



Moderator

Rev Andrew Gunton

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Youth Justice Statement

The Uniting Church Queensland Synod is concerned about media reporting on the issue of youth justice and the political responses to this issue. We recognise that there are significant community concerns related to youth crime and acknowledge the recent tragic loss of life of innocent people and the grief of all those affected. We share the concern for a society where criminal activity, especially by young people, is reduced and promote a vision of society of where all people may flourish and live without fear.

The issues of youth justice are immensely complicated. Although we understand the desire for a quick solution to this problem, for a long lasting solution there needs to be a robust evidence-base in consultation with stakeholders who have the experience and expertise to inform appropriate responses. This includes the need to address the often complex issues involved in why children and young people offend. Addressing and reducing crimes committed by young people involves focusing on young people's engagement with education, training and employment, and providing support for housing. Disability, mental health concerns, the impact of being in the statutory child protection system and the impact of trauma also require assessment and the provision of support.

The Uniting Church in Queensland, through its agencies UnitingCare and Wesley Mission Queensland, is involved in the provision of support services to young people and families. The services provided by our agencies to Queensland families and young people coming into contact with police and the courts provides insight into drivers of offending by children and young people, and what works in practice with families, children and young people. Many children and young people who come into contact with the police and courts have family backgrounds that include:

- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Mental Health
- Domestic and Family Violence
- Intergenerational Trauma, Family Dynamics and Attachment
- Neglect and Abuse
- Limited access to social housing
- Poor education



- Limited employment opportunities
- Lack of social/family support and poor connection with community

Within the Family Intervention space we are seeing higher rates of children being excluded from school or placed on reduced hours from as early as prep. Education Queensland data shows more than 1500 prep students, aged 5, were suspended in 2019 compared with 572 in 2013¹. We recognise that teachers are not equipped and/or adequately resourced to manage the trauma based behaviours of the children and young people and that more support is needed to enable children to fully engage in school.

What works

Children and families should be given every opportunity to grow and flourish and we should provide targeted interventions that reduce socio-economic disadvantage and improve outcomes in early childhood development. Intervention needs to be targeted at multiple levels. We need to intervene early and provide support to families who are at risk to ensure their health, wellbeing, safety and education needs are met, as well as providing more targeted, tailored and flexible supports for parents, children and families with more complex needs. There is strong evidence to support that investing in early prevention and intervention provides significant long term economic benefits.

We know that being connected with community and culture provides us with a sense of belonging and is linked with improved mental health and wellbeing. Children and young people need to feel socially connected and should have the opportunity to be involved in community sports, extra-curricular activities, community groups, etc.

We need to do things differently if we want to change the trajectory. We can do this by investing in strengthening services, reducing waitlist times for programs, making service delivery more flexible and offering education in a way that engages at-risk youth. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, extensive consultation and engagement should be sought, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led organisations guiding the way for local initiatives.

Conclusion

If we are able to address family issues at an early stage and provide therapeutic support for children, connect them with healthy community activities and engagement, then we have a better chance at reducing youth offending through early intervention. If we shift into a more punitive, shame based approach, it is likely that the criminal behaviour will become more entrenched. Alternatives to

¹ Lynch, L. (2020). Queensland schools with most student suspensions revealed. Accessed on 21/02/21 at <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/queensland-schools-with-most-student-suspensions-revealed-20200818-p55mt5.html>.



managing offending by children and young people which are evidence-based and already implemented in Queensland should be expanded, such as restorative justice conferencing, diversionary schemes, local community-led initiatives, and supervised community accommodation.

There is certainly a need for boundaries around and consequences for anti-social behaviour however these consequences need to be embedded in a trauma informed justice system that is dedicated to breaking cycles of violence, addiction and socio-economic disadvantage rather than entrenching the disadvantage by stigmatising individuals or further marginalising at-risk youth. This will reduce the likelihood of the tragic loss of life that we have seen recently in Queensland.

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