Praxis Youth

PRAXIS YOUTH

Theory of Change

How we believe lasting change happens

3–5 Year Horizon

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Theory of Change

This document sets out Praxis Youth's understanding of how and why our work produces change in the lives of justice-involved young people. It is written for funders, partners and external stakeholders who need to understand not just what we do, but the logic by which we believe it works.

It is downstream of our North Star — the primary expression of how Praxis Youth's five strategic pillars translate into a coherent model of change — and the foundation for our Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework.

THE GOAL

Our vision and anchor.

> *"A future where every at-risk young person has a safe home, the support they need, and the opportunity to build a meaningful life."*

In practice, over the next 3–5 years, this means: justice-involved young people in NSW exit the cycle of reincarceration and begin building stable, self-directed lives — with safe housing secured, meaningful engagement in work or learning underway, mental health supported, and genuine community connections established.

We hold that reduced reincarceration is not itself the mechanism of change. It is the consequence of change across four interdependent domains. Our goal is to produce that underlying change.

WHO WE WORK WITH

Justice-involved young people, aged 16–25, NSW.

These young people arrive with varying combinations of risk and need. At the point of engagement, a young person may be experiencing one or more of the following factors:

- No stable housing or imminent housing insecurity
- Limited or disrupted engagement with education or employment
- Mental health challenges, including untreated trauma

- Thin or damaged social networks, often including criminogenic peer associations
- Complex interactions with service systems, frequently experienced as adversarial
- Low trust in institutions and service providers, based on prior experience

OUR CORE BELIEF

Safe housing is a prerequisite. Everything else follows.

A young person without stable housing is in a constant state of managing immediate survival. That state consumes the attention, energy and trust that any other form of support requires. No meaningful progress in employment, education, mental health or relationships is reliably possible when housing is uncertain.

Once housing is secured, we believe four domains must be addressed in parallel. Weakness in any one of them significantly increases the risk of reincarceration.

01

Housing Sustainability

Securing housing is the start, not the finish. Sustaining it requires ongoing practical support.

02

Employment & Education

Work and learning build routine, identity and economic independence.

03

Mental Health & Wellbeing

Self-regulation and help-seeking underpin engagement in everything else.

04

Social Connection

Pro-social relationships reduce reliance on criminogenic networks and build belonging.

> *The thread through every domain is **the relationship.** Consistent, honest engagement between a caseworker and a young person is the mechanism by which the other domains become accessible. Without it, no intervention takes hold.*

OUR STRATEGIES

Three delivery strategies. One advocacy thread.

Strategy 01

Housing-First Placement & Tenancy Sustainment

We secure safe, stable accommodation for young people exiting custody or at risk of homelessness, and provide a discretionary rental subsidy in the critical early period. We do not treat housing as a reward for compliance — it is the starting condition for everything that follows.

- Sourcing and securing accommodation before or immediately upon release
- Administering a tapered rental subsidy
- Intervening early when tenancy is at risk

Strategy 02

Intensive, Relationship-Led Casework

A dedicated caseworker provides consistent weekly support — intensive in the first four weeks, then tapering off, maintaining a supportive relationship for as long as the young person needs it and is engaging with it.

- Weekly one-to-one casework: goal-setting, accountability, practical support
- Navigation of legal, financial, health and housing systems alongside the young person
- Consistent presence through both setbacks and progress

Strategy 03

Skills Development & Community Building

Co-facilitated workshops build practical capability and expand social networks simultaneously — teaching skills that matter in daily life while exposing young people to people and possibilities they may not previously have encountered.

- Workshops: financial literacy, job readiness, health and fitness, cooking and household management
- Co-facilitation by trained volunteers, deliberately drawn from outside the justice sector
- Intentional network-building between participants and community members

Advocacy

A Supporting Thread

Praxis Youth engages in policy and public advocacy as an extension of our delivery work — not a standalone program. Our advocacy is grounded in what we observe in practice, and targets system responses that are punitive and compliance-oriented.

THE PATHWAY OF CHANGE

Three strategies. One logical sequence.

PATHWAY 01

Housing-First Placement & Tenancy Sustainment

01

WHAT WE DO

We secure stable accommodation before or immediately after release, and provide a tapered rental subsidy in the critical early period.

↓

02

SO THAT

The young person has a consistent, safe physical base — and the immediate demands of survival no longer dominate every decision.

↓

03

SO THAT

Attention and energy can be directed toward casework, skill-building and longer-term goals.

↓

04

SO THAT

Meaningful engagement across employment, education, mental health and connection becomes possible.

↓

05

LEADING TO

The material and social conditions for a self-directed life begin to form.

PATHWAY 02

Intensive, Relationship-Led Casework

01

WHAT WE DO

A dedicated caseworker shows up consistently, keeps their word, and builds a genuine trust-based relationship — sustained for as long as the young person needs it.

↓

02

SO THAT

The young person experiences a reliable, non-judgmental adult relationship — often unlike anything they've encountered within services or authority before.

↓

03

SO THAT

They develop willingness to take risks, seek help and engage honestly with their own goals and barriers.

↓

04

SO THAT

Practical obstacles — legal obligations, financial literacy, service navigation, employment preparation — are addressed in real time.

05

LEADING TO

Confidence, self-regulation and clarity about the future develop — and the young person is equipped to sustain engagement independently.

PATHWAY 03

Skills Development & Community Building

01

WHAT WE DO

Co-facilitated workshops teach practical life skills and introduce young people to a diverse range of people and possibilities outside the justice sector.

02

SO THAT

Young people build concrete capability — financial literacy, work readiness, health, household management — and relationships outside their existing networks.

03

SO THAT

New social identities and possibilities become imaginable and credible. Reliance on criminogenic peer networks reduces as pro-social connection strengthens.

04

LEADING TO

Community belonging and a genuine sense of future become protective factors in their own right.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

When all three pathways work, what changes?

These outcomes are interdependent. Reduced reincarceration is the most visible — but it is the consequence of the changes below it.

HEADLINE OUTCOME

Significantly reduced reincarceration

Young people do not return to custody. This is the headline outcome — and it follows from outcomes across housing, employment, education, wellbeing and connection.

Sustained housing stability

Maintained independently or with minimal support — no longer dependent on crisis intervention.

Active participation in work or learning

Ongoing engagement with employment, training or education — on their terms, toward their goals.

Improved mental health & self-regulation

Established help-seeking behaviours and emotional capacity to sustain progress through difficulty.

Strong pro-social connection

Genuine relationships and community belonging that protect against isolation and reoffending.

Increased personal agency

The capacity to make and sustain decisions that shape their own life — without us.

Reduced justice system contact

Fewer cautions, charges and appearances. Disengagement from the justice system is progressive and measurable.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

What must be true for this model to work.

Every theory of change rests on assumptions. Naming them clearly is essential — it makes the logic honest and allows us to know when our model is working as intended.

About young people

- Young people are capable of change and want to change their circumstances. What they often lack is not the will but the conditions, opportunities and people who believe in them.
- A young person's engagement is the central variable Praxis Youth cannot control. We can create the conditions for change; we cannot compel it.
- Justice-involved young people have frequently experienced systems as punitive and unreliable. Rebuilding trust is itself a meaningful early outcome.

About the model

- Long-term, consistent relationships are necessary for behaviour change to consolidate. Short-term, time-limited contacts are insufficient for this cohort.
- Lived and professional experience in caseworkers is a practice requirement, not a preference. Credibility is earned through genuine understanding.
- Co-ordinated, holistic support is more effective than siloed specialist interventions.

About Praxis Youth as an organisation

- The quality and consistency of our caseworkers is foundational. If that quality degrades, outcomes will degrade with it.
- Praxis Youth must maintain sufficient and diversified funding to honour the long-term relational commitment we make to young people.
- Our practice must be continuously evidence-informed and improving. This is a strategic pillar, not an aspiration.
- Our advocacy is only as credible as our practice. We must maintain that discipline.

EXTERNAL FORCES & CONTEXT

What we operate within but do not control.

Political & policy climate

NSW has seen a 34% increase in youth detention numbers over the past two years. The current environment is characterised by punitive narratives about youth crime, creating headwinds for Housing-First approaches and increasing the urgency of our advocacy work.

Housing access

There are currently zero affordable rental properties accessible to a young person on Youth Allowance anywhere in Australia. This requires active and ongoing relationship management with housing providers, government programs and community housing organisations.

Employment & education access

Entry-level employment and vocational training are often structurally biased against young people with a justice history. Where structural bias exists, it is a target for our advocacy as well as our casework.

Young people's individual circumstances

Family relationships, health conditions, community context and prior trauma shape how quickly and deeply change can occur. These are not barriers to engagement — they are the context within which it happens.

Systemic responses of partner agencies

The responsiveness and quality of housing providers, mental health services, education institutions and employers affects what is possible for any individual young person. Where systems are unresponsive, our coordination role becomes more critical.

WHAT THIS MODEL DOES NOT CLAIM

An honest account of our limits.

This model is designed to maximise the likelihood of change — not guarantee it. We believe honesty about our limits makes our commitments more credible, not less.

— **We are not sufficient on our own.** Lasting change requires housing systems, employers, health services and governments to function adequately alongside us.

— **We do not achieve outcomes for every participant.** Engagement is voluntary. Some young people will disengage or return to custody. We do not hide this.

— **We do not work with all young people in the system.** Our model is intensive and our capacity is finite. We prioritise depth over breadth.

— **We do not use punitive or compliance-first models.** We will not claim outcomes that depend on restricting young people's agency or treating supervision as the mechanism of change.

How we will know

This theory is the foundation for our MEL framework.

The outcomes in the Pathway of Change will each be assigned indicators, data collection methods and review cadences through Praxis Youth's MEL framework. Key questions driving that work: Are the three pathways operating in the sequence described? Where young people disengage, at what point does that occur and what does it reveal about our assumptions?

This document will be reviewed annually as part of Praxis Youth's strategic review cycle.