

Submission to the NSW Inquiry into Youth Justice

Prepared and submitted by Praxis Youth



13/03/2026

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Members of the Select Committee on Youth Justice,

Praxis Youth welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. It represents a significant opportunity for NSW to examine the evidence on what works to reduce the number of children in its justice system, and act on that evidence.

I left home at 14 and entered the youth justice system at 16. During that time, I completed my HSC in custody and received a scholarship to UNSW through Confit Pathways, which lead me to where I am today. I am acutely aware that this path was exceptional, and that most young people are not as fortunate as I was. The structural barriers I navigated – housing instability, educational exclusion, fragmented service responses – remain as significant barriers for most young people moving through the youth justice system today.

I founded Praxis Youth in 2025 with the mission of addressing these barriers directly. We operate a 12-week intensive program built on three strategies: housing-first placement, relationship-led casework, and co-facilitated skills development. In our first cohort, participants all secured and maintained stable housing, entered employment, and have not returned to custody. Our verified unit cost is \$2,025 per participant against a detention cost of over \$1.3 million per child per year in NSW. We aim to prove that: (1) community-based, relational programs are highly effective, (2) that the cost of such programs is astronomically smaller than the cost of failure, and (3) that with the right supports around them, young people are capable of change and can achieve great things.

This submission draws on the lived experience of four young people with direct involvement in the NSW youth justice system, Praxis Youth's practice experience, and analysis of publicly available data. We offer it as a practical resource for the Committee's consideration.

Sincerely,



Michael Kwan
Chief Executive Officer
Praxis Youth Limited

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Executive Summary

This submission responds to the Committee’s Terms of Reference by presenting practice-based evidence and lived experience accounts across four key areas: the underlying drivers of youth justice contact (ToR a), conditions in custody that entrench reoffending (ToR b, g), an evidence-based community model that reduces incarceration (ToR b, g), Praxis Youth’s evidence-based community model (ToR b), and the disproportionate impact on Aboriginal young people and families (ToR c, h).

As of December 2025, 225 young people were held in youth detention – a 29.3% increase since December 2023 – the majority of them unconvicted. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people comprise 60.7% of that population despite representing approximately 8% of NSW’s young people. The costs of this failure are enormous: over \$1.3 million per child per year in detention. Current trends are moving sharply away from the NSW Closing the Gap Target 11 commitment to reduce Aboriginal youth detention by 30% by 2031. This submission documents the underlying drivers of youth justice contact, the conditions young people encounter in custody, and the process of designing Praxis Youth’s community-led program. It draws on the lived experience of four young people with direct experience of the NSW youth justice experience, Praxis Youth’s practice evidence, and publicly available data.

Children do not come into contact with the youth justice system incidentally. Justice contact is the downstream consequence of compounding system failures across education, housing, child protection, health and disability services. School disengagement, out-of-home care, housing crisis, unmet disability and mental health needs, and intergenerational poverty and trauma are upstream mechanisms by which young people are channelled towards the justice system. When one system fails, the probability of contact with the next increases until justice system contact becomes, for many young people, inevitable.

Once in custody, the conditions young people encounter frequently undermine the rehabilitative purpose of detention. Remand functions as a de facto punishment for legally unconvicted children. Section 22C of the Bail Act 2013 (NSW) has contributed materially to the increase in remanded young people in recent years. Classification rules that restrict program access based on legal status mean that the majority of young people on remand cannot access certain rehabilitative programs that could demonstrate their

capacity for change. Education is nominally provided but remains inaccessible to most. This is the case for mental health responses, which are reported by lived experience evidence as mostly transactional rather than therapeutic. Staff culture, described consistently across lived experience, represents the most significant factor in daily conditions, operating beyond the reach of formal oversight mechanisms.

The evidence for community-based alternatives is compelling. Praxis Youth's Housing-First, relationship-led model delivered positive housing and employment outcomes and no returns to custody in its first cohort.

Praxis Youth makes seven recommendations. In summary, these call for:

1. Community-led prevention and diversion investment framework;
2. An independent review of Section 22C;
3. Decoupling of remand classification from rehabilitative program access;
4. Dedicated bail accommodation and support services;
5. A genuine, Aboriginal community-controlled First nations Youth Justice Strategy;
6. Enhanced resourcing of the NSW Inspector of Custodial Services; and
7. An independent cost-benefit analysis of NSW youth justice expenditure.

The young people whose accounts are documented in this submission navigated some of the most complex circumstances any child can face. Their insights are key to understanding the practical implications of systemic issues that cannot be meaningfully extrapolated from research alone.

Submission to the Inquiry into NSW's Youth Justice and Incarceration System

Praxis Youth is a NSW-based registered charity working with justice-involved young people aged 16-25. Incorporated in September 2025, we operate at the intersection of prevention, diversion and post-custodial support, with a headline objective of reducing criminalisation and custodial involvement.

Our program model is built on three sequenced delivery strategies: (1) Housing-First Placement and Tenancy Sustainment, which secures stable accommodation before or immediately after release; (2) Intensive, Relationship-Led Casework, providing consistent weekly support from a dedicated caseworker with lived and professional experience; and (3) Skills Development and Community Building, comprising of co-facilitated workshops in financial literacy, work readiness, legal rights, health and household management.

Our Theory of Change revolves around two core assumptions: safe, stable housing is the prerequisite for engagement across all other domains and that the caseworker relationship is the mechanism through which those changes can be supported effectively. Reduced reincarceration is our headline outcome. However, it follows from sustained change across housing sustainability, employment and education, mental health and wellbeing, and social connection.

In our first cohort (October 2025 – February 2026), we saw positive outcomes in housing and employment enrolment into university and no returns to custody.

The NSW Youth Justice Landscape

Youth justice in NSW is administered by the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), which operates six youth justice centres and 34 community offices. The primary legislative framework comprises of the Children (Criminal Proceedings) Act 1987 (NSW), which establishes that detention is a last resort, and the Young Offenders Act 1997 (NSW), which provides diversionary pathways through warnings, cautions and conferences.

In April 2024, the Bail and Crimes Amendment Act 2024 inserted Section 22C into the Bail Act 2013 (NSW). This provision imposes an additional bail test on young people aged 14-18 charged with serious break-and-enter or motor vehicle theft offences while already on bail, requiring the bail authority to have

a ‘high degree of confidence’ the young person will not reoffend. The Law Society of NSW warned the provision was more stringent than the show-cause test applied to adults and would lead to the incarceration of children who would otherwise not have been detained. Section 22C was extended in 2025 for a further three years, to April 2028.

The remand data confirms those concerns. BOSCAR’s December 2025 quarterly update recorded 225 young people in NSW youth detention, a 29.3% increase since December 2023. At its peak in June 2025, the number reached 234, a 34% rise over two years. As of December 2025, 75.6% of young people in custody had not yet been convicted.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are severely overrepresented. BOSCAR’s March 2025 quarterly update recorded 139 Aboriginal young people in detention, comprising 60.7% of the youth detention population despite approximately 8% of NSW’s youth population. Almost 70% of Aboriginal young people in detention were on remand. The Aboriginal youth remand population increased 68.9% in the two years to December 2024. The NSW Closing the Gap 2025-2028 Implementation Plan commits to Target 11: reducing the rate of Aboriginal young people aged 10-17 in detention by at least 30% by 2031. Current trends are moving sharply away from this target.

Detention costs exceed \$1.3 million per child per year in NSW. Community-based intensive intervention, such as Praxis Youth’s, cost a fraction of this while achieving measurable outcomes in housing, employment and reduced justice contact. This cost differential is directly relevant to the Committee’s mandate to consider the fiscal impact of the youth justice system and underscores the economic, as well as human case for investing in community-based diversion.

Underlying Drivers of Children’s Contact with the Criminal Justice System

Terms of Reference: (a) Underlying drivers, as they manifest into custodial settings; (b)(i) Diversionary programs; (b)(ii) Alternatives to remand; (g) Governance and Oversight

Understanding what drives children into the justice system is the prerequisite to designing evidence-based responses that prevent it. This section documents four upstream mechanisms - each a point at which

earlier, evidence-informed intervention would reduce the number of children reaching the criminal justice system.

Children do not arrive at the youth justice system accidentally or incidentally. Justice contact is the downstream consequence of intersecting system failures across education, housing, child protection, health and disability services. Praxis Youth's practice evidence, corroborated by publicly available data, identifies four primary upstream mechanisms through which children in NSW are channelled toward the criminal justice system. Each operates with a flow on effect when one system fails, the probability of contact with the next increases until contact with the youth justice system is inevitable.

School Disengagement

School disengagement is included because it is the earliest and most consistent intervention point as identified in Praxis Youth's everyday practice. For the young people Praxis Youth works with, the pathway from educational exclusion to offending is typically rapid and poorly monitored. Disengagement can present as non-attendance, informal removal from mainstream classes, formal exclusion, and the absence of any meaningful structured response by school systems to re-engage the young person. NSW education policy nominally requires schools to follow up on unexplained absences and to develop attendance improvement plans. In practice, Praxis Youth's observations indicate that these obligations are inconsistently applied, particularly for young people already presenting with behavioural or welfare concerns.

The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee's (2025) interim report attributed patterns of youth offending to, among other things, the continuing effects of exclusion and inadequate early intervention. These findings are consistent with Praxis Youth's observations, and demonstrate that educational exclusion, whether formal or informal, accelerates contact with the criminal justice system by removing daily routine, adult supervision, peer connection and identity formation.

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

One young person in Praxis Youth's lived experience accounts left home at 14 after prolonged family instability and ceased attending school entirely. No school-initiated follow-up occurred, nor was any

referral to alternative education pathways made. Within 18 months of full school disengagement, the young person had sustained their first criminal charge. Between leaving school and first entering the justice system, their situation escalated without intervention – homelessness, lack of daily structure, and increasing contact with criminogenic peer networks. At no point during this period did any education or welfare authority make contact (Appendix B).

Out-of-Home-Care, Homelessness and Housing Instability

Housing instability is both a driver of initial justice contact and the single greatest barrier to successful diversion and post-release reintegration. Without addressing housing, no community-based alternative can function effectively.

There are currently zero affordable rental properties accessible to a young person on Youth Allowance anywhere in Australia (Anglicare Australia, 2025). This is a result of sustained structural failures in housing supply, income support, and youth welfare policy. On a systemic level, Praxis Youth observes young people exiting custody being returned to the home environments in which they were first incarcerated. For young people with prior criminogenic associations, unsafe family circumstances, or a goal to support themselves independently, there are very few viable housing options available.

The interaction between Section 22C of the Bail Act 2013 (NSW) and the housing crisis creates significant barriers to young people in the justice system. Where a young person has no safe home, no meaningful supervision arrangements, and no community supports in place, and no realistic option to relocate into independent living, the confidence threshold of Section 22C becomes functionally impossible to meet.

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

One young person in Praxis Youth’s lived experience accounts describes receiving \$60 per week in semi-independent out-of-home care– insufficient for food, transport and basic needs. The young person went hungry during the school day. When the placement broke down, the young person’s caseworker pressured them to return to the family home – the same environment in which conditions for their growing offending behaviours had developed. No alternative accommodation was offered. (Appendix C)

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

On release, a young person described receiving “a bunch of useless flyers” as their housing support when being released. They described a caseworker promised that housing was arranged, yet after that contact, the participant never heard from the service again. The young person reported a deep mistrust in the system and in service providers after that experience. (Appendix E)

Disability and Mental Health

Unmet disability and mental health needs represent a category of intervention that, when absent upstream, compounds every other driver and renders custodial responses ineffective. Young people in NSW youth detention present with extraordinarily high rates of neurodevelopmental disability, mental illness, acquired brain injury and substance use disorders. The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee’s (2025) interim report documented this extensively at the national level. In response, there is varied effectivity in supports through youth justice. There is a critical distinction between health service provision and therapeutic care. NSW youth justice centres operate medical facilities with nursing staff available around the clock, and Praxis Youth does not dispute the availability of acute medical services. There is, however, a deficit in the quality, continuity and therapeutic appropriateness of mental health responses in custody, particularly for young people whose conditions are trauma-related and require sustained relational engagement.

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

A young person was placed on antidepressants and risperidone in custody. They reported significant weight gain. When they raised concerns about side effects, the dose was increased rather than reviewed. The young person received no explanation of the medication’s purpose, no information about side effects, and no non-pharmacological intervention alongside it. They described psychological services in detention as highly transactional: “They’re watching the clock, and once time’s up, they’re gone”. (Appendix E)

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

An interviewee described psychology in detention as “something you have to navigate carefully, rather than a support”. Information shared with psychologists could be recorded in case notes, used in risk assessments and CSM meetings, and could “directly alter the quality of your daily life.” (Appendix B)

Family Dysfunction, Poverty and Intergenerational Trauma

Family dysfunction and intergenerational trauma are background conditions that determine whether a young person can absorb disruption without escalation to justice contact. They explain why identical risk factors produce different outcomes across different populations.

Poverty, family instability and intergenerational trauma form the background conditions upon which other drivers of incarceration operate. In Praxis Youth’s practice, they are considered conditions that determine whether a young person has the supports needed to absorb disruption, navigate institutional systems, and recover from setbacks, therefore directly contributing to offending behaviours.

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

Multiple young people described early life histories characterised by domestic violence, housing instability, parental substance use and intermittent engagement with child protection. One described leaving home after his father “went off the rails with drugs,” entering semi-independent living, and being “bounced around the system”. In each case, the pathway from family disruption to justice contact was mediated by the absence of a sustained, consistent adult relationship and the failure of any existing system to provide one. (Appendices B-E)

Conditions in Detention

Terms of Reference: (a) Underlying drivers, as they manifest in custodial settings; (b)(i) Diversionary programs; (b)(ii) Alternatives to remand; (g) Governance and Oversight

For young people who enter custody, conditions encountered determine whether detention functions as a rehabilitative intervention or as a mechanism that entrenches further system contact. Praxis Youth’s lived experience evidence identifies four structural mechanisms through which current detention practice undermines its own stated rehabilitative purpose, therefore contributing to repeated contact.

Remand as De Facto Punishment

Remand is examined in detail because it is the dominant form of youth detention in NSW, and the implications of remand result in custody not functioning as rehabilitative. As of December 2025, 75.6% of young people in custody had not yet been convicted (BOCSAR, 2025). The rate of unsentenced detention nationally was 2.1 per 10,000 compared to 0.6 per 10,000 for unsentenced detention (AIHW, 2025b). This means that although the majority of children in NSW youth justice centres are legally presumed innocent, they are subject to conditions that are indistinguishable from – and in some respects, more restrictive than – sentenced detention.

The bail refusal rate for young people dealt with under Section 22C of the Bail Act 2013 (NSW) is more than double the general bail refusal rate (NSW Departments of Communities and Justice [DCJ], 2025). The provision was extended despite no published evaluation of its effect on remand numbers, youth reoffending, or Aboriginal overrepresentation.

Furthermore, a compounded effect of Section 22C is increased probability that a young person is remanded. Once remanded, internal classification systems restrict young people's access to rehabilitative programs, education and therapeutic services, solely on the basis of their legal status. A young person on remand cannot, in most cases, drop below a certain risk classification, regardless of their actual behaviour or engagement. This means that in many cases, they are locked out of the programs that would demonstrate their capacity for change. This structural barrier is both a failure of the rehabilitative mandate under the Children (Criminal Proceedings) Act 1987 (NSW), and a direct contributor to the pathways between youth detention and adult incarceration.

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

One young person spent close to two years on remand. Classification rules blocked many core rehabilitative programs throughout this period. Court dates were sometimes communicated with less than 24 hours' notice. Contact with legal representation was sometimes limited to five-minute phone calls. The young person described the mental health impact as severe: “You're alone, with nothing to distract you, no one to talk to. Judges, lawyers, prosecutors are making decisions that affect your life, and you don't know what's happening” (Appendix B).

Education: Nominal Provision Versus Substantive Access

Education in detention is included because it is the primary mechanism through which custody could interrupt the school-disengagement-to-reoffending pathway. Praxis Youth’s evidence indicates that education in NSW youth justice centres exists in two realities: a nominal provision that satisfies reporting obligations, and a substantive provision that is available only to a small number of young people who demonstrate exceptional individual persistence and are fortunate enough to encounter supportive individual staff.

TAFE and vocational pathways are described as uncommon, and often not leading to any meaningful opportunities. The gap between the education formally available and the education that is delivered is wide, and falls hardest on young people on remand, whose classification can restrict access to full access to educational programs.

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

General education in detention was described by one young person as “colouring in and crosswords”. Another described it as “more like ticking a box”. A third participant was one of fewer than five people, across four years of incarceration, to complete the HSC in custody. That pathway required extraordinary individual effort. Computer access was limited to two hours per day, resources were almost entirely paper-based (without staples), and the young person was required to analyse textbooks without adequate teacher support. (Appendices B-E)

Staff Culture and the Governance of Daily Practice

Staff culture is included because lived experience evidence identifies it as the most significant variable in whether detention functions as rehabilitation or as a mechanism for further harm. Praxis Youth’s lived experience evidence identifies a governance gap at the level of daily practice that formal oversight mechanisms do not currently reach: the exercise of staff discretion over young people’s access to programs, classification, and quality of daily life. The NSW Inspector of Custodial Services reported 428 enquiries and 390 complaints from youth justice centres in 2023-24, with common issues including unfair treatment, separation and daily routine (Inspector of Custodial Services [NSW], 2024).

Lived experience evidence describes a governance system in which formal policy exists, but operational culture overrides it. Staff training occurs but does not translate reliably to practice, with case notes functioning as determinative administrative records lacking procedural safeguards

Case Evidence – De-identified, NSW

All four participants describe staff culture as the single most determinative factor in their daily living experience. One stated: “The best and worst part of youth justice is the staff. Some absolutely changed my life. I would not be here today without their support. Others created real, lasting trauma”. Access to programs was described as dependent, not on assessed need, but on whether individual staff members “liked you” and as a “popularity contest”. Case notes written by staff determined classification, risk ratings and program access, but young people had no notice of what was being recorded and no mechanism to review or challenge those records. A new staff member reported being told during their first shift that formal training was irrelevant: “Once you actually get on the floor, you’ll learn from the older staff how things actually work”.

The Disproportionate Impact on Aboriginal Children

Terms of Reference: (c) The specific and disproportionate impact of the youth justice system on Aboriginal children, and the adequacy of current strategies to Close the Gap on Aboriginal youth incarceration.

BOSCAR’s Aboriginal overrepresentation is a sharp measure of every systemic failure documented in this submission. The scale of overrepresentation is the clearest indicator of where evidence-based intervention is most urgently needed and where current approaches are most clearly failing.

The Scale of Overrepresentation

BOSCAR’s March 2025 quarterly update recorded 139 Aboriginal young people in NSW youth detention, comprising 60.7% of the youth detention population (BOSCAR, 2025). Aboriginal young people represent approximately 8% of NSW’s population.

Nationally, First Nations young people accounted for 565 of detainees aged 10 and over and 60% of detainees aged 10-17 in June 2025. They were 21 times as likely as non-Indigenous youth to be detained

(AIHW, 2025b). Among children aged 10-13, the rate for First Nations children was 40 times high than for non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2025b).

Praxis Youth's Observations

Praxis Youth's lived experience evidence offers two observations relevant to the Committee's consideration. Firstly, cultural programs in detention were described by all participants as among the most effective and valued aspects of their time in custody. They were described as "creating a bridge between detainees and staff" that enabled genuine communication. Another young person described engagement in cultural activities as "one of the rare experiences that made you feel more human".

Evidence-Based and Community-Led Responses: Praxis Youth's Model

Terms of Reference: (b) The availability, effectiveness, and evaluation of evidence-based and community-led responses that prevent offending and reoffending.

The preceding sections document the mechanisms by which the current system fails. This section presents Praxis Youth's model as a direct, evidence-based response to those failures — designed around the specific drivers and gaps identified above.

Praxis Youth's Theory of Change and Program

Praxis Youth's program has a headline outcome of reducing the number of children in custody, which follows from sustained change across housing, education, employment, mental health and social connection. Although early stage the program is built on well-documented research, lived experience and community consultation, and has, so far, delivered exceptional outcomes. Praxis Youth's program operates on a 12-week intensive cycle, delivered through three sequenced strategies:

1. Housing-First and Tenancy Sustainment;
2. Intensive, Relationship-Centred Casework; and
3. Skills Development and Community Building.

Praxis Youth was founded on the lived experiences of the CEO and COO, both of whom experienced the absence of adequate support upon release from custody and observed the same absence in other young people. Praxis Youth notes that although there may be organisations in NSW doing post-release work

with justice-involved young people, the evidence of such work is limited, and organisations are working in silos. This is particularly evident in the young people Praxis Youth work with, who consistently report a lack of services and supports post-release.

Recommendations

1. Invest in community-led prevention and diversion (ToR a, b)

That the NSW Department of Communities and Justice establish a community-led prevention and diversion investment framework, funded through recurrent appropriation at a scale commensurate with the demonstrated cost differential between detention and community-based intensive programs. Funding agreements should be multi-year, require co-design with young people and communities, and be directed in priority to organisations with lived experience at the core of their work.

2. Review Section 22C of the Bail Act 2013 (NSW) (ToR a, b, c)

That the NSW Government commission an independent review of Section 22C of the Bail Act 2013 (NSW), with specific attention to its effect on remand numbers, remand duration, and the disproportionate impact on Aboriginal young people, and that this review be tabled before the Committee's reporting deadline of 31 December 2026.

3. Ensure access to programs, education and therapeutic services in custody (ToR a, b, g)

That Youth Justice NSW decouple remand classification from access to rehabilitative programs, education and therapeutic services, effective within 12 months of the Committee's report, and that the Department publicly report program access rates disaggregated by remand status, Aboriginal status, age, disability and facility.

4. Fund bail accommodation and intensive support services (ToR a, b)

That the NSW Government funds dedicated bail accommodation and intensive support services for young people, operated independently of DCJ, with capacity of accepting referrals from police, courts and legal aid, and that this be paired with scaled youth-specific legal assistance available from the point of arrest through to sentencing.

5. Develop and resource a genuine First Nations Strategy (ToR c)

That the NSW Government develop and resource a First Nations Youth Justice Strategy in genuine partnership with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (CAPO), with specific targets aligned to Target 11 of the NSW Closing the Gap 2025-2028 Implementation Plan, and that strategy development be led and evaluated by Aboriginal communities, not government.

6. Resource the NSW Inspector of Custodial Services (ToR g)

That the NSW Inspector of Custodial Services be resourced to conduct proactive thematic inspections of youth justice centres (including unannounced visits and confidential youth hearings), with statutory authority to access case records, and that DCJ be required to table a public response to each inspection report within 90 days.

7. Commission a cost-benefit analysis of NSW youth justice expenditure (ToR h)

That the NSW Government commission an independent cost-benefit analysis of NSW youth justice expenditure, comparing the long-term fiscal, social and intergenerational costs of custodial versus community-based approaches, with findings published before the 2027-2028 NSW Budget.

Conclusion

NSW is detaining more children than at almost any point in recent years, many of them encountering the same unmet needs that drove their offending in the first place. The evidence in this submission points to a system that is not meeting its stated purpose.

The Children (Criminal Proceedings) Act 1987 (NSW) establishes detention as a last resort, however; it is not being applied that way. Section 22C of the Bail Act 2013 (NSW) imposes a higher bail threshold than for adults and has contributed materially to the increase in the youth detention population since December 2023. Over 75% of those detained are on remand, legally unconvicted, and in many cases, prevented from accessing the rehabilitative programs that could support their return to the community. The NSW Closing the Gap 2025-2028 Implementation Plan commits to reducing Aboriginal youth detention by 30% by 2031. Current trends are moving decisively in the opposite direction.

Praxis Youth respectfully urges the Committee to make recommendations that reflect the scale and urgency of what the evidence shows. Praxis Youth is available to provide further evidence, briefings, or supplementary information to the Committee upon request.

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Appendix A

Overview of Lived Experience Interviews

Interviews were conducted to support the collection of lived experience narratives from young people who have experienced youth justice detention (see Appendices BE) The purpose of these interviews is not to conduct academic research, but to document first-hand accounts that illustrate how youth justice policies and practices operate in practice, and how they affect young people's lives.

These narratives are used to support and contextualise Praxis Youth's recommendations by providing evidence that is rarely visible in administrative data, official reporting, or academic literature. The accounts reflect personal experiences and insights into systemic issues, including harms, gaps, and examples of effective practice, that cannot be meaningfully extrapolated from quantitative research alone.

Appendix B

Interview of Participant 1 (Formerly Incarcerated)

Personal Context and Pathway into Youth Justice

Interviewer:

What was your life like before you first came into contact with the youth justice system?

Participant:

I left home at about 14 years old. Pretty soon after, I left school and was hanging out with people who had also disengaged from school. We were committing small crimes at first, things like breaking into cars, drinking and taking drugs constantly. Things escalated quickly after I left home. I think a big motivator was money – I had to support myself, and making money through drugs, crime – that gave me a sense of control that I was lacking. I was around very negative peer groups. There was really intense conflict between my mum and dad as they were separated. I was almost like I was being used as a pawn in a game they were playing with the courts. It left me feeling really powerless. The only way I could escape all that conflict, or at least the only way I knew how, was through drugs and alcohol, trying to disassociate, remove myself from that situation. It was really difficult. Before I was kicked out of school, I was on a scholarship with very high expectations placed on me. As a young kid, I didn't know how to process all the things and feelings that were going on and I felt like I'd failed. So, before I became involved with the youth justice system, I was already in a spiral of negative behaviours.

Interviewer:

Can you talk us through how you first became involved with the youth justice system?

Participant:

My living situation was very inconsistent between 14 to 16 years old, just sleeping where I could, hanging out with negative peer groups. Lots of drugs and alcohol. Crime started with small things but became bigger and bigger. I was around gang members and much older people all the time, and over the next few years, I become really desensitised to antisocial behaviours, criminal activity and violence. All of these

things built up to a point where I was in a really negative space, physically and psychologically. When I was 16, I ended up being locked up for a serious GBH charge.

Experiences of Remand

Interviewer:

What was being on remand like and what impact did it have on you?

Participant:

I didn't really know anything about the court system or how things worked, apart from what friends had told me – friends that had been to goal. No one really explained the system to me while I was inside. I learned from people around me, bits of information here and there. There were court dates every so often, but I didn't really know what they were for. I thought, OK, I'll plead guilty straight away. Take responsibility and that would be it but it wasn't that simple. It dragged on for months, then years. I ended up being on remand for close to two years. Because of classification rules, I couldn't drop below a certain risk level while on remand, which restricted the programs I could access. If I'd been sentenced to be released after two years with time served, I would never have accessed any core rehabilitative programs at all. Remand classification rules meant I wouldn't have been allowed to do them.

The mental health impact of being on remand is also huge. There's so much uncertainty. As a young person, you don't understand the processes. I was often told with less than 24 hours' notice that I had court the next day. Then all you can do is sit in your cell for the next 12 hours, anxious and stressing about what's going to happen. You're lucky to get a five-minute phone call with your lawyer beforehand. You're alone, with nothing to distract you, no one to talk to. Judges, lawyers, prosecutors are making decisions that affect your life, and you don't know what's happening. That uncertainty, powerlessness and lack of understanding have serious mental health effects.

In term of goal setting, you can't plan because you don't know how long you'll be there. You can start education and be released with one day's notice, leaving you with nothing – no qualifications, no job-readiness. That uncertainty makes real rehabilitation and casework extremely difficult.

Once you're sentenced, it's like a switch is flipped. Suddenly you can apply for leave, programs, activities. Physically and psychologically, nothing has really changed – only your legal status. For most young people I saw, 75% or more of their time inside was spent on remand. Most never accessed rehabilitative programs at all.

Interviewer:

What are your thoughts on remand?

Participant:

I think it's a deeply flawed system. So many people are released – either on bail or through sentencing – without access to programs. Caseworkers and community organisations can't plan effectively. You can't line up employment or housing when you have no idea if someone will be released tomorrow or in two years. The classification system is also flawed. The implications of classification based on legal status are significant, and the fact that risk levels are determined based on your legal status creates a bottleneck that blocks rehabilitation.

Day-to-Day Life in Detention

Interviewer:

What was education like while you were in detention?

Participant:

I was one of the few fortunate ones to make the most of education. I was approved to be in a distance education class at [XXXX Youth Justice Centre. I did Year 10 though this class and really struggled. I hadn't been to school in two years and failed most subjects. There were only 4 people in that class doing distance education. Before that, I was in general classes with everyone else. We mostly did colouring in, crosswords and lounged around. I would barely classify it as education. After transferring to [XXXX Youth Justice Centre], I completed Years 11 and 12 in custody and sat my HSC exams, scoring very well. That pathway was extraordinary and unprecedented. Chaplains spent time helping me with writing and critical thinking. An English teacher delayed his retirement to help me. Over 4 years of incarceration, fewer than 5 people, either that I was with or had heard of, completed their HSCs. I still say, to this day,

it's one of the hardest things I've ever done. Work was completed on paper, mailed to Sydney for marking. You might get a one-hour Zoom call with a teacher who didn't know your circumstances or your learning gaps. These often took weeks to get approved. We only had a few hours a day on restricted laptops. Printing was limited. Teachers, Youth Justice staff and managers often subtly discouraged education, maybe because it created more work for them, or they just didn't like seeing kids education? I'm not too sure. It often felt like they wanted you to feel bad for wanting to learn.

TAFE courses existed but were limited and often not job relevant. Nowadays, they are all completed digitally, which made them extremely difficult to do. In the latter half of my time, I began to see more practical skills being taught such as woodworking, metal work, specialist courses delivered by external providers. The problem was that none of them provided any type of real, formal qualifications. They did not make young people more employable. A young person I knew completed a two-day bricklaying course. He was released and ended up returning in about 3 months. He told me, "They told me I could get a bricklaying job and that there's huge demand. When I got out, nothing. There's no jobs."

I later began university via correspondence while still in custody. That process was both unprecedented, and extremely difficult. During my time, I never met or heard of anyone else doing university from youth justice.

As a general summary, it felt like education was treated as a box-ticking exercise very much an optional extra. It's not encouraged, if anything it's subtly discouraged. Taking the easy path because it was required. Anything meaningful education-wise, you had to push so hard for opportunities.

Interviewer:

How were your physical and mental health needs handled while you were in detention?

Participant:

Physically, healthcare was good. Nurses were available, but access to dentists and specialists in regional centres was difficult. I remember not seeing a dentist in two years while in a regional centre. At times it was difficult to get things like Panadol and Nurofen, but you can understand the strict requirements around accessing medication.

Mental healthcare was much harder. In Sydney, access was better. In regional centres, it was clear that psychologists were overloaded. The major problem though, was confidentiality. It didn't work the same as outside. Information shared could be used in risk assessments, court reports, CSM meetings. It made it very dangerous to be honest what you said could directly affect the quality of your daily life. Psychology became something you had to navigate carefully, rather than a support.

Most mental health support came from other young people. Personally, some Youth Justice staff were amazing mental health supports, but there was always a risk of information being case noted or shared, then used in a way that might negatively affect you. So yeah, when I didn't have good boys around me, it was a big struggle. You didn't have any other option but to keep things bottled up.

Interviewer:

How would you describe the way you and other young people were generally treated by staff?

Participant:

I still say, the best and worst part of youth justice is the staff. Some absolutely changed my life. I would not be here today without their support. Others created real, lasting trauma. There was a toxic work culture in every centre I was in. There were multiple times where I witnessed staff being reprimanded for "caring too much" for young people, being told, "that's not our job".

Your treatment depended heavily on whether individual staff members liked you. Power imbalances were extreme. Staff are the only adult role models you see – they are with you 24/7. The influence they have is massively underestimated. When you're a young person that has only known a life of trauma, crime and abuse, you don't know what a normal, functioning adult looks like. So staff end up being your primary source of learning. This twisted relationship of officer to detainee, it doesn't support young people in learning how change and be a pro-social member of society. The job description does not adequately describe the role that staff have, particularly as role models for young people. They have a hugely influential position, and when that influence is misused, there are severe implications for young people. Physically, safety with staff was more than reasonable. Although there were cases where I saw abuse of force, this became increasingly rare during my time. Psychologically, it was very unsafe. Verbal and

psychological abuse occurred daily, in particular, disgusting instances of staff taking advantage of vulnerable young people. The most common circumstance was a disparity in young people's ability to communicate compared to workers. An officer could write case notes about any sort of interaction and be able to completely spin it however they like. There was no accountability. A young person lacking the ability to communicate effectively had no chance.

Casenoting in general was a massive issue. They were treated as undisputed fact, despite being written by staff who, by human nature, are not unbiased or objective. As they were meant to be confidential, as a young person, you had no idea what was being said about you. As case notes were "small" things by themselves, there was no opportunity to dispute any negative case notes, nor was there anyone telling you that they even existed. In my experience, you would receive "good" case notes from workers that liked you, and "bad" case notes from staff that disliked you. "Bad" case notes had a huge effect on your internal risk assessments and access to programs. It was a very flawed system.

First Nations Experience

Interviewer:

Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

Participant:

No.

Interviewer:

What did you observe about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were treated in youth justice settings?

Participant:

Many young people were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, particularly in regional centres. There were specific cultural programs available which was positive, but it also created a level of animosity for non-Indigenous young people. There needs to be equivalent cultural programs made available for non-Indigenous young people. Then again, some of the most positive moments were the cultural activities that

we shared together. Sharing culture was one of the rare things where staff, young people, everyone were brought down to the same level. Engaging in culture, not just my own, made you feel more human. There was a lack of quality Aboriginal staff. More are needed, both youth justice staff and external program providers – people who can be positive role models, cultural supports and that can do their jobs well.

Health, Disability, and Trauma

Interviewer:

Do you think the justice system is equipped to respond appropriately to things like trauma, disability and mental health issues?

Participant:

The system is most certainly not equipped to deal with trauma. Most trauma goes undiagnosed and untreated. Responses are reactive, not proactive. Trauma-informed training exists on paper but is not applied on the floor. The thing is, trauma is the cause of many negative behaviours and incidents in youth justice, but existing trauma informed training is just not adequate. Applying training to the real job it just doesn't happen. That can actually be said about training in general. Staff would go through regular professional development, as well as the initial, I believe, 6-week initial training program. A new staff member I had a conversation with while I was inside, they were telling me about how on one of their first buddy shifts, that is, observation shifts, an older staff member was telling them how they just needed to get through the training, it was all *****, and that once you actually get on the floor, you'll learn from older staff how things actually work.

That was the trend I observed – you're taught all this theory through initial training, but when you get on the floor, none of that translates to the actual work. In my opinion, reform is needed. There needs to be a real good look at responses to health and trauma by staff in custody. Not to mention, early intervention, diversion. It's a difficult issue on paper, staff are trained. In reality, there are many existing staff that should never be allowed near vulnerable young people.

Long-Term Impacts

Interviewer:

Are there impacts of youth justice that people underestimate or do not talk about enough?

Participant:

I think that you learn a false sense of reality inside youth justice. This becomes trauma in and of itself. Call it institutionalisation if you like. The staff officers are the people you spend the most time around, and they are the only way you can learn about what the real world is like. They have a huge amount of influence, as I've mentioned. So coming out, and to this day, it's still a struggle to move past those times. When I first came out – not having anyone telling me what to do making decisions by myself. There is a huge discrepancy between life inside and life outside. Something needs to change. Being able to socialise is also a significant long-term impact. You're put with a bunch of other young people with trauma, who've been involved in criminal life. It's very difficult to escape that culture. It took me two years to be able to sit at the dinner table and listen to a young person tell a story about stealing a car and realise internally that this isn't normal. It's not ok to normalise, glorify and boast about crime. Most young people never learn how to talk about experiences they've been through with a sense of remorse and reflection. It either continues to be glorified, or gets bottled up, suppressed with a damaging sense of shame. So back to socialisation, it's very hard to create positive, diverse support networks when you have no idea how to connect and relate to people that don't understand your background

The Positives

Interviewer:

What positive supports were available and what did you find helpful while in youth justice?

Participant:

I think one of the best things was the [XXXX external program]. They were an external program, run by guys with lived experience of the justice system running mentoring programs through fitness. That was huge. They were the first people that actually knew what I was going through. They'd not just been through it, but had come out the other side, giving me a glimpse at what life could be like, that there was hope. It was primarily due to their mentorship that I went on to do the HSC and go to university.

External programs like that, people with lived experience, or even just willing to help with a kind heart – very impactful in a youth justice setting.

Services-wise, there was barely anything, so not a lot to say there, just many empty promises. There was no post-release support whatsoever.

In terms of staff, there were really good staff like I mentioned. But they were rare. For every good staff member, there were 10 trying to bring you down. But there were good people that changed my life.

Interviewer:

What things do you wish were available to you?

Participant:

Housing is number one. The single biggest struggle I faced was trying to get [internally] approved, then logistically figuring it out. There was pressure from all levels- community caseworker, internal caseworker, management – everyone was saying to go back to your dad's place, it was just not a safe environment. This was not just something I faced. Systemically, young people are sent back to the same housing environments in which they offended in the first place. Less than two people I knew were able to move into their own, independent housing.

Service providers need to improve. There is a bottleneck in actual access to young people. The only housing support that reached out to me had to do so via my caseworker, who only saw me once per week for 30 minutes. [XXXX service provider] ended up promising me housing, then I never heard from them again. Really, post-release support needs to become available and consistent across the board. It is dismal as is

System Reform and National Standards

Interviewer:

From your experience, was there consistency in youth justice?

Participant:

I think it is an extremely inconsistent place. That is my summary of youth justice. There are many, many policies, SOPs, the Act. There are so many rules. But at the end of the day, what actually goes on comes

down to the three or four staff that are rostered on, and the person that's leading that team. In this sense, it is very tricky.

You can have a great morning where you're chatting with staff, you're going to school, you're doing programs, maybe playing footy – and then have an absolutely miserable afternoon, just because the staff changeover and it can be a completely different vibe.

There's inconsistency in treatment. Why aren't more young people being offered to do the HSC? Why aren't there more people in TAFE? Programs, including education, are offered based off risk assessment, but also off if staff like you. So a lot of the time, access to programs was not a matter of need, it was a popularity contest. Rehabilitative and restorative programs, that is, housing, education, employment, mental health and social connection – all of these should be available to every young person, regardless of their situation, background or traumas.

Appendix C

Interview of Participant 2 (Formerly Incarcerated)

Personal Context and Pathway into Youth Justice

Interviewer:

What was your life like before you first came into contact with the youth justice system?

Participant:

What was my life like? It was kind of like a book. A fiction. I experienced a lot of things while I was young; I was born in Australia and Mum was in [immigration detention] when she gave birth to me.

Then Mum took me back to China. I was granted with the Australian passport birth certificate. I stayed there till age 12, then came back to Australia. I finished my year six in China, but high school was not an option for me for financial reasons. Also, other complications issues followed the Australian government was going to cancel my passport up so mum sent me back to Australia by myself.

She thought I would only stay in Australia for a few months and then she'd able to come as well. Well, it wasn't the case. Things really changed. I came to this country without any English. I didn't know the place. I hardly knew anybody. Things got very tough, my passport was surrendered and I was stateless. I don't have any identity with me. I only had a piece of paper saying I was born in Australia, that's it. I had to call immigration every three months to renew my visa so I could stay. So that I could go to school and have a life. I was only 12 years old at this time. I was only 12 years old, and these kinds of things were happening to me. I didn't have family in Australia. I didn't have anyone to talk to. I was isolated because my carer didn't want me to talk to my mum. They weren't great to me at all. There was violence and abuse. I was very scared.

Later, after a year of care, I went to another carer because Mum found out. So many things happened that you know, it is very traumatic for me to think about. I remember between age 12 to 16 I had 4 carers. I was very scared and wasn't able to trust people. I had to just escape. School was difficult, there were bullies due to culture and language differences and I started abusing drugs, drinking alcohol, fighting at school, trying to escape, trying to be cool so people didn't look down on me. It was just a mess for me. A

lot of mess. Immigration was still there, Mum was in a relationship and there was domestic violence happening back in China, and I was by myself in Australia and didn't have anyone to talk to about it. The school found out about abuse from my carers and DCJ got involved. However, the caseworkers – very temporary. Accommodation – temporary. I had to spend one night at one place, then two weeks and another, three weeks, three months. I had to travel two hours to go to school, and two hours back. Even though I was around kids that are all misbehaving, I still had a goal. I wanted to do good in my life. But it was very chaotic, traumatising and I saw a lot of things I shouldn't see. DCJ put me into a semi-independent living program because they believed I was old enough to look after myself at 16. I couldn't get Centrelink and lived off \$60 a week. There would be weeks when I had no food. When I could shop, I would get a bag of noodles for \$5, cook and eat once a day just to stay alive for two weeks. This was while still in school, even though my grades weren't good, I was still going. But immigration was still happening, they would call me and tell me they were going to lock me up as soon as I turned 18. It seemed to me like I'm just going to go to gaol. And I was questioning myself: what did I do to deserve this? I ended up dropping out completely to work full time. The stress built up. There were no counsellors or family I could talk to. Drugs became the only way to escape because that was the only way I knew how. I started to be involved in criminality and in 2018, I was locked behind bars.

Experiences of Remand

Interviewer:

What was being on remand like and what impact did it have on you?

Participant:

Personally, it was very difficult. I have no idea what would happen. Or how long I'm going to be sentenced. You're waiting for the court to sentence you, and you go through all these processes, remand, hearings, sentencing. I get that it is part of the process, but it was terrifying. There are a lot of [rehabilitation] programs that you cannot attend because of classification. While you are on remand, you can't go below a certain classification. There are so many things that are restricted, there are lots of limitations. Also, your mentality changes once you are sentenced. You know the date, you know what's

going on, you can plan out goals. While on remand, you have to just take it day by day. You never know, your lawyer may give you a call, or you might get bail the next day, you're just waiting. And you never know the day when change will come.

Day-to-Day Life in Detention

Interviewer:

What was education like while you were in detention?

Participant:

Education is provided. It is limited. However, it is... provided. The reason I'm saying this is it's more like ticking a box. For example, in my personal circumstance, I was very keen to go to school. I did my HSC while I was a detainee. Why? I wanted to progress to higher education. But it is very limited. There are limited resources, no decent teachers or education supporters that had capacity or were capable of answering my questions. I needed to analyse textbooks by myself – very difficult. I would usually get only 2 hours with a computer per day. Everything is all paper, you can't even organise them because you can't have staples. The whole situation was very, very outrageous and very difficult to handle. But even in that situation, I was still able to complete my HSC. But I do believe that I could have done so much better.

There was limited education for other people. TAFE courses were not appropriate, they need job ready qualifications. I remember one kid was doing a certificate in WHS. Even then, it was very uncommon for people to do TAFE courses, university or HSC. Very rare. I think the setting is a factor. It is very poorly managed. The resources are very limited and you don't have the support.

Interviewer:

How were your physical and mental health needs handled while you were in detention?

Participant:

The physical help was provided because there are medical centres and nurses on site 24 hours a day. Mental-health-wise it is very much up to the individual. Some counsellors are very capable and are willing to help. They do have empathy and they want to help the kids rehabilitate, find out issues and

what's caused their situation. But others don't care. Most of the time, [mental health support] is just up to people that are willing to help, passionate about helping kids and want to change lives.

Interviewer:

How would you describe the way you and other young people were generally treated by staff?

Participant:

There was always conflict between the two sides. Youth justice shouldn't be like gaol, it should be for rehabilitation. It is a consequence, but also a platform for people to understand and have the opportunity to change. Staff don't always see this, and generally just don't have respect for you due to their position. There's a lack of understanding, lack of respect and lack of responsibility. Through my time, three years of being detained, I see many people who were willing to listen, help, provide a safe setting and a path for growth. But many individuals, they're just showing up to work to make money. There were great people, but there's people who just lack empathy, understanding and are just abusive, there to tick boxes.

First Nations Experience

Interviewer:

Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

Participant:

No.

Interviewer:

What did you observe about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were treated in youth justice settings?

Participant:

They make up a large percentage of the population even though they are a minority population in Australia. I really think they're mistreated because of assumptions, judgements and stereotypes. You have generational trauma, inconsistent support, lack of support, inconsistency of understanding. You have people that are very willing to help out and listen, understand. But others lack awareness, are ignorant or just don't want to be present. No understanding given.

Health, Disability, and Trauma

Interviewer:

Do you think the justice system is equipped to respond appropriately to things like trauma, disability and mental health issues?

Participant:

I don't think so. These kids, most of them have extensive trauma. They need extra support. I know there's a reason they have been put behind bars. But that should not shape their whole future. They need a chance and they're still kids. They have come from very difficult situations, difficult things and experiences. The staff are just not trained to cope with, or to have that understanding of how to support them. They are just there to keep them behind bars.

Long-Term Impacts

Interviewer:

Are there impacts of youth justice that people underestimate or do not talk about enough?

Participant:

I think institutionalisation. They're put behind bars and see things they shouldn't see. A lot of people will say, oh, they deserve that because they are criminals. But it just makes things worse because the place isn't built to rehabilitate. It ends up punishing, shaping them into a criminal. The situation usually ends up making them a worse person because that's all they know and all they see. If you take someone who's traumatised, bullied, going through hardship as a child, then you put them inside, you're shaping them into a person that only knows criminal activities.

You see it when they come out into society – smoking, gambling, don't have the skills to get a job. Don't have the ability to go to education. Or things like how to do taxes. I didn't know how to do taxes when I came out because no one taught me.

The Positives

Interviewer:

What positive supports were available and what did you find helpful while in youth justice?

Participant:

I think the helpful part for me, that changed me as a person, is cultural programs. You have Pacific Islander, Aboriginal, all kinds of things for specific cultures. You're putting people together, giving them chances, a platform to communicate. Not just the detainees, but staff as well. It allows a bridge between the detainees and staff that gives them the ability to communicate, to talk about how things are going, and how things can get better. You're together in the same shoes, working on the same page. You know, learning from each other instead of fighting and conflict.

Fitness is also very important. There was opportunity for fitness. Counsellors can be tricky. Some are very supporting, but some will mislead you, or misuse your information and make the situation harder for you. Although it was very difficult education was positive.

Interviewer:

What things do you wish were available to you?

Participant:

I think more community projects. I remember when I was in [youth justice], there was a community project that was training guide dogs for the blind. So I was able to look after a dog for myself and this taught me responsibility, time management and also gave me a sense of normality. I feel like I was still in society despite being in a very intense, very panicked situation and environment.

There was also a community garden when I was in [youth justice]. I was able to plant my own vegetables, and it was very meditative for me. It helped with mindfulness and with my mental health. Also, there needs to be more community involvement rather than isolating kids away from society.

Closing Questions

Interviewer:

Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you would like to add?

Participant:

I think I think one thing that I mentioned is that there's lack of transparency in the system. There's no kind of time sheet or information, website, there needs to be something for [families] to understand what life is

like in the justice centres. This caused a lot of panic – the lack of awareness. You don't really know what's going on unless you're in there, right? There are people in the community willing to help, but the process is very complicated with paperwork, many management systems, and a lack of transparency so people don't really know what's going on.

Appendix D

Participant 3 (Formerly Incarcerated)

Personal Context and Pathway into Youth Justice

Interviewer:

What was your life like before you first came into contact with the youth justice system?

Participant:

Life was “simple” the way I say it, but it wasn’t normal. Casual domestic violence, unstable housing, like moving houses, hopping around, area-hopping, no money to buy the necessities and inconsistency of hot plates at night. Yeah, there was a lot of that before I was actually incarcerated. But what sort of led me down that way was when my mum lost a partner – a partner left her, but this partner was abusive towards me and my mother.

Interviewer:

Can you talk us through how you first became involved with the youth justice system?

Participant:

So what sort of led me down that road was my identity and not wanting to be home as much, due to how everything was at the time. I wanted to fit in. We area-hopped, so I went from the [South Sydney] to straight out west. I knew nothing about this place. It was a whole new world to me. I was just going in Year 7, going to a new high school, no friends. There were Islanders there, and there weren’t as many Islanders where I was from. So I knew I was an Islander and I was trying to fit in with these guys, but they just wouldn’t accept me. The Islander boys were sort of up to the stuff that I eventually [was incarcerated] for, and I’d do anything just to fit in with them. That’s where identity came into play. The second thing was not being home. My stepdad would lock me in my room for hours at times. It was just- it was messed up. And the third thing was when he left, there was no money. We lost the house within two weeks. Everything changed within two weeks for my family. I was already living that isolation, but seeing my family like that, I thought I could do something.

The boys at school were making a bit of money, so I thought I'd give it a go. I started doing what they were doing – going through cars, stealing cars, whatever.

Experiences of Remand

Interviewer:

What was being on remand like and what impact did it have on you?

Participant:

For me, the impact was mainly on the mental side of things. When I went in, I thought I was untouchable. But when you're inside, you've got no one. You're mixing with people you've had dramas with, or just mixing with everyone – and on top of that, you've got to worry about staff and fitting their expectations. There are expectations, but you don't know what they are when you first go in. When you don't meet them, you're getting locked in your room or spoken to like ****. So yeah, my experience on remand wasn't the best. When you're sentenced, that's when everything changes.

It either makes or breaks you, you meet more like-minded offenders or otherwise you're scared. The main impact was that what the system was slowly doing to me, it was automating my day with every same task every day. The only difference would be, different lunch and dinner, maybe an extra program of an afternoon. [It felt like] being a robot and essentially making me reoffend after release due to stress and having 0 coping skills.

Interviewer:

What your thoughts on remand?

Participant:

They way you get treated on remand versus when you're sentenced should change. If the court already knows someone is doing long time, there should be early intervention straight away – not waiting until they get sentenced. Sometime a boy does three years and only starts programs when he's got two months left. What does that help? Who does that help? Another big thing is psych services. When you're at your all-time low – and everyone hits that point the instability of psych support is a massive issue. You talk to

one person, then next week it's someone else asking you the same questions. That throws you off opening up. That's why boys bottle things up. That's a big issues across all centres, not just remand.

I didn't really care about ****, I just wanted my sentence to hurry up. It was a slow process, the longer it dragged on the longer I came to more sense and understanding why I'm in here and how I'm planning to change.

Day-to-Day Life in Detention

Interviewer:

What was education like while you were in detention?

Participant:

Education was actually pretty good. I don't really have anything bad to say about it. That's probably where I did a lot of my learning and fixing myself up. A lot of opportunities. The teachers were very good.

Interviewer:

How were your physical and mental health needs handled while you were in detention?

Participant:

When I first went in, I already had depression, anxiety, bipolar. When you try to do something about it, they just throw you on meds. That's cool, but where's the actual fix? You're drugged up inside, you can't do anything and no one really takes you seriously. The people who say they care are paid to say they care and to give you the drugs. I was on antidepressants and risperidone. I put on a lot of weight and asked about side effects. They said no, just take it and you'll feel happier. When I gained weight, they didn't help. They upped the dose. We shouldn't just be fed meds inside to be happy. There should be programs and other things going on.

If your needs are never met, if you're having mental health issues, you have to ask you staff to put you on a waiting list for a GP or psychologist that comes in once every 2 weeks if you're lucky. [Most times] workers tend to forget which leads to frustration or not being heard, then this [escalates].

Interviewer:

How would you describe the way you and other young people were generally treated by staff?

Participant:

There's a lot of politics inside. A lot of cultural stuff that creates division. Sometimes cultural programs would only favour certain groups. That goes for Aboriginal and Islander stuff. It creates division overall. [XXXX Youth Justice Centre] was different. You were treated more like a number. XXXX Youth Justice Centre] was a good centre. You were treated more like a human. When you're treated like a human, you want to do better. It's hard to explain unless you've experienced it.

There's always unnecessary force going on. Certain staff just don't like kids. I've seen it happen plenty of times. I don't even know where to start with that.

First Nations Experience

Interviewer:

Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

Participant:

No.

Interviewer:

What did you observe about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were treated in youth justice settings?

Participant:

They had a lot – sometimes too much – support. Aboriginal boys had more resources, more programs, more time out of their rooms, better caseworkers and Aboriginal courts. It felt unfair when everyone's done the same offence, but some people get a lot more support than others.

Health, Disability, and Trauma

Interviewer:

Do you think the justice system is equipped to respond appropriately to things like trauma, disability and mental health issues?

Participant:

Disability – yes. Trauma – no. Mental health – no. Mental health is just meds, trauma isn't dealt with. Psych services don't really care – you can tell. They're watching the clock, and once time's up, they're gone. They spend money on walkways or new murals or other useless programs, distracting kids from the actual programs. If you actually direct the money into a proper team of psychologists, maybe things would start to work. All that [kids are taught] is that pills fix your mood. When you get out, that's the mindset and attitude [you maintain]. It keeps adding to the problem.

Long-Term Impacts

Interviewer:

Are there impacts of youth justice that people underestimate or do not talk about enough?

Participant:

When you're incarcerated for a long time, you come out not knowing how to live normally. You're used to being told what to do everyday, then suddenly there's nothing. There's no follow-up, no help. That messes you up long-term.

The Positives

Interviewer:

What positive supports were available and what did you find helpful while in youth justice?

Participant:

Outside, Praxis Youth, Centrelink, Parole, not really. Inside, sport and gym programs helped me. Especially at [XXXX Youth Justice Centre] – I could do that everyday. Really, nothing was available [beside] a bunch of useless flyers, on taking me to a ***** appointment. No job avenues, no housing efforts, just a bunch of flyers.

Interviewer:

What things do you wish were available to you?

Participant:

Proper caseworkers that take your case seriously. I have witnessed so many false caseworkers. I witnessed a caseworker say to my friend who was about to be released that he has housing ready,

Centrelink sorted and a potential job. When he got out it was straight lies, this man really wanted to try when he got out of juvie after 3 years, but instead the system and a bunch of caseworkers lied and gave empty promises.

System Reform and National Standards

Interviewer:

From your experience, was there consistency in youth justice?

Participant:

No. None whatsoever. Everything was different week to week.

Appendix E

Participant 4 (Formerly Incarcerated)

Personal Context and Pathway into Youth Justice

Interviewer:

What was your life like before you first came into contact with the youth justice system?

Participant:

Well, to be honest, I grew up most of my life in Brazil until I was about 13 years old, then I moved to Australia with both my parents, and then COVID started pretty much straight after we moved here. So it was tough times, you know – just moving to a new country, adapting to a new environment, didn't really know anyone here. And then, yeah, I started consuming drugs and alcohol, and then that turned into an ambition to make money. And then, yeah, it just went downhill from there.

Interviewer:

Can you talk us through how you first became involved with the youth justice system?

Participant:

Well, the first offence that I got charged with was a break and enter at a bottle shop. I was 14 at the time. We decided to go there and steal drinks so we could resell it to make some money off that. That was my first contact with the youth justice system.

Experiences of Remand

Interviewer:

What was being on remand like and what impact did it have on you?

Participant:

Look, it's really tough to put it, because it varies. I've been on remand for like six months, but also been on remand for like a week or two. So it's like – I feel like the court system, the more serious the charges, they tend to leave you on remand for longer. But I feel like being on remand, not just for me, but speaking for every young person – it's very stressful because you just don't know what's going to happen to you.

You have no certainty of what your future will look like because you don't know how long you're going to be locked up for. So it does that a massive toll on your mental health and all of that stuff.

Interviewer:

What your thoughts on remand?

Participant:

I personally think, this is my personal opinion, it's understandable that the court system needs time to work on a matter or whatever. But I think there should be a limit on how long a young person can be on remand for, just so it's fair and even treatment for everyone.

Day-to-Day Life in Detention

Interviewer:

What was education like while you were in detention?

Participant:

Look, particularly in my case, I was one of the very few that was able to do actual school in there. So the general population of custody, the school that they go to, it's not like a normal school. They don't really teach anything at all there. It's more just doing paintings and all of that stuff. If you want to do you High School Certificate like I wanted to, or even if there's cases of people doing uni inside, you've got to actually apply, and it's a very hard process for you to get accepted into a class, which is called the Sydney Distance Education class. You're allowed computers in [that class] so it's considered a high-risk class. So you have to go through the whole process of approvals and everything just to achieve some sort of schooling in there. It's tough but I feel like there's a lot of room for improvement in regard to education in custody.

Interviewer:

How were your physical and mental health needs handled while you were in detention?

Participant:

Regarding mental health, I feel like that's one of the main positive points in custody. They have a lot of support, psychiatrists, psychologists which are allocated for each unit. So there's about 10 sites and

they're always on site. Also if it's urgent, you can just request one of the officers to call them down, they'll come down so you can have a chat to them. I was having fortnightly appointments with my psych, which helped me a lot. Then a psychiatrist as well – you can make a referral and then they'll see you. And they can put you on medication and whatever needs you really have.

In regard to physical health, they have nurses there every day, so they help. But if it's a serious problem you've got to go to the hospital. But that's another thing that I feel like they could improve – because for you to go to the hospital, you need to be risk assessed and it can be a very lengthy process for you to be approved. So the shift supervisors, the managers there, they try to avoid you going to the hospital as much as possible, so it's less paperwork for them, which I feel like is quite unfair. If a young person needs to go to the hospital, it should be easier for them to access that.

I do feel like I was taken seriously, but more so because I had a pretty good relationship with most of the workers there and got along with them pretty well. So it's all about that, you know what I mean? Inside there, it's like they'll help who they want to help. And if you don't get along with the workers they won't hesitate to say no if you ask for help or assistance. It can be quite unfair, the treatment.

Interviewer:

How would you describe the way you and other young people were generally treated by staff?

Participant:

Me in particular, I was treated pretty nice because I was nice to them and we had a good relationship. But I've seen cases where young people weren't treated as fairly or as nicely as they would hope to be treated by staff. And it happens more often that you'd like to see, which is a shame. There's no real explaining as to why they do it. Sometimes they might just not like a kid, or have some sort of resentment towards them, and they just treat them like nothing.

It's hard to feel safe – you're in gaol at the end of the day, it is incarceration. There's no – like "safe".

Like I didn't feel like anyone would abuse me or anything, but you're always on edge in there just because the environment – it's only natural that you stay on edge. At the end of the day, you are in gaol, so it's only natural for you to not feel 100% safe.

First Nations Experience

Interviewer:

Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

Participant:

No.

Interviewer:

What did you observe about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were treated in youth justice settings?

Participant:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people inside custody – they do have a lot more attention [compared to] another young person that's not of Aboriginal background. They're treated with respect, they have a lot of support and programs, particularly focused on their culture. I was never a person to feel [annoyed, frustrated]. I've had some Aboriginal colleagues in there also. I learned to respect and accept that that is their culture. They should be able to learn and empower that.

Health, Disability, and Trauma

Interviewer:

Do you think the justice system is equipped to respond appropriately to things like trauma, disability and mental health issues?

Participant:

I don't think inside, particularly, is the ideal place for you to be treated for traumas and everything like that. But then again, I don't think they are equipped. But at the same time, I don't think it is their role to be dealing with that.

Long-Term Impacts

Interviewer:

Are there impacts of youth justice that people underestimate or do not talk about enough?

Participant:

I feel like – just being incarcerated is a trauma within itself. It's not the ideal environment for any young person to be in. So I feel like that within itself can be a trauma that a person may carry with them for their lives. I mean... it's very funny because I feel like a lot of young people do trust the system more than anything else. It's a sad reality because they grew up in the system – they grew up in and out of incarceration. That's all they know, so therefore, they end up having huge trust in the system. It's sad to say, but they see that place like their home, and they, like me, they enjoy being there, which I feel like it's hard [to say] what needs to change. I wouldn't say it needs to be harsh inside, but at the same time it's a very tricky question.

I'd split it into two sections. So... the actual juvenile justice centres – I personally feel like they're trying. They try their best to help a young person to the standards that they can meet. They provide you the support that they can – psychologists, there's food, the workers try to reach out to you. But there's only so much they can do, and I feel like the things that they do inside to try and help you, they conflict a lot with the court system. And that's where I feel like it has a negative impact on young people- the court system. Like the long waits of young people on remand, the uneven sentences that you see in multiple cases, the Young Offenders Act, which, in my opinion, it's simply – it's stupid. Like how are you going to judge every single case, which has specifically different details, by the same Act? ... It's hard for one [system] to help the other when there's a court system that that overlooks everything. [The Youth Justice Centres] can't just be like, "yeah, we work with this kid, improve them and then we'll just let them out when we want." It's not up to them.

The Positives

Interviewer:

What positive supports were available and what did you find helpful while in youth justice?

Participant:

When I was in, I was always a young person that put my hand up to go to as many programs as I could. And it's really up to a young person – if you're well-behaved inside and you want to participate in programs, they'll do anything to put you in those programs, and be really helpful at times. But if you're

not well behaved, you don't get to participate in those programs. It's really a form of incentive for you to be participating in such programs.

There are some programs – the essentials – that should be equal access to each and every single young person. But then of course there are some other programs which I feel like it's fair enough that they are used as an incentive.

Interviewer:

What things do you wish were available to you?

Participant:

I would 100% have more interactions between the boys that are gang affiliated – put them in a room to make them talk it out, sort it out – because I feel like that would be very beneficial for them.

System Reform and National Standards

Interviewer:

From your experience, was there consistency in youth justice?

Participant:

I would say they try their best. ... But then again, you've got to split the justice system in two. The actual juvenile justice centres- I feel like they do apply consistency. For example, if you get in a fight, the confinement – it's always the same, it's always going to be the same amount of hours. They're not going to discriminate. It's always the same. ... In regard to the court system though, I see a huge amount of inconsistency, especially in delivering sentences for young people. You see young people coming in for extremely serious charges and then they get such a short amount of time. And then you may see, let's say, an Aboriginal young person that comes in for not as serious a charge, and they'll end up getting more time, or even the opposite. Sometimes an Aboriginal kid may be favoured by the system and get less time than another kid for the same crime. So, [regarding] the court system, there's huge inconsistency.