



Youth Justice Forum 2015

Summary and Recommendations

Summary

The Youth Justice Forum was a joint collaboration between the Queensland Chapter of Restorative Practices International and Griffith University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, to help promote a collaborative approach amongst agencies working with young people who are at risk of, or are entering the Youth Justice system.

Chaired by Mr Leigh Garrett, Chair of Restorative Practices International (RPI), the Forum was held at the Ship Inn Brisbane, a campus of Griffith University, on the 15 July 2015. Attendees were invited from Universities, Justice, Courts, Police, Education and Victim Support. The Forum was opened by the Honourable Yvette D'Ath, Attorney General for Queensland, and addressed by three keynote speakers, Judge Andrew Becroft - Principal Youth Court Judge New Zealand, Mr Rob Hulls - former Attorney-General Victoria, and now Director of the Centre for Innovative Justice at RMIT, and Professor Pamela Snow – Head of School of Rural Health, La Trobe University.

The format of the day was to have each keynote presentation followed by a 40-45 minute "dialogue session", where delegates reflected upon and discussed the content of each of the keynotes. The day concluded with a panel session, which included Judge Andrew Becroft, Professor Pamela Snow, Judge Michael Shanahan (President of the Children's Court), Mr Sean Harvey (Assistant Director General, Youth Justice), Mr Bevan Brennan (Deputy Director General, Education Queensland Operations) and Ms Christine Handy (Mater Family and Youth Counselling Service).

Participants were organised into focus groups representing Academics, Justice, Police, Education, Courts, Youth Justice Conferencing, and Victim Assist groups.

Feedback was collected from delegates at the end of each session and at the conclusion of the Panel session, focusing on the following question:

What would be the critical elements of a world class Youth Justice System?

The responses from each sector have been collated under the following headings.

1. Principled approach

Forum participants agreed that responses to youthful antisocial and offending behaviour should address the needs of young people, as well as the victims of youthful crime. Participants noted in particular the following:

- That the principles regarding youth justice are focused on care and protection and operate in a timely manner.
- That anyone presenting to the youth justice system is seen as a community responsibility.
- Ensure that the child/young person is the centre of any approach and their needs are addressed in a holistic manner.

Recommendation:

- That policy and practice decisions regarding young people involved in youth justice are made based on evidence and research regarding best practice irrespective of ideology.
- That victims are afforded the opportunity to participate in the process and have their needs addressed in all matters of youth justice.

2. Structures and Processes

Forum participants commented on the need for a better “system response” to youthful offending and antisocial behaviour. These included not only police and court responses, but also community responses.

- System and resource restrictions should be minimised – for example, police confidence and participation in restorative justice responses to youthful offending should be encouraged.
- There is a consistent application of sentencing for young offenders.
- Court outcome is not the final outcome – the needs and issues of the young person and victim continue to be addressed beyond a court decision.
- There is an equal and relevant distribution of resources across the state.
- Flexible timeframes to allow for appropriate engagement with communities.
- Area/community-specific models to recognise the specific needs of each community. Local communities are drivers for systemic change.

Recommendation:

- Implementation of a specialist youth court with appropriate training and expertise for all those professionals who deal with youth offending.

3. Policy Framework and Legislative Basis

Forum participants agreed that youth justice policy and legislation should focus on constructive responses to youthful antisocial and offending behaviour. The following comments were offered:

- Policy and legislation must work within the parameters of United Nations standards and be based on evidence about what works and what doesn't work.

- Detention should be kept as a last resort.
- Policy should encourage a practice of limiting arrests and a focus on using specialist police who are trained and supported by procedures to intercede in the least intrusive manner.
- Policy needs to reflect that a court outcome is not a final process, the needs and issues of the Young Person and victim persist beyond a court decision.

Recommendation:

- Young people not be placed in adult jails on remand.
- That young people under the age of eighteen are not transferred to adult prisons.
- Remove/limit legislative provisions that prescribe disciplinary actions in schools, especially those that lead to suspension and exclusion particularly in the case of out-of-school incidents. (As school engagement is one of the protective factors that prevent young people from entering the youth justice system).
- Provide for youth-specific courts that are consistent in practice across the state.
- Provide a specialised police unit to deal with young people who offend, and the victims of those offences.
- Schools implement school wide restorative practices, which are known to lead to reductions in school suspensions and exclusions and subsequently provide diversionary and early intervention responses to youth offending.

4. Standards of Practice

Forum participants commented that responses to youth offending in schools and the community should address the needs of young people and victims.

- That schools be held accountable for the concerning rate of suspensions and exclusions and consider more constructive options that aim to reduce the use of punitive responses to antisocial behaviour.
- The development of inclusive practices that focus on connectedness and belonging.
- Training for support people to work in strategic positions such as schools in order to target interventions.
- Development of evidence-based assessment tools to support intervention across all agencies working with vulnerable youth.
- Staff are trained effectively and supported by procedures to respond in the most effective and efficient way needed.
- Transition experiences for young people are managed effectively.
- Responses reflect the cultural needs and requirements of the community.
- Restorative principles as a shared belief and practice within and across human services.

Recommendation:

- Provide training across all relevant sectors to promote consistency of practice and shared language and understanding.

5. Multi-Agency approaches

Forum participants noted the need for better integration and coordination between agencies that respond to the needs of young people and the victims of crime. These included the following:

- Development of effective models of reintegration to provide coordinated support and research based programs.
- The engagement of resources and agencies required to address the young persons' and victims' needs are focused on the individual

circumstances rather than the institution.

- Specialised police unit to deal with young people.
- Interagency connection – a 'wraparound' approach – that holds the young person, their family and victims at the centre of the process.

Recommendation:

- All agencies working with young people and victims – for example, education, youth justice, child protection, health etc collaborate with a whole of community approach.

6. Early Intervention

Finally, forum participants commented on the need for schools and other agencies to develop more effective approaches to responding earlier and more constructively to antisocial behaviour.

- Diversion opportunities are created at each stage of the process of working with vulnerable young people.
- There are incentives and benefits for schools to work with young people involved in the youth justice system and that schools realise their role in local community crime prevention and responding to vulnerable and at risk young people.
- Early intervention needs to be more broadly available – increased proactive activities and programs.
- Police focus on crime reduction/prevention; and this is modelled by community policing groups to create a safe approachable environment.

Recommendation:

- That schools (K-12) adopt a restorative/relational approach to discipline, to minimize the use of suspension and to promote the development of social and emotional competencies and a strong sense of community in learners.



Concluding Remarks

The 2015 Queensland Youth Justice Forum brought together a range of key government departments, academics and those agencies working with young people, families and victims in a positive and constructive dialogue around the future of youth justice in Queensland. Forum attendees actively engaged in a series of interactive and inter-agency dialogue sessions with sincere enthusiasm and a genuine interest in exploring innovative ways of responding to youthful offending and better meeting the needs of young people and the victims of crime.

As the organisers of the Forum it is our hope that this document will provide the stimulus needed to maintain the constructive dialogue among those working in policy, practice and research to move the Queensland's youth justice system to the international benchmark that it once was.

Our aim for the way forward is to hold a second Queensland Youth Justice Forum in mid-2016. The goal of this forum will be to reflect upon changes to youth justice in Queensland and to encourage continued conversations about the state of youth justice at all levels of government and across government, policy, practice and research.