

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Port Macquarie Hastings Council

Date Received: 30 May 2024

24 May 2024

Mr Edmund Atalla MP
Committee Chair
Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
submitted via the Parliamentary Inquiry website

Dr Mr Atalla,

Re: Parliamentary Submission on Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities

Port Macquarie Hastings Council appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission on a critical issue affecting regional and rural communities.

Community safety is a key aspect to quality of life. Regional and rural communities face unique challenges and opportunities that shape the landscape of community safety. In its Community Strategic Plan, Port Macquarie Hastings Council (PMHC) identifies community safety as a key strategic objective within the theme of “Resilient” communities. The PMHC Local Government Area (LGA) faces specific issues impacting community safety that include, but are not limited to; geography, access to services and the varying impact of socio-economic influences. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that leverages local strengths and fosters collaborative efforts among residents, cross-government agencies, and community organisations.

As part of this submission, Council provides access to general data on crime across regional and rural NSW as compared with data from the PMHC LGA. A key component of this crime profile is understanding the aspects associated with youth crime across regional NSW and the PMHC LGA, which is also profiled in this submission.

Regional and Rural Crime Profile

Research from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) exploring crime patterns, particularly that relating to property crime and violent crime, in regional NSW shows statistics higher than that of Sydney. In 2023, the rate of property crime in regional NSW was 59% higher than Sydney and the rate of violent crime in regional NSW was 57% higher than Sydney ¹.

According to the report “Crime in Regional and Rural NSW 2023: Trends and Patterns” ², during the COVID pandemic (2020 and 2021) crime fell across most offence categories in Regional NSW, and in Sydney. In Regional NSW in 2023, most major offences remained lower than in 2019 prior to the pandemic. This is true of the offences: break and enter dwelling,

¹ Recorded Crime Statistics 2023: Crime in NSW far worse in regional and rural areas, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics & Research [NSW Recorded Crime Statistics quarterly update December 2023](#)

² Cook, A., & Fitzgerald J., 2023, [Crime in Regional and Rural NSW in 2023: Trends and Patterns](#)

break and enter non-dwelling, steal from motor vehicle, steal from dwelling, steal from person, other theft, sexual touching, and robbery.

Four major offences, however, significantly increased in regional NSW over the five years from 2019 to 2023:

- Motor vehicle theft (up 20% or 1,239 additional incidents)
- Non-domestic assault (up 14% or 1,825 additional incidents)
- Sexual assault (up 47% or 1,505 additional incidents)
- Domestic violence related assault (up 24% or 3,284 additional incidents)

Local Government Area Crime Profile

For the Mid North Coast region specifically the rate of property and violent crime was as follows:

- Property crime (up to 50% higher than NSW average) 1.3 times higher
- Violent crime (up to 50% higher than NSW average) 1.4 times higher

For the Port Macquarie Hastings Council LGA, there were increases in offences as follows:

Offence	Two-year trend and annual percent change (Jan 2022-Dec 2023)	Five-year trend and average annual percent change (Jan 2019-Dec 2023)
Domestic violence related assault	Stable	Up 10.3%
Non-domestic violence related assault	Stable	Up 8.1%
Sexual assault	Stable	Up 16.2%
Fraud	Stable	Up 9.5%
Other theft	Up 22.9%	Stable
Prohibited and regulated weapons offences	Up 26.6%	Stable
Breach Apprehended Violence Order	Stable	Up 8.8%
Other offences	Up 39.6%	Stable

Table 1: Recorded Crime Reports: Local Government Area Trends, [Latest quarterly and annual recorded crime reports \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/lga-crime-reports), accessed 21/05/24.

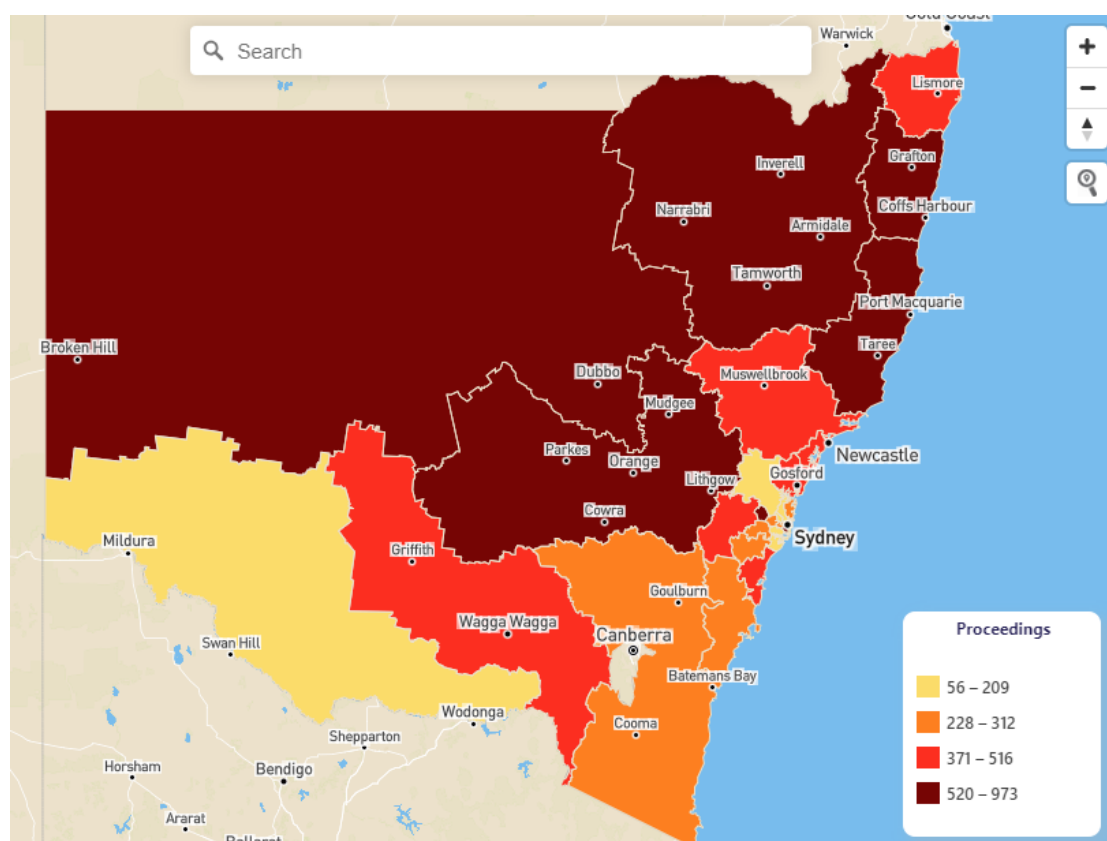
Youth Crime Profile

The 20% increase in motor vehicle theft from 2019 to 2023 in regional NSW appears to be due to an increase in offending by young people; legal actions for this group increased by

188% from 2019 to 2023. Police data also shows an increase in vehicle theft incidents co-occurring with break-ins and an increase in keys being stolen in break-ins.³

The 14% increase in non-domestic assault from 2019 to 2023 in regional NSW is due to an increase in incidents occurring on residential premises (40% of the increase) and on school premises (31% of the increase). Legal actions against young people account for 62% of the total increase in legal actions for this offence in regional NSW ⁴.

The map below shows information about young people legally proceeded against by NSW Police for criminal behaviour. NB: In NSW, young people are aged between 10 and 17 years, inclusive. Notably, there is a high number of young people in legal proceedings from the Mid North Coast region, which is among the highest in NSW ⁵.



³ ibid., p2

⁴ ibid.

⁵ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research webpage, Youth Offending, accessed 21/05/24, https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_pages/Young-people.aspx

In summary, the Mid North Coast has seen an increase in property and violent crime of up to 50%. Within the PMHC LGA from 2019-2023, this translates to increases across offences such as:

- Domestic violent related assault
- Non-domestic violent related assault
- Sexual assault
- Fraud
- AVO breaches

Theft offences was the greatest increases from 2022-2023. Legal proceedings against young people are among the highest regions across NSW.

Drivers of youth crime

More than 1 in 3 young people (35%) under supervision on an average day were from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds as compared with only 6.1% from the highest socio-economic backgrounds ⁶. The AIHW Report, “Youth Justice in Australia”, indicates that those from low socio-economic backgrounds also experience acculturation stress and challenges - including low labour market participation, social isolation, poor mental health, poor educational outcomes, alcohol and substance dependencies, homelessness, and intergenerational conflict.

Additionally, social media notoriety fuelled by peer relationships has been a contributing factor to increases in youth crime rates and usually comprises individuals uploading videos of violent crimes on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat.

NSW Police Youth Strategy

In its Youth Strategy 2023-2025, the NSW Police Force, outlines its structure for a Connective Workforce, including youth-specific operational officers (and the PCYC network) and partnerships with key stakeholders ⁷. The strategy emphasises the importance of its external stakeholder network:

“The NSW Police Force plays an important role in identifying at-risk young people, however, the way in which the NSW Police Force can assist those young people to make better choices and avoid contact with the criminal justice system is limited.

The importance of building collaborative relationships with other agencies is vital to ensure a harmonious approach is taken in connecting young people with appropriate support services. The purpose of these partnerships is for young people to access services and receive support for a variety of complex needs, permitting a higher number of care options for young people within the community.”

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Youth Justice in Australia 2021-22, [Youth justice in Australia 2021-22 \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-justice-in-australia-2021-22), p.14

⁷ NSW Police Force, Youth Strategy 2023-2025, [Youth Strategy Brochure 2023 \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/youth-strategy) p.10

Placed based, community driven solutions

Identifying the drivers of youth crime can be a multi-layered and complex exercise even when armed with research that informs at the macro and micro levels. Cultural impacts leading to offending and recidivism can be subtle and at times unseen and will not necessarily register throughout the research process. Culturally appropriate organisations (not-for-profit or government) have generally been identified as the best-placed and best-equipped to deal with the challenges of youth crime, especially when it comes to supporting over-represented and vulnerable groups.

It is important to note that communities, newly emerging or existing, may not possess the capacity and capability to address such a complex problem alone. Therefore, as identified in the NSW Police Youth Strategy, partnerships between governments, mainstream community organisations, and culture-based organisations are vital, and responsibility should not be solely bestowed upon any one organisation.

Local councils undoubtedly have a role to play. PMHC has a program of youth-focused activities that are aimed at engaging youth qualitatively and quantitatively. These activities target youth as a demographic but also have the added benefit of engaging vulnerable and at-risk youth through free activities. An outline of these activities is as follows:

Target Area	What we are doing now	What we'd like
Graffiti vandalism	<p>We facilitate community service for young offenders by supervising graffiti removal on public property, coordinating with carers and Police. This typically occurs one morning per week.</p> <p>Graffiti Blasters: A council-run volunteer program removes graffiti from recreation and transport assets four days a week.</p>	<p>Funding to deliver the Warner School Graffiti Education Program. A long-standing successful behaviour change program in city councils.</p> <p>Funding for place-making projects. Street art youth skills development program including incentives for businesses to hire artists to reduce graffiti. Expression spaces in youth hubs and neighbourhood centres.</p>
Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We design public infrastructure using CPTED principles • We have a social impact policy and guide for development applications. • We have public art (grant funded) murals on repeatedly vandalised assets ie. amenities blocks, water tanks and underpasses. 	<p>Increased funding for outdoor parks and reserves to make them safer and more inviting for teenagers ie. lighting, seating and security cameras.</p> <p>Increased funding for lit footpaths and carparks, and surveillance cameras in entertainment/CBD precincts.</p>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We provide comment on Liquor licence applications and are a member of the Hastings Liquor Accord • We have an Alcohol Restricted Areas policy for the Port Macquarie CBD • We deliver free and inclusive community events • We have low-cost hire rates to ensure affordable access to community facilities • We provide community grants to not-for-profit organisations to deliver programs that support healthy and safe communities • Hastings Youth Voice - youth council 	<p>Increased investment in mental health service providers, social prescribing programs, and transport options for small towns.</p> <p>Investment in cross-sector youth enterprise development and mentoring programs.</p> <p>Funding for welfare programs and crisis accommodation. Particularly youth homelessness.</p>

Specialised community support

To address the drivers of youth crime, areas of specialised community support could be structured as follows:

- **Integrated services:** Coordination between various government agencies (health, education, justice, social services) to provide comprehensive support to at-risk youths and their families.
- **Economic support programs:** Implementing targeted economic support programs to alleviate financial stress on families, such as job creation initiatives and financial assistance.
- **Mental health services:** Expanding access to mental health services tailored to youths, with a focus on early intervention and community-based support.
- **Educational engagement:** Enhancing support for educational engagement through tutoring, mentoring programs, and ensuring access to digital resources.
- **Community development:** Investing in community development projects to create safe and supportive environments for youth, including recreational facilities and community centre-based activities.

Expectations need to be managed regarding the range of functions performed by NSW Police Officers and their supports with police officers in regional and rural areas. Officers often perform functions outside their roles of traditional law enforcement, including responses to mental health crises in the absence of specialised services and engaging in youth welfare activities due to limited availability of social workers and youth counsellors.

To support police in these expanded roles, additional support could be provided (if not already) through:

- provision of specialised training in mental health first aid, crisis intervention, and youth engagement strategies
- police officer support networks, including access to mental health services and peer support groups.
- Allocation of resources that ensure adequate staffing levels to allow police officers to focus on their primary responsibilities while other agencies handle specialised support functions.

Conclusion

Addressing youth crime in regional and rural NSW requires a comprehensive and integrated approach involving multiple government agencies and community stakeholders. By focusing on the root causes and providing targeted support through well-coordinated services, safer and more supportive environments can be created for young people, reducing crime rates and enhancing community wellbeing. Ensuring adequate staffing, training, and resources for police and other frontline workers is crucial to the success of these efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours sincerely



Lucilla Marshall
Group Manager
Liveable Communities