionately high cost of adult incarceration reflects years of repeat offending and re-imprisonment stretching across entire lifetimes. Beyond legal system expenditure, child poverty also inflicts serious costs on crime victims and devastates the long-term labour market outcomes of those caught up in the justice system. Every dollar not invested in eliminating child poverty today is being paid back many times over in courts, cells, and lost economic potential.

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) is the peak body for non-government organisations in the health and community services sector in NSW. NCOSS works to progress social justice and shape positive change toward a NSW free from inequality and disadvantage. We are an independent voice advocating for the wellbeing of NSW communities. At NCOSS, we believe that a diverse, well-resourced and knowledgeable social service sector is fundamental to reducing economic and social inequality.

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Acknowledgement of Country

NCOSS respectfully acknowledges the sovereign Custodians of Gadigal Country and pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the rich cultures, customs and continued survival of First Nations peoples on Gadigal Country, and on the many diverse First Nations lands and waters across NSW.

We acknowledge the spirit of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and accept the invitation to walk with First Nations peoples in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

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