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'We can't go shopping without police coming': north Queensland's at-risk youth feel excluded and heavily surveilled

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Youth crime in Australia has been the subject of sensationalist media coverage and growing community concern, particularly in north Queensland.

Read more: Why the media aren't helping to solve the 'youth crime crisis' they're reporting

We wanted to understand the experiences of young people in north Queensland who were involved in the juvenile justice system, or at imminent risk of becoming so, through their own eyes, and use the findings to improve local services.

We worked with a partner organisation that runs an after-hours diversionary service for young people 10-17 years old. This service supports those who are engaged in crime or are at high risk of doing so, by engaging them in activities such as educational sessions, sports, arts and craft, and outings to the park.

We found young people using this service often felt under heavy surveillance in public spaces, felt excluded from the community, and felt physically, emotionally and culturally unsafe on public streets.

These young people wanted to feel safe and included in the community, but often felt the opposite.

Diversion is better than harsher punishment

Evidence in countries including Australia, New Zealand and Canada has linked youth crime to troubled home environments, trauma, poverty, violence and disrupted education. But such young offenders also often experience marginalisation, over-surveillance, structural bias and racism.

In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in child protection services, and there's a damaging drift from child protection and out-of-home care into youth justice services.

Frustrated and fearful communities have often called for stronger punitive measures to deal with youth crime, but these are unhelpful in the longer term. Harsher punishment doesn't divert young people away from offending. Rather, it tends to lead to a pattern of reoffending (called recidivism).

Evidence suggests approaches that divert young people away from entering the justice system, and reengage and reintegrate offenders into the community, have greater success in reducing youth crime.

What we studied

We undertook three studies. First, we reviewed relevant national and international publications and reports that looked at perceptions of at risk children and youth about social services provided to them.

Next, we undertook a "photovoice" project, in which young people took photos that conveyed how they felt about culture, community and the services they accessed.

The Victorian Koori Youth Council's Report Ngaga-Dji in 2018 identified that children's voices can be the missing piece in meeting the needs of young people in the juvenile justice system.

Read more: Queensland's LNP wants a curfew for kids, but evidence suggests this won't reduce crime

In our third study, we gave young people the role of peer researchers, working with staff from the partner service and university researchers to document their own and their friends' experiences of using the local diversionary service and broader youth services.

The service aims to build young people's capacities. It helps support relationships between the young people and their families/carers, providing meals and overnight accommodation when they are in crisis.

The service also encourages them to resume their schooling, helps them feel included, supported, accepted, to have their say, and make positive choices about their lives. It encourages young people to come to the diversionary service in the evening instead of roaming the streets.

What young people at risk of offending told us

One young person involved in the photography project said:

Us kids can't go to shopping centres without, you know, police coming.

Another young person added:

They are too racist against the Black people.

Others wanted to feel included:

The community is not private; a community is for everyone.

Pointing to fears about being unsafe on the streets, one young person said the diversionary service staff "keep us safe from vigilantes".

Media reports suggest there's been growing vigilante behaviour in north Queensland. In one example, a vigilante group put up flyers in Mackay in May this year announcing plans to enforce their own 10pm curfew for children "due to the large number of unpunished break-ins and car thefts".

Fearing similar vigilantes, one participant in our study said:

They tried to throw me in a car but I ran away.

Read more: Diverting children away from the criminal justice system gives them a chance to 'grow out' of crime

Young people told us the diversionary service provided a safe, supportive space. Specifically talking about the staff, the young people recognised "how they support you" to "control [your] anger" and taught them to respect culture, themselves and others.

Another said that "no-one can grab us off the streets" at the diversionary service.

Pointing to life circumstances sometimes overwhelming them, one young person added:

you can't always keep the grief to yourself, you can talk to an adult.

These findings provide a unique view of youth offending through the eyes of young people, which can contribute to improving services that divert young people away from crime and can help to connect alienated young people with the community.

We acknowledge the vital work of the partner organisation and thank the staff and young people who participated in the research, including key partner researchers Nikkola Savuro and Sara O'Reilly.